

# Managing mental health in the workplace



The impact of mental illness on Australian workplaces can't be overstated. It's the single largest contributor to years that Aussies live in ill-health, and is the largest contributor — after cancer and cardiovascular conditions — to reducing the total number of years of healthy life for Australians.<sup>(i)</sup>

## The cost of mental illness

Work related injuries are costly to employers, workers and the Australian community. In the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's (AIHW) 2020 report, mental health conditions resulted in the highest median time off work (17.3 weeks) and the highest median compensation paid (\$30,800). In comparison, nerve and spinal cord injuries were the second highest with the median time off work at 10.8 weeks and median compensation approximately \$21,100<sup>(ii)</sup>.

## The importance of caring for your employees' mental health

Reducing workers' exposure to mental health hazards is as important for employers as reducing the risk of physical injury or illness.

Work-related psychological injuries can be caused by things like bullying and harassment, or exposure to violence. These can be exacerbated by a variety of factors, including:

- poor workplace relationships
- working remotely or in isolation,
- low/high job demand, and
- role clarity, or a lack thereof.<sup>(iii)</sup>

## How to care for your employees' mental health

There are several strategies that employers can use to reduce and manage risk, and promote safe work environments for their employees.

### Promotion

- Educate the workforce about what a mentally healthy workplace is and how they may contribute.
- Increase the capacity of both individuals and organisations to recognise and address mental health and wellbeing concerns.

### Intervention

- Educate organisational leaders on intervention strategies and how they are implemented
- Educate the workforce on how to identify the early signs of distress, and what should be done once they're identified.

### Prevention

- Provide education and training to organisational leaders on how they can influence the development and maintenance of a mentally healthy workplace.
- Develop and implement policies and procedures that appropriately address psychosocial hazards and risk factors.

### Recovery and return to work

- Develop emergency response and crisis management plans that address mental health scenarios, including suicidal behaviour.
- Maintain at-work and return-to-work programs.

#### References:

<sup>(i)</sup> Productivity Commission, 'The Social and Economic Benefits of Improving Mental Health' January 2019, viewed 26 May 2022, <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-893650219/view>

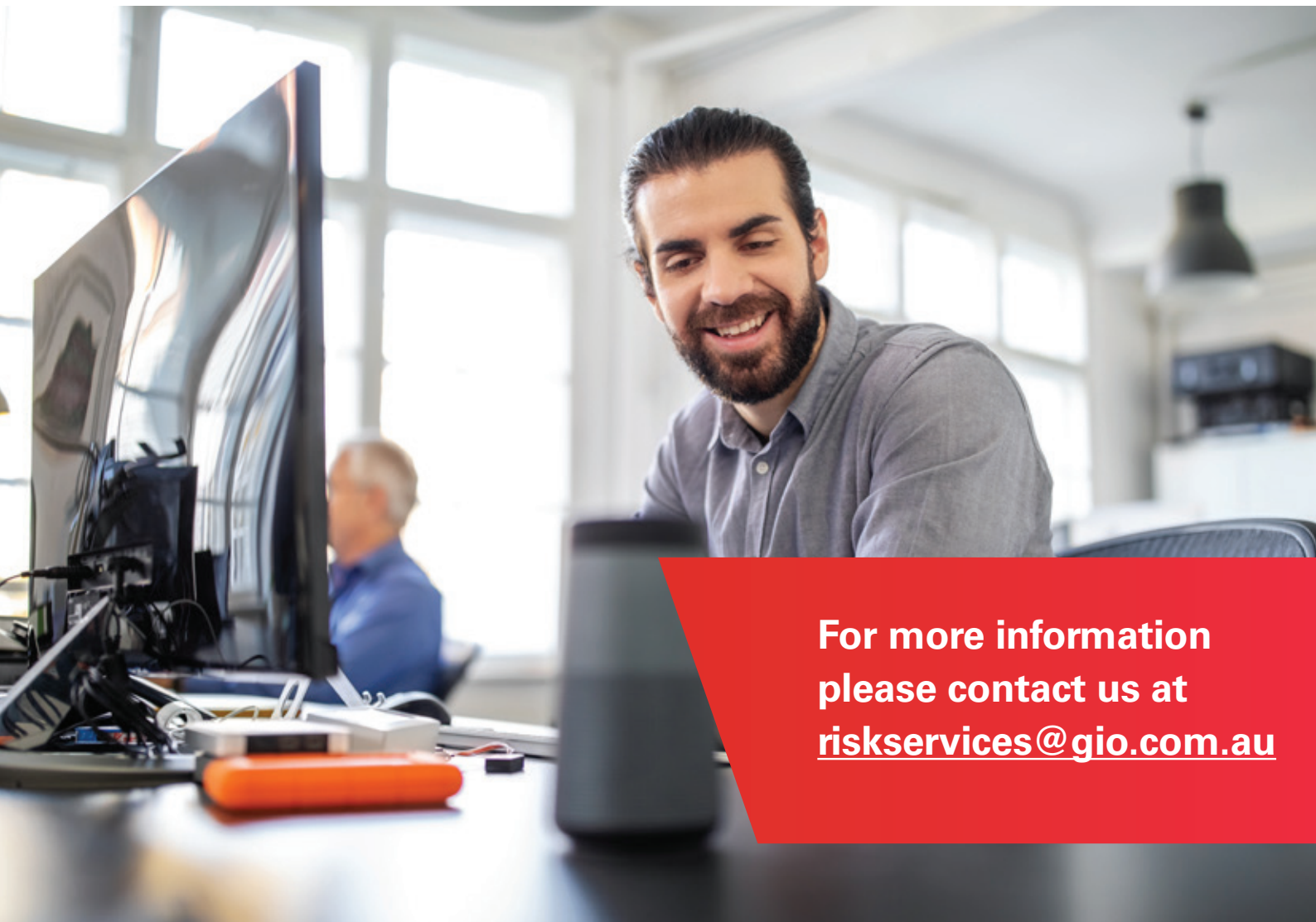
<sup>(ii)</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 'Australia's health 2020', viewed 26 May 2022, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/128856d0-19a0-4841-b5ce-f708fcd62c8c/aihw-aus-234-Australias-health-snapshots-2020.pdf.aspx>

<sup>(iii)</sup> Safe Work Australia, 'Work-related psychological health and safety: A systematic approach to meeting your duties' January 2019, viewed 26 May 2022, [https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/system/files/documents/1911/work-related\\_psychological\\_health\\_and\\_safety\\_a\\_systematic\\_approach\\_to\\_meeting\\_your\\_duties.pdf](https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/system/files/documents/1911/work-related_psychological_health_and_safety_a_systematic_approach_to_meeting_your_duties.pdf)



The above recommendations are based on a code of practice which was developed to help promote and maintain mentally healthy workplaces for FIFO workers in the resources and construction sectors, launched by Mines and Petroleum Minister Bill Johnston on 2 April 2019 in Western Australia<sup>(iv)</sup>. But while the code was developed for that specific sector, the recommendations can apply to many types of workplaces across the country.

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please contact us at  
[riskservices@gio.com.au](mailto:riskservices@gio.com.au)**

<sup>(iv)</sup> WA Department of Mines, Industry Regulation and Safety, 'Mentally healthy workplaces for fly-in fly-out (FIFO) workers in the resources and construction sectors – code of practice' 2019, viewed 26 May 2022, [https://www.dmp.wa.gov.au/Documents/Safety/MSH\\_MHW\\_FIFO\\_COP.pdf](https://www.dmp.wa.gov.au/Documents/Safety/MSH_MHW_FIFO_COP.pdf)

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