

Stigma free work places – what can employers do

“I think that until we really learn to be open about illness, whatever kind of disability it is that you have, or whatever condition...then we’re not going to get anywhere. It’s the little problems like that that make you human...”

Kathryn McNeil from Julie Leibrich’s, “A gift of stories” (1999)

Stigma free and mentally healthy workplaces don’t happen by accident. Employers have a responsibility to make sure that people feel comfortable disclosing their experience of mental illness in an environment that does not discriminate, that they are comfortable in their workplace – and that they have access to support when they need it.

Warren Elwin, Chief Executive for Workwise Employment Agency says employers can easily make reasonable adjustments to accommodate the needs of employees with experience of mental illness.

“Many adjustments cost little or nothing to implement and are often a matter of flexibility and developing a creative approach to working practice,” he says.

“The focus needs to be on job performance rather than [experience of] mental illness.”

People with experience of mental illness can bring a range of skills, talents and abilities to the workplace. They can work in all sorts of jobs - from senior managerial positions to manual or technical jobs - with many holding tertiary and trade qualifications.

“There are a lot of skills locked up in people with experience of mental illness that are available to the labour market. It’s about marrying up the right person with the right type of employment,” Warren says, “And the majority of employers who have employed someone with experience of mental illness say that they would be happy to continue doing so.”

One employer willing to talk about their practices is Career Services. They were named in the recent *Unlimited* magazine’s 2008 Best Places to work in New Zealand survey, as the eighth best medium to large workplace.

Human Resources Manager, Kathy Miller, says that as a crown agency, Career Services takes a very open and flexible approach to any issues that affect their employees in the course of their employment.

“It’s a strength-based organisation that is interested in the skills people bring with them to their roles and asks, ‘What do you need to be successful in your job and make the most of your abilities?’

“With respect to any support required by employees with experience of mental illness, the Service uses the same approach as any other situation that may arise where people need to adjust their work commitments. Together we look at what is needed; flexible or reduced working hours, carefully monitoring and managing

workloads, granting additional leave, or a combination of arrangements that best suits each person's situation."

As examples, Kathy mentions an employee with chronic depression who works part time, and another employee with experience of bipolar disorder.

"One of the staff members who disclosed their experience went through a bad patch whilst in employment where they needed to spend some time away from the workplace - and that was not an issue. The job was kept open for as long as needed, and there was no pressure to return to work within a certain time."

The staff member concerned says, "When you're in hospital in a situation like this, knowing that you've got job security is huge. The support from my colleagues was amazing as well. It meant so much to me".

Another employer with a valued member of staff, who from time to time experiences mental health issues, is Greg Clesionik-Jones, from Dwight's Canvas in Porirua.

Greg says, "Sarah* is very reliable and friendly to workmates and customers. We get on really well. We all enjoy working together and care about each other. Sarah* has fantastic days and then sometimes she'll have a day where I can see that something is on her mind. At those times, I'll suggest she take a mini-break and collect her thoughts. It's just about being flexible."

Warren Elwin says there are other steps that employers can consider as well. "It's not just about the person experiencing mental illness. You should be considering the mental health of all your employees and reminding them the organisation values them and there is support available should they require it."

How do you create an accepting, non-discriminatory environment?

It starts from the top down. If management establish a good working culture where differences are valued, discrimination is not accepted, and cooperative and flexible approaches to working situations for everyone are the norm then there is less likely to be stigma in the workplace.

People report that the following values are important for them to see in their employers, colleagues and their working environments:

- Inclusion
- Respect
- Listening
- Understanding
- Valuing people's unique differences

Once a person has chosen to disclose their experience of mental illness – both employer and employee should take the time to discuss what support and accommodation they may need.

Some immediate steps that employers can consider are:

- Enabling people to work flexible hours
- Job sharing
- Working from home

Need some help with best practice?

Employers who would like support with establishing best practice guidelines for their organisation or business can get more information from (or arrange to talk to) the following agencies:

- Supported employment agencies, like Workwise are about supporting the employers and employees in the work environment to create a sustainable working relationship. For more information, visit www.workwisetrust.co.nz
- Working Well is a division of the Mental Health Foundation. Its key objective is supporting employers and managers to create more mentally healthy workplaces in New Zealand. For more information, visit www.workingwell.co.nz or phone 0800 496 754.
- The Equal Employment Opportunities Trust provides information and tools on EEO to employers and raises awareness of diversity issues in the workplace. For more information visit www.eeotrust.org.nz

Profile: Joseph Pennant*

Joseph Pennant* has been working as a commercial painter for the past nine months. He has Thursdays off to go a community art centre where he does illustration work for an educational manual.

Joseph has been diagnosed with schizophrenia although he says he no longer experiences any symptoms. "I've been very open about my experience" says Joseph, "and my employers have been very supportive about that."

Joseph got the painting job through a friend who organised him a good pay rate. "Working again has made me like I'm normal, like everyone else" says Joseph, "I feel accomplished and relaxed. I don't feel anxious anymore. I just have a relaxed feeling about it."

Joseph's advice to others with experience of mental health issues considering returning to work is "Be courageous! Give yourself a chance!"

Profile: Melissa Brown*

Melissa was at University studying towards her Bachelor of Engineering, when she had what she describes as a "melt down". She made the decision to move back home and was eventually referred to the Workwise Employment Agency to assist her with her job search.

Melissa and her Workwise Employment Consultant decided that the best approach was to try lots of different roles by registering with a local temping agency. She eventually found a company she really enjoyed working for and accepted a permanent role with them.

Recently, Melissa chose to disclose some of her experience with mental illness at her annual review. She says her supervisor was very surprised, but it has had no impact on their relationship. She's confident that should she need additional support or time off it would not be an issue for her employer, "It's no different to colleagues who need time off to cope with their family issues."

Melissa still has bad days where she doesn't want to work, but "I just try to plough through and wake up the next day and hope things are better". Her Workwise Employment Consultant says being valued as an employee has done wonders for

* Names have been changed to protect privacy.

Melissa's confidence. "She's a completely different person than when she first came to Workwise – having this job has built her confidence unbelievably."

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