



Depression & Anxiety Consumer Research Unit
CENTRE FOR MENTAL HEALTH RESEARCH

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DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY IN THE WORKPLACE

Passing feelings of stress, anxiety and depression are very common, but for most people these resolve quickly. However, in some people they can persist for weeks and cause major disruption to the person's life. In such cases, the person has a depressive or anxiety disorder. A national survey of Australian adults found that in any one year, 6% of people have a depressive disorder and 10% an anxiety disorder. It is not unusual for people to have both an anxiety and a depressive disorder, and there may be additional problems with alcohol, smoking or other drugs. Although people who are in professional occupations are at slightly lower risk, the difference is small.

Many people do not realize how disabling depressive and anxiety disorders are. These problems cause major disruption to a person's ability to work and carry out family roles. They often cause more disability than physical diseases, even though there is no visible sign of the disability like crutches, a wheelchair or a hearing aid. For example, medical experts have rated the disability produced by moderate depression as similar to that from relapsing multiple sclerosis, severe asthma, chronic hepatitis B and deafness.

According to the Mental Health Council of Australia, depression accounts for six million full workdays lost each year. Most people assume unemployment causes depression. In reality, many people become unemployed due to the impact untreated depression has on their work.

"Recognising and treating depression can save money. In Australia, depression costs \$2.5 billion per year in absenteeism and \$900 million in impairment at work. Treating all the depressed employees in a business is estimated to save on average \$1,500 - \$3,000 per employee. The cost of treatment is far less than this!"

Professor Tony Jorm, Director, Centre for Mental Health Research, the Australian National University, 2004.

"Depression is an economic issue. If you treat depression, it has an economic return for the employer, for the individual and for Australia. There's a cost to not treating depression."

Professor Harvey Whiteford, Bulletin, November 12, 2002.

Supporting Colleagues With Depression and Anxiety

While people often know a lot about common physical health problems, there is widespread ignorance of mental health. This ignorance adds to the stigma of mental health problems and prevents people from seeking help early and seeking the best sort of help. It also prevents people providing appropriate support to colleagues and family members, simply because they do not know how.

In order to help people provide initial support for someone with a mental health problem, the Centre for Mental Health Research has developed a Mental Health First Aid training course. This is analogous to a regular first aid course, but focuses on how to provide initial help to someone in a mental health crisis situation (e.g. feeling suicidal, having a panic attack, or in a psychotic episode) or with an on-going mental health problem. The 12- hour course can be conducted in workplaces.