

# State of Workplace Mental Health in Australia



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## KEY FINDINGS

**Mentally healthy workplaces are as important to Australian employees as physically safe workplaces, however workplaces are not meeting their expectations**

- 91% believe mental health in the workplace is important (88% believe physical safety is important).
- Despite this, only 52% of employees believe their workplace is mentally healthy compared to 76% for physical safety.
- Only five in ten (56%) believe their most senior leader values mental health.

**One in five** Australian employees report that they have taken time off work due to feeling mentally unwell in the past 12 months.



**Mentally unhealthy workplaces impact on employee behaviour**

- One in five Australians (21%) have taken time off work in the past 12 months because they felt stressed, anxious, depressed or mentally unhealthy.
- This statistic is more than twice as high (46%) among those who consider their workplace mentally *unhealthy*.
- Employees who believe their workplace is mentally *unhealthy* are unlikely to disclose within their workplace if they are experiencing a mental health condition, seek support from HR/management, or offer support to a colleague with a mental health condition.

**Australian employees expect mental health support in the workplace environment, but many are not aware of, or are unable to access appropriate resources**

- Three quarters (75%) of Australian employees believe workplaces should provide support to someone who is experiencing depression or anxiety.
- 81% of organisational leaders indicate their workplace has one or more policies, procedures or practices to support mental health, but many employees (35%) don't know these resources exist or don't have access to them.

**When mental health is valued by leaders, and appropriate resources are available in the workplace, there are real benefits to business**

- In workplaces that employees consider mentally healthy, self-reported absenteeism as a result of experiencing mental ill-health almost halves (13%).

## INTRODUCTION

According to an ABS study, 45% of Australians between the ages of 16-85 will experience a mental health condition in their lifetime. It is estimated that untreated mental health conditions cost Australian workplaces approximately \$10.9 billion per year. This comprises \$4.7 billion in absenteeism, \$6.1 billion in presenteeism<sup>1</sup> and \$146 million in compensation claims<sup>2</sup>.

Financial impacts aside, the workplace has been identified as a relevant and an appropriate setting to promote and support the health and mental health of workers for several reasons, including:

- ease of access to a large number of people
- existing infrastructures (e.g. communication channels, supportive environment)
- opportunity to tailor interventions to support the needs of specific groups of employees (e.g. shift workers) and within particular industries
- cost-efficiency relative to clinical or community-based programs<sup>3,4,5,6,7</sup>.

**A mentally healthy workplace is one that protects and promotes mental health and empowers people to seek help for depression and anxiety, for the benefit of the individual, organisation and community.**

While creating a mentally healthy workplace is everyone's responsibility, mental health is a leadership issue, and change must start at the top. Business owners and organisational leaders play a critical role in driving policies and practices that promote mental health in the workplace. They have the capacity to positively influence workplace culture, management practices and the experience of employees.

1. Note: Presenteeism is when an employee is at work but is less productive than usual because of illness or injury  
2. PwC. (2014) 'Creating a mentally healthy workplace: return on investment analysis'. Accessed online from [http://www.headsup.org.au/docs/default-source/resources/beyondblue\\_workplaceroi\\_finalreport\\_may-2014.pdf](http://www.headsup.org.au/docs/default-source/resources/beyondblue_workplaceroi_finalreport_may-2014.pdf)  
3. Australian Government (2012). Ten year roadmap for national mental health reform (Draft #4).  
4. Dame Carol Black, 2008, Working for a healthier tomorrow.  
5. Waddell G., Burton, A.K. (2006). Is work good for your health and well being? London, The Stationery Office  
6. World Health Organization (WHO) (2011) Workplace Health Promotion. Accessed online from [http://www.who.int/occupational\\_health/topics/workplace/en/](http://www.who.int/occupational_health/topics/workplace/en/)  
7. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2007 National Mental Health and Well-Being Survey (NMHWS)

This study of Australian employees conducted by TNS Social Research, an independent research agency, provides a snapshot of the current state of workplace mental health in Australia. The research found that while nine in ten Australian employees (91%) agree that it is important to work in a mentally healthy environment, only 52% of employees agree their workplace is mentally healthy. Furthermore, one in five Australian employees report they have taken time off work due to feeling mentally unwell (stressed, anxious, depressed or mentally unhealthy) in the past 12 months.



### THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted online with a **representative sample of Australian workers**. A total of 1,126 interviews were conducted and of these, 85 were with senior leaders (CEO/Managing Director or HR managers) and 1,041 were with employees (a mix of lower management and other employees). Quotas were set and weighting applied to ensure the sample was representative in terms of industry, number of employees in the company and location (at state/territory level) based upon Australian Bureau of Statistics data.

### Survey content

This research provides a detailed snapshot of the state of mental health in Australian workplaces<sup>9</sup>. The survey asked participants to respond to the following areas:

- the importance of physical safety and mental health in workplaces and an assessment of how their workplace performs
- stigma around mental health
- behaviour when personally experiencing a mental health condition or encountering mental health conditions in the workplace
- workplace support and practices to promote good mental health
- awareness of resources available to promote good mental health.

### DETAILED FINDINGS

#### Mentally healthy workplaces are important to employees. Across all industries and locations in Australia, employees do not consider their workplace as mentally healthy as they would like it to be

This research shows that employees and leaders agree on the importance of mentally healthy workplaces (91% employees, 89% leaders). However, employees do not necessarily believe their leaders place as much importance on mental health as they do (56% of employees believe their most senior leaders consider mental health in the workplace important).

Across all states/territories and industry sectors, there is a significant gap between the importance employees place on a mentally healthy workplace ('importance'), and how mentally healthy they believe their workplace actually is ('performance').

#### Mental health and physical safety importance and performance - by location

BY STATE	MENTAL HEALTH		PHYSICAL SAFETY	
	Importance %	Performance %	Importance %	Performance %
NSW/ACT	91	52	84	73
VIC	94	51	89	76
QLD	87	46	88	76
SA/NT	94	50	94	79
WA	93	62	92	80

\*Note: base size does not permit analysis for all states/territories

8. This research is the benchmark phase of a wider evaluation of *beyondblue's* Workplace and Workforce program.

9. The majority of questions in the study were answered on an 11-point scale. Where the term 'agree', 'believe' or similar is used throughout this report, this is based upon combining responses for the top three scale points (8, 9 or 10 on an 11-point scale). The classification of workplaces as 'mentally healthy', is also based upon combining responses in this way.

The classification of workplaces as 'mentally unhealthy' and data related to the 'line manager/industry does not value a mentally healthy workplace...' is based upon combining responses for the bottom five scale points (0, 1, 2, 3 or 4).

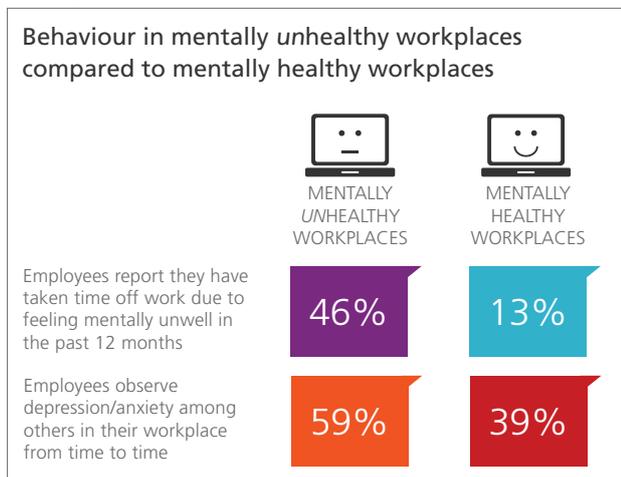
### Mental health and physical safety importance and performance - by industry

BY INDUSTRY	MENTAL HEALTH		PHYSICAL SAFETY	
	Importance %	Performance %	Importance %	Performance %
Agriculture	92	41	83	65
Public Administration and Safety	88	41	81	76
Transport, Postal and Warehousing	87	42	89	74
Health Care and Social Assistance	95	51	95	76
Administrative and Support Services	91	47	83	65
Manufacturing	88	45	89	70
Retail Trade	92	50	86	68
Accommodation and Food Services	91	50	90	70
Education and Training	95	57	93	78
Wholesale Trade	88	53	85	71
Professional, Scientific and Technical Services	90	58	83	88
Financial and Insurance Services	90	58	80	86
Construction	92	63	92	81
Other services	95	64	85	81

\*Note: base size does not permit analysis for all sectors

### Employers can reduce absenteeism by improving mental health in their workplace

Overall, 21% of employees report that they have taken time off work due to feeling mentally unwell in the past 12 months. The findings show that employees who consider their workplace mentally unhealthy are almost four times more likely to say they have taken time off work due to feeling mentally unwell in the past 12 months compared to those who describe their workplace as mentally healthy. Employees in mentally unhealthy workplaces are also more likely to have observed the symptoms of depression and anxiety among their colleagues.



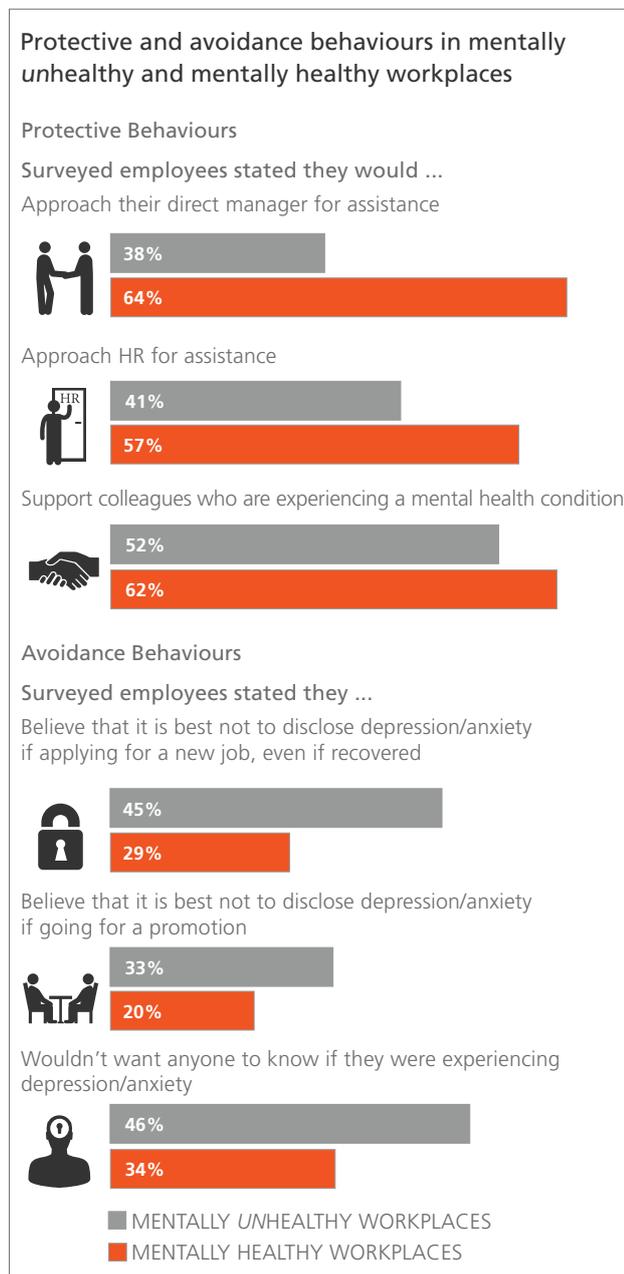
The research has identified clear differences between employee behaviour in mentally healthy workplaces and mentally *unhealthy* workplaces, including what employees would recommend someone experiencing depression or anxiety should do.

These actions can broadly be categorised as either ‘protective’ or ‘avoidance’ in nature. In the context of this research, protective and avoidance behaviours have been defined as follows:

- **protective behaviours** are positive and pro-active ways of seeking to improve mental health such as seeing a GP, talking to colleagues, family or friends and accessing support through the workplace.
- **avoidance behaviours** are the opposite - not seeking help or support, isolating oneself from colleagues, family or friends, and potentially using alcohol and other harmful drugs as a coping strategy.

The survey found a significantly lower prevalence of protective behaviours in mentally *un*healthy workplaces, and a higher prevalence of avoidance behaviours was evident. As a result, organisational leaders may not be aware that employees in their workplace are experiencing depression or anxiety. In workplaces classified as mentally *un*healthy:

- employees are less likely to seek assistance for a mental health condition from their direct manager or human resources (where this exists)
- they are less likely to provide support to others
- they are more likely to avoid disclosing an experience of depression or anxiety in the workplace, as well as in situations of career progression.



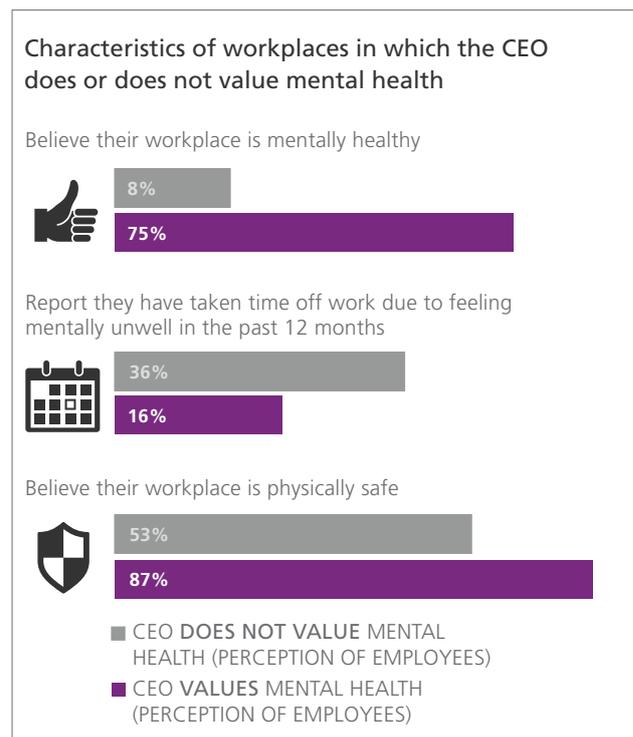
## When mental health is valued by leaders there are real benefits to the business

The survey found:

- mentally healthy workplaces are **important to workers** (91% agreement among employees, 89% among leaders)
- a widespread perception that organisations that value mental health are **likely to be more productive** (72% agreement among employees, 71% agreement among leaders)
- organisational leaders who focus on mental health in the workplace **inspire respect among employees** (65% agreement among employees).

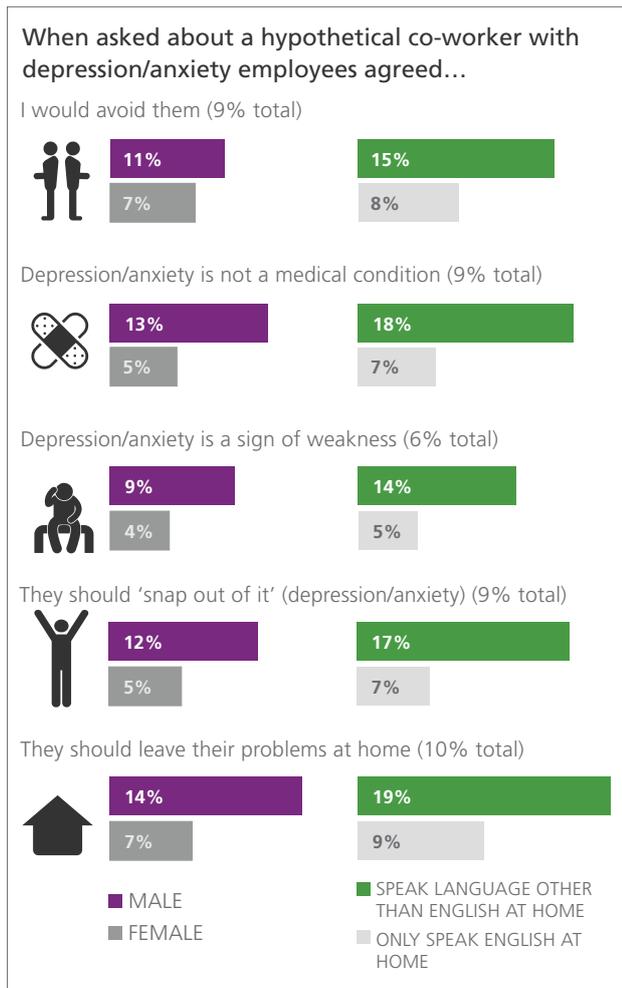
However, just over half of employees (56%) believe workplace mental health is valued by their CEO, and fewer (52%) believe it is valued within their industry.

There is strong evidence that when employees believe their CEO values a mentally healthy workplace, there are significant attitudinal and behavioural benefits. These include half the level of absenteeism due to mental health conditions and more positive perceptions of mental health in the workplace. Additionally, workplaces where CEOs are believed to value mental health are also more likely to be considered physically safe.



## There is evidence of mental health stigma in workplaces

The research explored the presence of stigma in relation to a hypothetical work colleague. Few employees agree with the generalised statements below. Those who were more likely to agree were males, and those who speak a language other than English at home.



When it comes to specific work situations, however, approximately one in three:

- have reservations about working with a person experiencing depression or anxiety.
- would prefer that a person experiencing depression or anxiety was not their line manager.
- did not think someone experiencing depression or anxiety would be able to perform adequately at their job.

Males and older employees are more likely to have concerns about the workplace performance of a colleague experiencing depression or anxiety.

## When asked about a hypothetical co-worker with depression/anxiety employees believed...

They would be unpredictable at work (30% total)



I would prefer they were not my line manager (32% total)



They are unlikely to perform adequately at their job (31% total)



■ MALE  
 ■ FEMALE  
 ■ 16-49 YEARS  
 ■ 50 YEARS +

## A variety of workplace factors are considered to be potential triggers for poor mental health

For many employees, factors such as having a stressful job or sustaining a workplace injury are associated with experiencing depression and anxiety. Employees who report they have taken time off work due to feeling mentally unwell in the past 12 months are even more likely to agree there is a link between these workplace issues and poor mental health.

## When asked about depression and anxiety, employees agreed these conditions...

Are caused by stressful jobs



Are common in Australian workplaces



Are more likely if the workplace is not physically safe



Can often occur after a workplace injury



■ TAKEN LEAVE DUE TO A MENTAL HEALTH CONDITION  
 ■ NOT TAKEN LEAVE DUE TO A MENTAL HEALTH CONDITION

### There is an expectation among workers that employers should assist those experiencing depression or anxiety

Three quarters of Australian employees (75%) believe workplaces *should* provide support to someone who is experiencing depression or anxiety and almost two-thirds (64%) believe they *would* receive some form of support from colleagues, management or a union. Not surprisingly, those who have taken leave due to experiencing a mental health condition are even more likely to agree that employers should support employees in these situations (86%).

Fundamentally, employees' belief that employers have an *ethical* obligation to support employees experiencing a mental health condition is stronger than their belief that employers have a *legal* obligation to support workers with mental health conditions. Sixty one percent of employees believe that employers have legal responsibilities towards workers with mental health conditions while 75% believe workplaces have an ethical obligation to provide mental health support.

Legal and ethical obligations aside, there is acknowledgement of shared responsibility in creating mentally healthy workplaces. Two thirds of employees (67%) and leaders (68%) agree that workplace mental health is a shared responsibility.

### While employees want to access support from workplaces, this does not necessarily mean they will

In responding to scenario-based questions about a hypothetical colleague experiencing depression or anxiety, 71% of employees recommend seeking some form of support through the workplace. Blue collar employees are somewhat more likely to recommend seeking support through the workplace (73%) compared to white collar employees (67%). However, there was significantly lower agreement that in this situation the hypothetical colleague should undertake specific, action-oriented behaviours such as:



This presents a 'gap' in terms of the stated desire to access support from workplaces, and the ability to translate this into an action-oriented behaviour.

Four out of five employees (81%) recommend accessing external support by talking to a GP or counsellor and a further 71% of employees would recommend consulting family and friends. These beliefs are highest among blue-collar employees, with 85% indicating they would talk to a GP or counsellor (compared to 76% of white collar workers) and 77% indicating they would talk to family or friends (compared to 64% of white collar workers).

While the majority of surveyed employees were able to identify constructive help-seeking behaviours it should be noted that one in 20 Australian employees (5%) indicate that if they experience a mental health condition they would consider *quitting their job*. Almost one in seven (14%) indicated that attempting to *deal with it independently/cheering up / looking on the bright side of life* is an appropriate course of action. One in 30 (3%) believe that a potential solution is to *try to relax by drinking some alcohol*. These are not recommended actions for someone who may be experiencing a mental health condition and may even exacerbate symptoms of depression or anxiety.

### Many employees do not actively seek support through their workplace because there is a lack of policies, procedures and practices to support mental health...or, they don't know these resources are available

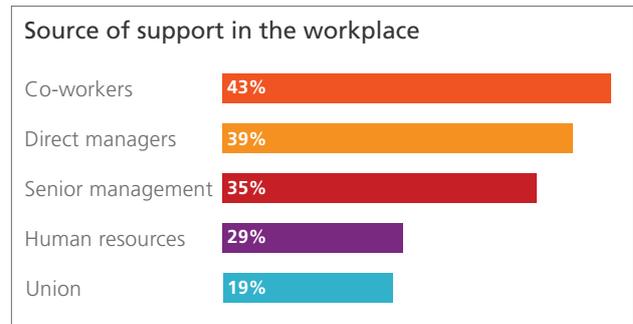
Most employees believe the workplace is an appropriate setting through which to access support for a mental health condition, but are not aware of, or don't have access to, appropriate resources. The survey highlighted a significant knowledge gap between leaders and employees in terms of their awareness of the existence of workplace policies, procedures and practices to support workplace mental health. Over one third of employees (35%) are unsure or believe their workplace has no policies, procedures or practices to support mental health. In contrast, 81% of leaders indicate their workplace has one or more policies, procedures and practices in place to support mental health.

As the following diagram shows, less than half (46%) of employees state their workplace provides information about legal responsibilities for mental health, that their workplace has a return to work policy for staff experiencing a mental health condition (44%) or that their workplace has processes and policies to support those who disclose a mental health condition (44%).

71% of organisational leaders stated that their organisation has leaders committed to promoting the mental health of staff but just 37% of employees agreed. Certain groups of employees gave their organisational leaders a higher rating - employees in white collar roles (39%), working in organisations with 200+ employees (43%), operating across more than one workplace (40%), and employees in workplaces with good physical safety (41%).

Percentage of employees and organisational leaders who believe their workplace has specific practices and resources to promote mental health		
In my workplace there is/are...	EMPLOYEES	LEADERS
Provision of information about the workplaces' legal responsibilities	46%	72%
Return to work policy for staff with a mental health condition	44%	74%
Processes and policies to support those who disclose a mental health condition	44%	70%
Leaders are committed to promoting the mental health of staff	37%	71%
Employee input into planning, implementation and review of mental health programs in the workplace	25%	57%

Almost two-thirds (64%) of employees believe they would receive some form of support from people within their workplace if they experienced a mental health condition. Employees are most likely to seek support from a colleague, but least likely to approach Human Resources for assistance with a mental health condition.



### The majority of employees would not disclose their experience of a mental health condition within their workplace

There are many factors influencing an employee's decision to disclose or not to disclose their mental health condition within their workplace. The survey found that among the one in five employees who report that they have taken time off work due to feeling mentally unwell in the past 12 months, almost half (48%) did not disclose the reason to anybody in their workplace.

The survey found a reluctance among employees generally to disclose their experience of depression or anxiety to employers. 35% of employees state they would not want anyone to know. This is even more evident among those who describe their workplace as mentally *unhealthy*. In mentally *unhealthy* workplaces, close to half of employees surveyed (46%) indicate they would not disclose if they were diagnosed with depression or anxiety. Additionally, the extent to which workplace mental health is believed to be valued by the line manager, CEO and industry, impacts on the likelihood of a person disclosing a mental health condition:

- 52% if not valued by line manager
- 47% if not valued by CEO and
- 43% if not valued by their industry.

### **Many employees would proactively approach a colleague they were concerned about, although not all are confident in their ability to provide support**

More than half of surveyed employees (58%) indicate they would approach a colleague they are concerned may be experiencing depression or anxiety to express their concern and support. Employees who have taken time off work due to feeling mentally unwell are even more likely to offer support to a colleague (68%). Younger employees (51%) and males (52%) are less likely to approach a colleague they believe may be experiencing a mental health condition, compared to 71% for older employees and 65% for females.

Employees are divided in terms of their personal ability to advise a colleague on avenues for support for a mental health condition. Just over half (52%) agree they would be able to suggest an appropriate course of action. This is higher among employees who have taken time off work due to feeling mentally unwell (62%). Younger employees (47%) and males (46%) are less likely to be aware of appropriate resources they could suggest to a colleague, compared to 60% for older employees and 58% for females.

### **What characteristics are associated with a mentally healthy workplace?**

Within this research, clear differences were observed in the opinions of employees who work in a 'mentally healthy workplace' compared to those who believe their workplace is mentally *unhealthy*. Employees of workplaces that are perceived to be mentally healthy are significantly more likely to:

- agree their CEO, leaders and industry value mental health in the workplace
- have access to, or awareness of, workplace policies, procedures and practices that support mental health
- work in a workplace they think is physically safe
- work part-time, work regular hours (rather than shift work) and rarely work overtime
- work for a small to medium sized businesses (up to 200 employees)
- work for an employer with just one worksite.

In addition, they are relatively:

- more likely to work in WA and less likely to work in QLD
- more likely to work in construction; professional, scientific and technical services and other services
- less likely to work in agriculture; manufacturing; transport, postal and warehousing; public administration and safety.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

This research shows that Australian businesses need to give employees' mental health in the workplace the same priority as they give their physical health and safety.

This commitment to mental health in the workplace can be demonstrated by organisational leaders in many practical ways.

It is important that employers identify triggers of poor mental health specific to their workplace, such as stress and inflexible working hours, and tailor their actions to address these risks.

Additionally, businesses should implement workplace policies, practices and programs that encourage employees to seek help for mental health conditions. This may also result in reduced absenteeism.

Resources designed to protect employee mental health must be promoted throughout the workplace to ensure that employees are aware of them.

Providing mental health training for staff can be an effective way of equipping employees with the skills and knowledge they require to manage their own mental health and support others in their workplace.

By demonstrating their commitment to good mental health in the working environment, organisational leaders will contribute to the reduction of stigma around mental health. This will ultimately result in mentally healthier workplaces



## ABOUT *beyondblue*

Most people in Australia have some experience with depression and anxiety, whether it is personal or via family, friends or work colleagues. *beyondblue's* work is aimed at achieving an Australian community that understands depression and anxiety, empowering every person in Australia, at any life-stage, to seek help. *beyondblue* raises awareness, reduces stigma and ensures that people have access to the information they need to support recovery, management and resilience.

*beyondblue* works in partnership with health services, schools, workplaces, universities, media and community organisations, as well as people living with depression and anxiety, their friends and family, to bring together expertise and provide tools and resources.

Further information to assist organisations to create a mentally healthy workplace is available at:

[www.headsup.org.au](http://www.headsup.org.au)



## ABOUT TNS

TNS Social Research has more than 500 dedicated social researchers working across 40+ countries. We are recognised as the research partner inspiring the world's leading policy makers by providing action-oriented analysis and recommendations based on evidence. Each year we conduct millions of interviews through a range of quantitative and qualitative methodologies to help our clients understanding and track public opinion on a local and international level. We assist decision makers across public sector and government bodies; the media, non-government organisation and major international and national institutions; with specialist expertise in disadvantage, education, health, social services, environment, workforce, family, public transport, justice, immigration and community integration.

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