

MEMBER GUIDE

Five tips for a mentally healthier work environment



DATE: October 2020

PURPOSE

This guide outlines Consult Australia's top five tips for members about what individuals, particularly business leaders and managers, can do to quickly and easily create a mentally healthier work environment.

BACKGROUND

Consult Australia's Mental Health Working Group has been developing a series of guides to support the broader membership and its employees with a range of workplace-related mental health concerns. These guides are available [here](#).

This member guide is in response to the notion that is sometimes raised about mental health initiatives in the workplace being expensive and time-consuming. The opposite is often the case can be quick and easy to deliver – particularly for initiatives that focus on workplace culture – and the significant productivity and performance benefits and improvements to the wellbeing and engagement of employees.

FIVE TIPS FOR A MENTALLY HEALTHIER WORK ENVIRONMENT

Tip 1 – Lead by example

To create a mentally healthier work environment in a business, we must not forget our own mental health and wellbeing. This should always be your first step – just like the safety briefing on an aeroplane, you should always 'put on your own oxygen mask before helping those around you...'

Nobody is immune from mental health challenges, regardless of your experience and ability to cope with pressure and stress. Nor is it possible to truly help those around you if you are putting your own mental health and wellbeing last.

As such, supporting your own mental health and following healthy work habits is not only important for your own welfare and putting you in a better position to support your team, but also these actions – or lack of actions – are what set the tempo and then modelled by others around you.

One way you can lead by example is demonstrating a healthy work-life balance, which in turn actively encourages your colleagues to make sure they too have this balance right. Consider making a point of '[leaving loudly](#)' every now and then – letting colleagues know when you're leaving early or on time and why – or sticking to daily routines such as some time away from your computer on lunch breaks.

Tip 2 – Be open and share with others

Many employees or colleagues may be surprised to hear that those around them, particularly their managers or leaders, have their own challenges in life and like most people have to invest time and strategies to manage and maintain their mental health.

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To this end, we have a lot to learn from those others about what works for others and hearing how our colleagues and bosses are human like us. Being vulnerable and telling our own story about how we manage and maintain our mental health, and some of the challenges we find difficult might make a big difference for our colleagues.

Being open and sharing with others could help address a challenge that a colleague is facing by adopting the same approach. But what is more important is that it encourages our colleagues to also think about their own mental health and to share and seek help if they are facing any challenges.

Everyone has a story to tell, and every little story can make a difference. Starting the conversation is so important to tackling stigmas that wrongly suggest mental health is a closed topic, and to helping us all learn from each other about looking after ourselves.

Tip 3 – Ask and actively listen

Genuine connections can be a key factor for preventing, identifying and addressing mental health concerns. As such, you should look for opportunities to build these genuine connections and have genuine moments with colleagues – even if you are working remotely from each other.

Creating genuine two-way communication channels on topics such as mental health is not created overnight, so it is important to work towards a trusting work environment where colleagues feel comfortable asking questions, sharing concerns or raising challenges that may be personal. We think this can be achieved over time by always seeking, and encouraging others, to communicate in a regular, transparent and authentic manner – which sometimes requires a shift away from a transactional or an 'as needed' communication approach.

One way you can do this to help create this culture in your business is by having proactive check-ins with colleagues. Don't feel the need to wait until a colleague come to you to share concerns. Fitting in regular time with colleagues, face-to-face or by a video calls, and spending time genuinely asking how they are going and making sure they feel heard and supported can make a big difference.

Finally, any offer of support to a colleague should be done so with tact, compassion and the right time. This can be managed by taking a genuine interest in their life and health without being too intrusive and by respecting privacy and confidentiality.

The RUOK Day have developed material to assist with conversations about mental health. These are available [here](#).

Tip 4 – Get your team involved

You should not feel like you have all the answers on what will create a mentally healthier work environment for your business. And sometimes getting everyone involved in the process in finding the answer is almost as effective as the answer itself.

Setting up an internal mechanism, which is championed and enabled by the business leader and senior managers, where employees have a collective say in the mental health strategy of the organisation is a powerful and effective approach. This helps ensure what your business is doing to support the mental health of employees is effectively targeting the right areas, and the effectiveness of these activities is being considered.

Heads Up, which is a Beyond Blue initiative, has some more information on the value of getting your team involved in your organisation's mental health approach and using this internal mechanism to take a more strategic approach. This is available [here](#).

Tip 5 – Also focus on physical health

'Physical' work-related health and safety (WHS) factors or hazards, and our physical health in general, can have an impact on our mental health and wellbeing. Research by the NSW Mental Health Commission notes that poor physical health can lead to mental health challenges, and can also exacerbate any existing concerns.¹ As such, we must look after our physical health as part of efforts to support mental health outcomes. This includes, for example:

- Addressing poor work environment triggers such as prolonged exposure to poor light, loud noises, poor ventilation or temperature issues
- Having appropriate tools, equipment and resources to undertake work requirements such as personal protective equipment
- Ensuring workstations, particularly in remote work settings, are ergonomic
- Encouraging physical movement, a healthy diet and breaks – this can be as simple as organising a walking meeting or in the park, and providing access to healthy food and promoting a balanced diet.

This tip also works in reverse where poor mental health outcomes can lead to poor physical health outcomes. For example, loneliness is twice as harmful to our physical health and mental health than obesity.² This is why we should always think holistically when thinking about work-related mental health challenges.

¹ NSW Mental Health Commission, [Physical health and mental wellbeing \(evidence guide\)](#)

² Forbes, [When home becomes the workplace: mental health and remote work \(2020\)](#)

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CONTACT US

If you have any questions on this guide or are interested in hearing more about our mental health activities, please contact:

James Robertson

Policy Advisor

james@consultaaustralia.com.au

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