

Don't make assumptions about employees with mental illness

Due to a lack of education and understanding, too many managers wrongly assume mental illness will prevent an employee from working well, says SANE Australia executive director Barbara Hocking.

But the best thing employers can do to support employees with mental illness is "not make any assumptions", she said at a recent forum.

"Don't assume that if you've employed someone who... discloses they have a mental illness that that person will no longer be able to do the job.

"The big thing is not to make any assumptions, and not to immediately assume that this person will not be able to work well, because that is totally unfounded in the evidence."

Managers need to understand that "mental illnesses are like any others, and they respond well to treatment".

"When people are receiving effective treatment they're very good employees. In fact [companies are] probably employing many of them at the moment and don't know about it.

"They're probably employing many people who are having treatment for mental illness but are maybe not getting the support at work that would make a difference to their working and their sleeping.

"There is good evidence to show that people with mental illness make very good, loyal employees and they're less likely to take sickies, for example, because they value being able to work and they're so conscious of that.

"And in fact if someone with mental illness does take a day off, the chances are it's a very important day for their mental health."

How to help

When a manager becomes aware that an employee has a mental illness, they should seek to find out, through discussion, which types of situations might put the employee under stress, and which situations relieve stress, Hocking says.

"It depends on the individual person as well as the illness they've got and how it impacts them. Someone who is anxious, for example, depending on what it is that makes them anxious, may prefer to be sitting separate to other people, or in the midst of everything."

Employers should ask what the pattern of the employee's illness is like, and how the person would like to be supported, Hocking says. "Start with something as general as that."

"Come to some agreement that if the person starts to show signs of becoming unwell again that they will agree to go and get treatment.

"You might have an agreement that the person takes time off on a regular basis to visit their clinician.

"Once you get to know the person better you can ask, what are the early warning signs that they may be becoming unwell, and come to some sort of plan of action."

Even more importantly, Hocking says, is to find out "what helps the person stay well".

"Obviously having a job helps a person to stay well, if it is the right job for them. If it's a part-time job, sort out the hours of work. They might start a bit later in the morning, for example.

"Many people are very sedated with the medication they're taking, so they may prefer to work from 10 until four, for example, rather than nine until three. Ask those sorts of questions."

Finally, she says, ask the employee if they would like co-workers to know about their illness, and if so, how much information they want to share.

"That obviously has to be within the context of a workplace that already has demonstrated that it's 'mentally healthy'," Hocking stresses.

"That means where people certainly haven't been discouraged from talking about mental illness and its impact, and where there's been active education and training for people, because if the employer hasn't had that to date it may not be a positive experience. But where that has happened, it's certainly very reasonable to ask, 'How much would you like your co-workers to know?'"

"Some people might be very comfortable; others may not and just want the supervisor to know - just as you would with any other health problem."

Findings

SANE Australia's research found that two-thirds of the 520 respondents to its survey had disclosed their illness to their employer or manager, but most felt unsupported at work, and that their manager lacked understanding of mental illness and its impact.

"The survey paints a concerning and unsatisfactory picture of Australian workplaces," Hocking says. "Many employees, including those who care for a family member with a mental illness, are being disadvantaged by a lack of flexibility, such as being able to work part-time, to work from home at times or to have adjustments made in the workplace.

"As a result, businesses lose experienced employees and have to spend time and money investing in new people."

SANE Australia runs the "Mindful Employer" program, which encourages employers to work towards improving mental health in the workplace.