

Having the conversation

Telling someone at work about your mental health condition



Having a conversation with your manager about your mental health can feel daunting. You might be worried about negative reactions or being treated differently, or just unsure of what to say. You're generally under no obligation to tell your employer about your condition, but making them aware means you'll be able to access any support you need. Remember that people are unable to help if they don't know what's going on.

If you've decided to tell your employer, it can be useful to practise what you're going to say with someone close to you beforehand. This resource can help you to order your ideas and get you thinking about what you want to say. There are spaces to make notes as you go.

Talking about your mental health condition is an individual experience and there is no right or wrong way to do it. The main thing is to say what feels natural.

Need help deciding?

If you're unsure about whether it's in your best interests to tell your manager, it can be useful to weigh up the pros and cons. Visit www.headsup.org.au/pros-and-cons for information, videos and an interactive tool to help you figure out your reasons for and against.

While there is no legal requirement to tell your employer, it's important to be aware of the overall health and safety of your workplace. If your condition potentially compromises safety, you have a responsibility to let your manager know.

How much detail do you want to share?

Think about how you will describe your mental health condition. If you feel it's in your best interest to be specific, then do so; otherwise, you can speak in general terms.

It can be useful to provide your employer with relevant fact sheets or other basic information about your mental health condition. You may also consider getting a letter from a health professional to support you and confirm the diagnosis.

Often people don't know how to talk about anxiety and depression because they don't know very much about it. Understanding the condition may make your employer more comfortable. You can get more information about anxiety and depression from www.beyondblue.org.au/resources.

Remember

- You might want to share some details about your condition, which could include your diagnosis, symptoms, medications, and any specific treatment.
- It can be useful to share current and past experiences to help your manager or colleague better understand your condition.
- Respect your own sense of privacy – it's OK to be selective about what you share.
- It's impossible to retract something once it's been said, so only share details you're comfortable having other people know.

How I'll describe my condition and how I've been feeling

[Empty text box for describing condition and feelings]

"My condition is called generalised anxiety disorder. I feel anxious and worried most of the time, without anything specific happening to cause it. My heart races and I feel like I'm going to be sick."

"I'm not coping at the moment. Sometimes I haven't been able to get out of bed, which is why I've been off work."

- People may ask questions about changes to working arrangements, and your employer will have to inform your colleagues if they are going to take on some of your tasks.
- Being open can often help to prevent gossip and rumours spreading.

"I want people to know but I don't want to have to tell them all individually and I'm not ready to speak to a group about it. Can you please tell the rest of the team?"

The level of privacy I would like/how I would like any information shared

[Empty text box for privacy preferences]

"I'd prefer no-one else at work found out as I don't think they'd understand."

What level of privacy would you like?

Consider the level of confidentiality you want to maintain, remembering that your privacy is protected by legislation. Do you only want the person you are having the conversation with to know? Are you happy for your manager to speak to your colleagues or other managers? If so, what should they say? Be specific about this and your wishes during your conversation.

Remember

- By law, your employer must respect your right to privacy, unless there is good reason to believe your condition compromises workplace safety.
- How much, if anything, your colleagues know is up to you.

Why are you sharing your experience?

Everyone's situation is different, and you might have a couple of different reasons for telling your manager. It's helpful to be clear about these, as this will help your manager understand your position and what you need from them.

Common reasons include:

- You are on your way to recovery but may need support to manage your condition in future.
- You need additional support, changes to your role or time off.
- You want to reduce stigma in your workplace.
- You are tired of keeping your condition a secret – being open may help people understand your situation.
- You have been struggling and your performance has become an issue.

"I wanted to share my condition with you because I'm aware I haven't been coping very well at work. I didn't want you to think I can't be bothered or that I'm just slacking off."

My reasons for sharing my experience

"I'm tired of keeping it a secret. I've decided to be more open about things, and I feel like the team here is really supportive."

What would be helpful for you?

It's useful to explain how your condition affects you at work – what you find difficult or stressful, and what your manager can do to support you. This may be a good way to ease their concerns. For example, you might say, "I tend to get anxious when there's a lot of noise or people hanging around my desk, but I find that a short walk gets me refocused." Your manager may ask how they can help, so having a few ideas prepared can be a good starting point.

Think about any changes to your role that will help you remain at or return to work. These could include adjustments to your workload, tasks, schedule, rostered hours or the workplace in general.

If your condition doesn't affect how you do your job, be sure to make that clear.

Remind your employer of your skills and strengths.

Remember

- Under Australian law your employer must make changes, or 'reasonable adjustments' to support you, providing you're able to carry out the core requirements of the job (the parts of the role that can't be altered).
- Any adjustments should be tailored to your needs, so think about the parts of your job or workplace you find difficult and any changes you can suggest to your manager.

"I don't need any extra support at the moment but I might need some in the future. I want to know that I can come to you if I'm struggling – I may need to adjust my workload or hours."

Changes or extra support that would help me

"In my last job, we had a system where my colleague served the customers if I was feeling anxious and I took over whatever he was doing. That worked really well."



Practical tips for planning the conversation

- Consider at what point during your experience with anxiety/depression you want to have a conversation. For example, at the point of diagnosis, any time during employment, at an interview, or during a job performance process.
- Think about where and when you want the meeting to take place. You might feel more alert in the morning, or your manager might usually be free just after lunch. Do you want to have a formal meeting or just chat in the café? How much time do you think you will need?
- Do you need a support person with you? Regardless of whether they come with you to the meeting, it's a good idea to have someone you can debrief with afterwards.
- What will you do if the conversation becomes negative, or you unexpectedly get upset?
- Discuss the planned conversation with family, friends or a close colleague for their perspective and advice.
- Prepare prompts or discussion points to keep the conversation on track and ensure you cover everything you need to.

Remember, there is no right or wrong time to tell someone at work about your mental health condition. If it feels daunting you can think about it, speak with someone close to you or a health professional, and take your time to decide when you will actually have the conversation.

As part of my plan I need to:

Where to find more information

Heads Up

www.headsup.org.au

Heads Up is all about supporting Australian businesses to create more mentally healthy workplaces. Access a wide range of resources, information and advice for all employees and create a tailored action plan for your business.

beyondblue

www.beyondblue.org.au

Learn more about anxiety and depression, or talk it through with our Support Service.

☎ 1300 22 4636

✉ Email or 💬 chat to us online at

www.beyondblue.org.au/getsupport

mindhealthconnect

www.mindhealthconnect.org.au

Access to trusted, relevant mental health care services, online programs and resources.



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