

FIRST TO ACTION

Early intervention to support
psychological health and
wellbeing



Australian Government

Comcare

PUTTING YOU *FIRST*



Early intervention is the key to supporting employees who are not coping in the workplace.

It means assisting an employee before a symptom develops into an injury.

EASY REFERENCE GUIDE

This guide aims to help line managers and human resource personnel recognise the warning signs and take action to support employees.

It also provides information for employees, case managers, approved rehabilitation providers and medical practitioners. The principles in the guide can be applied to all early intervention programs.

Responding early can often prevent the employee from becoming ill, taking long-term sick leave or from needing to submit a workers' compensation claim.

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WHAT CAN I DO?

Line manager/supervisor

- > Recognise the early warning signs of employee distress and low morale.
- > Support the employee. Demonstrate empathy by initiating a conversation that expresses concern and allows the employee to discuss their health or other concerns in private.
- > Contact the employee if there is an unplanned absence from work. Explore with them their reasons for non-attendance. Offer support. Stay in contact with the employee in cases of prolonged absence to maintain the connection with the workplace.
- > Seek assistance if you feel unable to provide positive support to an employee. Help may be available from your human resources department, rehabilitation case manager or through your organisation's Employee or Manager Assistance Programs (EAP and MAP). If there has been a harassment or bullying complaint made against you by the employee, arrange for someone else, for example, HR personnel, to provide support to the employee.
- > Involve the case manager if an employee needs assistance to return to work. Your organisation's case manager will help you work with the employee to resolve issues, facilitate recovery and develop a return to work plan.
- > Provide flexible workplace options that enable the employee to be safe and productive at work (such as changes to the way the work is organised, additional support through a mentor or buddy, adjustments to work hours or duties). Ensure that the employee is fully involved in planning options and has co-ownership of job-related decisions.
- > Meet with the employee on return to work. Welcome the employee back, confirm their contribution was missed and provide an update about developments that have occurred in their absence. Agree on any changes to the organisation of their work and how this should be communicated to the team.
- > Provide ongoing support until the employee has reached their former functional level.

Rehabilitation case manager

- > Provide support and advice to the line manager. Focus on strategies to assist and support the employee to remain at work or to return to work.
- > Organise an assessment if an employee continues to experience work-related stress and/or has not returned to work. Use an approved rehabilitation provider with the expertise to manage psychological injury to carry out a comprehensive needs assessment. If the employee has submitted a workers' compensation claim, manage the process under sections 36 and 37 of the *Safety, Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 1988*.
- > Co-ordinate planning to maintain or return the employee to meaningful employment as soon as possible. This will involve liaison with the employee (and/or their representative), line manager, rehabilitation provider, medical practitioner and claims manager (if a claim has been accepted). Be creative in seeking solutions that involve all stakeholders and facilitate a sustainable outcome.

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Approved rehabilitation provider

- > Provide professional assessment of employee needs. Identify unresolved workplace issues, barriers to safe and productive work and flags for potential psychological injury
- > Liaise with the medical practitioner to identify medical considerations and discuss flexible workplace options
- > Develop an agreed plan. Work with the case manager, line manager, employee and medical service providers to address underlying issues and promote resolution and recovery in the workplace. The plan should establish a process for ongoing management which may include case conferencing with relevant parties.

Employee

- > Talk to someone early if you are feeling distressed or not coping. You may feel overwhelmed, irritable, anxious, unable to sleep, lack concentration, or just disinterested in work. Talk to someone who can help such as your line manager, human resources personnel, independent Employee Assistance Services or Harassment Contact Officer (if appropriate).
- > Find out what support is available to you. Check with your employer's rehabilitation policy and intranet website, or contact the human resources department. Your workplace may offer options such as changes to work hours or duties or the way your work is managed.
- > Do not isolate yourself from work colleagues, friends and family. It is likely that someone from your workplace will be in touch with you if you are absent from work. This is to establish the reason for your absence, your expected return date, and to discuss what assistance they can offer. Be open to alternative ideas and duties that may assist your return to work.
- > Review your health status with your general practitioner. There are effective treatments that could help you if you are suffering from anxiety or depression. The beyondblue website (www.beyondblue.org.au) has information that may assist you.



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Senior manager/HR manager

- > Develop clear policy/guidelines for early intervention. This should cover monitoring and managing absence and risk factors, involvement of professionals, organisational resources and funding available and flexible work adjustments to ensure that employees are treated fairly and consistently.
- > Provide training to develop people management skills and resources to support line managers and case managers to carry out their responsibilities in prevention and early intervention.
- > Focus on strategies to improve leadership and work team climate to build a healthier workplace.
- > Hold managers accountable for people management outcomes and establish clear expectations through performance management frameworks and workplace agreements.
- > Monitor the health of the organisation. Consider employee opinion surveys, grievances, EAP and MAP use, absence data, injury data and stress claims to identify and manage the risk of ill health.
- > Communicate relevant data to line managers so they are able to identify and respond to high risk areas.
- > Support flexible options for return to work. Provide assistance to managers in finding suitable work for employees who are not coping, including options for short or long-term transfer to another work area.
- > Develop, monitor and provide appropriate service agreements with external providers (EAP, MAP, mediation, training and development, approved rehabilitation providers) based on agency needs.
- > Work in partnership with Comcare to facilitate early determination of claims and early return to work.

General practitioner

- > Provide medical assessment of the employee's capacity to undertake their present workplace duties.
- > Provide advice on how the workplace can best support the employee to remain at or return to work.
- > Provide advice on options such as alternative duties or modifications that would support the employee to remain at or return to work.
- > Monitor the employee's recovery and communicate progress or concerns to the case manager. Stay actively involved as a key member in the rehabilitation process.

Additional information for General Practitioners is available on the Comcare website:
www.comcare.gov.au

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SEVEN KEY ELEMENTS TO EARLY INTERVENTION FOR PREVENTING PSYCHOLOGICAL INJURY

1. Guidelines on how to support employees exhibiting early warning signs. The policy or guidelines should state that support is provided regardless of whether the employee has submitted a claim, or whether their claim has been accepted by Comcare.
2. Line manager awareness of the early warning signs, and how to respond appropriately (achieved through training, policy and guidance material).
3. Early contact with the employee to offer assistance.
4. Early and expert assessment to identify employee needs.
5. Employee and supervisor involvement in developing an agreed plan to enable the employee to remain at work or return to work.
6. Access to effective medical treatment and evidence-based therapeutic interventions if there is a psychological condition.
7. Flexible workplace solutions to support the individual at work.

EARLY WARNING SIGNS

Behaviours

- > not getting things done
- > erratic behaviour
- > emotional responses
- > complaints of lack of management support
- > fixation with fair treatment issues
- > complaints of not coping with workload
- > withdrawn from colleagues
- > reduced participation in work activities
- > increased consumption of caffeine, alcohol, cigarettes and/or sedatives
- > inability to concentrate
- > indecisive
- > difficulty with memory
- > loss of confidence
- > unplanned absences
- > conflict with team members/manager
- > use of grievance procedures
- > increased errors and/or accidents.

Physical / physiological signs

- > tired all the time
- > sick and run down
- > headaches
- > reduced reaction times
- > difficulty sleeping
- > weight loss or gain
- > dishevelled appearance
- > gastro-intestinal disorders
- > rashes.

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EARLY INTERVENTION ACTIONS TO PREVENT PSYCHOLOGICAL INJURY

Recognise early warning signs

Recognise early warning signs, including:

- > physical symptoms (tiredness, headaches etc)
- > increased unplanned absences
- > emotional responses
- > erratic behaviour
- > withdrawal behaviour
- > increased workplace conflict
- > low morale
- > deteriorating work performance.

Respond with support and assistance

Provide early support to the employee by:

- > making contact
- > listening with empathy
- > offering support (e.g. Employee Assistance Program)
- > contacting a rehabilitation case manager for assistance, particularly if a claim is lodged
- > seeking advice from HR or Manager Assistance Program.

If employee safety or self harm is a concern immediately communicate this to your HR or OHS area

Assess needs and agree on a plan

Develop and agree on a plan by:

- > considering workplace-based solutions
- > arranging a workplace assessment by an approved rehabilitation provider
- > arranging and participating in a case conference or mediation to clarify issues and possible solutions
- > encouraging employee participation and co-ownership
- > seeking specific medical advice
- > liaising with rehabilitation case manager.

Support recovery and restore work ability

Keep employee safe and productive at work by providing:

- > rehabilitation as required
- > access to evidence-based treatment
- > monitoring and support in the workplace
- > flexible workplace arrangements (duties and responsibilities)
- > reasonable adjustments to the workplace.

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