

Facts and Strategies for Employers

One in two people will be affected by mental illness at some time in their life.

Te Rau Hinengaro: The New Zealand Mental Health Survey (2006) revealed that one in two people (46.6%) are predicted to experience mental illness at some time in their lives, with 39.5% having already done so and 20.7% in the past 12 months.

The fact that a person has experience of mental illness says nothing about their ability to do a particular job.

In fact – skills and traits of people with experience of mental illness and recovery can include creativity, empathy, inner strength, resilience, lateral thinking, loyalty, and appreciation, especially when they are given the same chance as anyone else.

“Those companies that do hire and retain employees with serious mental disorders often find a payoff: Many workers with such illnesses have shown the strength to overcome great barriers and have acquired impressive credentials in the process.”

—Wall St Journal Online (taken from: *Taking the first step: a guidebook for jobseekers with mental health issues; Like Minds Employment Advocacy Project, LEAP*)

Meaningful work allows people to maximise their potential.

Making reasonable accommodations can be simple.

Under the Human Rights Act, employers are required to make reasonable accommodations; this means that employers can enable people to be in the workforce and be productive. It is about initiating and encouraging dialogue with open-mindedness, willingness and honesty.

Employers can make many simple arrangements

- flexible working hours
- setting up a work-station so that an employee is not easily distracted
- giving instructions and providing supervision differently
- providing relevant training for supervisory staff
- allowing a gradual return to work after a period of absence
- setting up regular meetings with a supervisor

It is not about lowering the standards of the job performance or qualifications – it is about changing the way those standards are met (process). Employers can facilitate this process.

Principles of accommodation

- Create an environment where diversity is accepted by addressing the individual needs of each employee.
- Respect the employee’s confidentiality and identify specifically the form and degree of confidentiality.
- Be willing to engage in joint problem solving.

- Make all accommodations voluntary for the employee.
- Be prepared to review accommodations periodically to meet changing needs, and keep in mind that needs change.
- Be flexible in enforcing traditional policies.
- Be concrete and specific when identifying accommodations. Putting them in writing is a good idea.
- Set up an easy and accessible mechanism for reviewing accommodations.

Keep these principles in mind when any current or potential employee asks to be accommodated in the workplace.

They will help you to create a positive, and therefore more productive, environment.