

## Mental Ill-Health Has Reached A Tipping Point

By Peter Barraket

On 31 October 2019, the Australian Productivity Commission (APC) released its Mental Health Draft Report. It estimates the cost to our economy of mental ill-health and suicide is \$43-51 billion per year, plus another \$130 billion attributed to diminished health and reduced life expectancy.

These shocking numbers are the tip of the iceberg with the APC further reporting:

- Nearly 50% of all Australian adults meet the criteria for mental illness at some point in their lives
- 1-in-5 Australians will meet the diagnostic criteria for mental illness every year
- 75% of sufferers first experience mental illness before the age of 25
- Suicide is the leading cause of death for Australians aged between 15 and 44 with approximately 65,300 suicide attempts each year

Looking outside Australia, the global statistics around mental ill-health are just as alarming - the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates depression and anxiety costs the global economy US\$ 1 trillion per year in lost productivity. The WHO also finds that bullying and psychological harassment (known as 'mobbing') are among the most commonly reported workplace problems.<sup>1</sup> Other workplace problems which are reported as contributing to mental health issues, include:

- Inadequate health and safety policies
- Poor communication and management practices
- A lack of empowerment to make decisions or control how work is performed
- Inflexible work hours
- Unclear directions, tasks and objectives

Our own experience working with organisations in Australia tells us that these statistics are very real and not just numbers on a page. So much so, we believe mental ill-health has reached a tipping point and organisations must begin to make mental health a priority.

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<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization: Mental Health in the workplace - Information Sheet, May 2019

**For more information contact:**

People At Their Best | [info@peopleattheirbest.com.au](mailto:info@peopleattheirbest.com.au) | [www.peopleattheirbest.com.au](http://www.peopleattheirbest.com.au)

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The APC report supports our view, finding that Australian workplaces are significantly affected in the following ways:

- At least 3 million working Australians either have mental ill-health or care for someone with mental ill-health
- Among those with mental ill-health, the rate of absenteeism, averages close to 5 percentage points higher than for working Australians without reported mental health problems, while the rate of those attending work but are not well, described as presenteeism, is 5 to 8 times higher
- Cost estimates of workplace ‘absenteeism’ and ‘presenteeism’ due to mental ill-health range from \$13-17 billion per year, with 70-80% of this cost attributed to ‘absenteeism’

These impacts are unlikely to subside anytime soon - the report goes on to state that even with the recent investment in the health system, mental ill-health in this country has been getting worse. We, at People At Their Best, believe the time has long arrived where employers must take action and adopt a different approach to mental health in the workplace.

There is also a role for all organisations to play in supporting the mental health and well-being of their workforce. Organisations can create ‘workplaces that work for all’, not only making it easier for sufferers to perform better at work but also to get sufferers into the workforce. Being at work helps mental health by providing sufferers with ‘a sense of identity, common purpose, achievement and connection with others’ says the World Health Organisation.

There are also financial benefits to be realised - Australian organisations need to understand that for every dollar invested in mental health initiatives there is at least a \$4 return - achieved through improved health and productivity in terms of lower absenteeism, increased productivity and reduced workers compensation claims. Further, the APC reports the estimated benefit to the Australian economy for these types of investments ranges between \$100 million to \$5.6 billion and up to an estimated \$11 billion, over time, from increased participation of those with mental-ill health in the workforce . So what can be done to start to realise these benefits?

### **How can organisations improve mental health in the workplace?**

First of all, it is critical to acknowledge that mental ill-health is ‘preventable’ and the fact that it is preventable should dictate a need for organisations to take proactive steps. Next, we all need to increase our awareness of the facts and reality of mental ill-health and in doing so, start to reduce the stigma

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around mental ill-health. Further, we all need to boost support for employee **well-being** in the workplace. And, no matter the cause, organisations have a role to play in helping people with mental ill-health to better participate and contribute at work. Simply, an acknowledgement that changes are needed is crucial and with this, leaders can build an action plan for better mental health outcomes in their workplaces. Drawing on the APC report, leaders can ask themselves the following questions:

1. Do we agree that the mental health and well-being of our people is a top priority?
2. How can we increase awareness and reduce the discrimination around mental ill-health at work?
2. What strategies can we put in place to prevent mental ill-health in our organisation?
3. How can we enable early intervention and treatment of work-related mental ill-health?
4. What assistance can we provide to help people with mental ill-health get work with us?
5. What gaps in employee support services exist and how can we close these?
6. What's our budget for mental health initiatives; remember there's a 4 to 1 return on investment?

You may also consider adopting the following initiatives based on the WHO list of the most commonly reported problems that employees say drive mental ill-health:

1. Ensure health and safety policies explicitly include mental health
2. Improve communication and management practices of all staff across your entire organisation
3. Empower employees to make decisions over how they do their work
4. Improve flexible work arrangements
5. Provide clear directions, tasks and objectives

## How can individuals improve mental health in the workplace?

As individuals we all have the choice and ability to nurture our own mental health and to have a positive influence on others and the organisations where we work. Here are some things you can try:

1. Build personal [resilience skills](#) - practice such things as mindfulness, breathing exercises, meditation, regular exercise, getting enough sleep and healthy eating
2. Support others - have [RUOK?](#) conversations that help to increase awareness and reduce the stigma around mental ill-health
3. Collaborate with others - work with others to build a business case for increasing investment in mental health initiatives in your organisation – it is good for you and good for business
4. Seek clarity - ask for greater clarity around your role and where the business is headed
5. Find purpose – organisations under-invest in defining and aligning people to their organisational purpose or mission – we all want to feel that we ‘matter’ – start conversations today about your organisation's purpose and how you contribute to it

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## **Mental Ill-Health Has Reached A Tipping point**

Lastly, talk to us at People At Their Best. Our workplace resilience seminars have helped many organisations, most recently KPMG, where staff operate in a volatile and complex market and are under constant pressure. By learning some simple, highly effective techniques, staff have enhanced coping mechanisms and increased their resilience - more importantly, they have started conversations that help reduce the stigma of mental ill-health and normalise their common experiences and challenges.

Please get in touch to see how we can deliver practical, validated techniques that help.

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