What should HR do about mental health at work?

Ceara Nicolls, Research Associate at Umbrella Wellbeing, summarises the research and provides answers on what HR can do to create effective, proactive and meaningful mental health strategies.

The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health has resonated worldwide, with the first year of the pandemic triggering a **25 per cent increase** in the prevalence of anxiety and depression. Despite many countries (like New Zealand) including mental and psychological support as part of their COVID-19 response plans, the past couple of years have caused widespread disruptions to our lives, affecting many people's health and wellbeing.

Although many of us may feel like we are coping okay, **July 2022 data** from Stats NZ shows a significant rise in poor mental health, with around one-in-three Kiwis saying they are experiencing poor levels of mental and emotional wellbeing.

Most New Zealanders are likely to meet the criteria for a diagnosis of mental illness at some stage in their lifetime (remember, diagnoses include problems with alcohol and drug use, as well as issues like anxiety or depression). Mental illness and poor wellbeing are unfortunately common, and have a measurable impact on business outcomes. The good news is these outcomes can be reduced, including through the actions of HR teams to support wellbeing in their workforce.

So, what can HR practitioners do to create effective, proactive and meaningful mental health strategies?

Business case

We know that poor wellbeing and mental health are real issues. In fact, during 2020, an **estimated 81 per cent of New Zealand** company boards discussed workplace mental health issues, which was a large spike compared with 2019. But let's get real for a moment. Although it is encouraging to see mental health being discussed in the workplace, many business leaders may be shy of the costs they imagine to be associated with wellbeing programmes. Mental health may be a 'hot' topic, but effectively

managing it can involve 'hot' concepts like 'time investment' and 'budget requirements', which may turn even well-meaning leaders off.

By setting out a clear business case that highlights the effectiveness of mental health measures in affecting bottom-line organisational outcomes, HR teams will have better luck bringing senior leaders and board members to the table. When building your business case, consider where your senior leadership team may fall with regard to the **following three motivations**.

1. **Legal:** Under the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015, a legal duty of care exists to support and protect people's mental health and wellbeing in the workplace. With the rise of mental health awareness in the workplace, business leaders are asking for support to better understand their obligations and meet them.

2. **Ethical:** The stress we experience at work is often a major factor contributing to mental illness. Morally and ethically, more and more business leaders are realising it's the right thing to do to look after their organisation's people. **He aha te mea nui o te ao? Māku e kī atu, he tāngata, he tāngata, he tāngata**. *What is the most important thing in this world? It is people, it is people, it is people.*

3. **Financial:** The research tells us the return on investment for strengthening wellbeing and mental health in your workplace is, on average, $3 for reactive support and $5 for proactive support. Based on previous research, we know this return on investment is supported by the fact that:

   – employees take fewer sick days (absenteeism)

   – presenteeism is reduced and productivity is improved

   – staff turnover is reduced as is the cost of replacing staff

   – a brand bump occurs for companies known to take staff wellbeing seriously

   – an organisation's ability to attract talent in tight human resource markets is improved

   – businesses are better able to cope with shocks (eg, COVID-19).

With a clear business case in hand, ensure your mental health programme is successful by: 1) taking a strategic approach, 2) setting up the conditions for

success, and 3) providing proactive, not just reactive, support.

Taking a strategic approach

Building mental health at work requires a strategic approach. This involves defining your organisation's goals and expectations, measuring your people's current mental health levels, tailoring your initiatives to suit your unique situation and remeasuring regularly to assess whether your strategy has produced results.

Developing clear expectations

First, before diving in and making changes, take a step back and make sure your purpose is clear and you are on the same page as your organisation's people and leadership. Ask questions like: What changes would we like to see in our organisation? What would good mental health practices look like for us? What outcomes are we hoping to achieve?

Measuring

Once you are confident you've set out a clear purpose and goals for your organisation, find out your people's current, or baseline, mental health levels. One way to do this is to partner with an external provider to get an unbiased snapshot of how employees are performing across various mental health and wellbeing measures, and the work and non-work factors that are contributing.

Whatever your method of getting data and knowing your people, it's crucial you can identify, with confidence, the areas where people need support and their areas of strength. This is important for developing a proactive wellbeing strategy that delivers tailored interventions uniquely suited to your business and your people.

Tailoring

Once you have the data, use this detailed knowledge of your people's mental health and associated organisational factors to inform and tailor a unique mental health programme for your people, through strategy, planning and, finally, action. Any actions you take, whether isolated interventions or comprehensive programmes, should map to what you already know about your people and bring you closer to achieving your wider mental health goals.

Review

The next step for all mental health initiatives is to check in and review your progress. Regular review of your wellbeing strategy is vital to make sure you are on track towards reaching your overarching purpose and helping your people. A pulse check, or reassessment, where you compare progress against the data you collected before implementing your mental health programme, can identify improvements, stuck points and areas for further attention or intervention.

Setting up conditions for success through leader actions

Many factors contribute to the success of any mental health programme. Unfortunately, there are too many to cover here, but one – leadership role modelling and buy-in – can make a big impact when we get them 'right'.

Our Umbrella team often hear that conversations about mental health are some of the most anxiety-provoking for leaders. To most effectively support team members who may be struggling with their mental health, and to promote good mental health proactively, the following actions are a great place to start.

- **Engage in training**. Make sure leaders have been properly trained and equipped with practical tools and actionable knowledge for **understanding psychosocial risks, creating psychologically safe teams** and managing mental health at work.

- **Set the tone**. In the executive suite and at every level beneath, leaders can foster trust by making it clear that wellbeing is a top priority.

- **Role modelling**. Leaders are in a unique position to role-model wellbeing activities, such as flexible working around family commitments, taking sick leave to avoid presenteeism or exercising during a lunch break. This produces a positive and significant impact on employee behaviour.

- **Put your wellbeing first**. Leaders should prioritise their own wellbeing first, thereby helping to send a non-negotiable message to teams that work should not come at the expense of physical, mental or whānau health.

Actions like these separate out leaders who pay lip service to wellbeing but are 'too busy' themselves to participate or to take any meaningful steps towards a healthier workplace, and those who embody and encourage wellbeing as a top priority.

Providing proactive, not just reactive, wellbeing support

When managing workplace mental health, it is important to know what to do to both proactively and reactively support people's wellbeing in the workplace.

Proactive support involves maximising protective factors for mental health and wellbeing and giving them the best support before it is needed. A good proactive approach to mental health will take into account factors such as tweaking organisational policies, eliminating or minimising psychosocial risks (eg, high workload or poor manager support) and training and awareness-raising. You're making sure staff have the tools and resources to meet any future mental health challenges head-on, as well as stopping challenges from occurring in the first place.

Reactive support, on the other hand, involves responding to your staff's mental health needs after these become an issue. While proactive support is generally considered the gold standard of mental health management, sometimes mental health issues come to the fore for reasons we cannot control.

Reactive support involves targeted efforts for groups who are already struggling. Also important is demonstrating good peer support and leadership in flexing around struggling staff members, and using good communication to boost awareness for internal support services (eg, EAP or peer support programmes).

Proactive support: Training and awareness-raising

In combination with great leadership and a proactive approach, mental health training programmes and follow-ups are effective ways to equip staff with the knowledge and practical skills to manage their own mental health, and to support others.

Any training programme should consider critical vulnerabilities or areas of risk identified during the initial 'data collection' step of your mental health strategy. Also important is to consider the type of training, the expertise of those delivering it (are they evidence-based and psychologist-led?), and whether the content is well suited to the diverse roles of employees in your organisation. Does one size fit all, or is a more nuanced approach needed?

Proactive support: Policies, communication and promotion

Finally, think about how you might build mental health into organisational practices, policies, communication and promotion. For instance, you might consider including a wellbeing check-in as a standard part of stand-ups and staff meetings. Or, think about how you might include wellbeing goals as an (optional) component of the annual review process.

When your organisation succeeds in making mentally healthy work part of your business as usual, your organisation and your people will thrive, creating healthier teams, workplaces and communities.

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Ceara Nicolls (PhD) is a Research Associate at Umbrella Wellbeing, alongside a team of psychologists who provide workplace wellbeing support. Armed with a doctorate in social cognitive psychology, a passion for science, and a daily cup of caffeine, Ceara spends her days hunting down the latest findings in workplace wellbeing, mulling over academic research articles, and penning evidence-based content for Umbrella's publications. Ceara's work helps to build scientific rigour and a strong research base for Umbrella's newest development projects and offerings, making a concrete and positive difference in the world of mental health, wellbeing and organisational outcomes. Learn more at **https://umbrella.org.nz/ceara-nicolls/**