

2011 Annual Business and Professions Study

RESEARCH SUMMARY

May 2011

Executive summary

A 2011 survey of almost 18,000 Australian professionals indicated:

- high levels of awareness and knowledge regarding depression, but not of anxiety disorders
- low levels of stigmatising attitudes towards people with depression
- low levels of confidence in managing mental health issues in the workplace.

Although 47.3 per cent of professionals felt confident in their ability to *support* a colleague with depression, anxiety or another mental health disorder, they generally had low confidence in their own skills and knowledge to *manage* mental health issues in their workplace. While professionals believed that their organisation was not well equipped to manage mental health issues in the workplace, they did not feel their organisation would respond in a detrimental way to an individual with depression or an anxiety disorder.

Overall, 17.5 per cent of survey respondents had completed training relevant to dealing with mental illness in the workplace, with nine out of ten professionals reporting that this type of training was useful. Gender, age, seniority level, profession and sector had some influence on awareness, proactive behaviour and confidence. However, the two factors with the greatest impact on a person's confidence to manage mental health issues in the workplace were whether the person had:

- undertaken training in dealing with mental illness in the workplace and/or
- a previous diagnosis of depression or an anxiety disorder.

Background

The high prevalence of depression and anxiety disorders in Australia is not only of significant personal cost to individuals experiencing such conditions and their family members, but also of great financial cost to the organisations in which they work and the wider community.

Each year, more than three million people in Australia will experience depression and/or an anxiety disorder. Over six million working days are lost each year as a result of untreated depression alone.¹ Given that every employee with untreated depression is estimated to cost his or her organisation an average of \$9,660 per year due to lost productivity and absenteeism,² the financial cost to industry cannot be underestimated.

As part of an annual survey of professionals across Australia conducted by Beaton Research & Consulting, *beyondblue: the national depression initiative* was invited to investigate levels of awareness and attitudes regarding mental health problems, and how individuals and organisations respond to mental health issues in the workplace. This follows on from a similar survey undertaken in 2007, which investigated the prevalence of mental health problems, and knowledge and attitudes surrounding mental health.

Research sample

Data was analysed for a total of 17,980 respondents. The study sample was 66.8 per cent male and 33.2 per cent female, with an even distribution of ages. Senior leaders (e.g. CEOs) made up 31.1 per cent of the sample, while managers made up 18.3 per cent and general staff were 50 per cent. A range of professions were surveyed across different sectors (see Table 1).

Table 1. Number of professionals, by role and sector

	Lawyer (N=1,123)	Engineer (N=1,887)	Accountant (N=1,324)	Shared services (N=583)	Other (N=10,661)	Total (N=15,578)*
Government & community	237	452	251	179	2,401	3,520
Manufacturing, wholesaling & retail	41	138	196	83	641	1,099
Finance & insurance	131	7	149	73	2,336	2,696
Primary industry, infrastructure & utilities	106	555	176	99	1,295	2,231
Professional & other services	549	428	447	110	2,751	4,285
Property & construction	59	307	105	39	1,237	1,747

* Excludes respondents from sectors which could not be classified



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Research results

Knowledge and attitudes

Knowledge regarding depression was relatively high. For example, more than four in five professionals (82.0 per cent) recognised that depression and stress are not the same thing. Knowledge regarding anxiety disorders was lower – only 33.4 per cent of professionals correctly identified that anxiety disorders are more common than depression. Awareness of some anxiety disorders, such as obsessive compulsive disorder and post traumatic stress disorder, was relatively high. However, there was a lack of knowledge about two of the most common anxiety disorders – generalised anxiety disorder and social phobia – with 42.1 per cent and 23.1 per cent respectively stating they had never heard of these disorders. Professionals with the highest levels of awareness regarding anxiety disorders were those who had undertaken training in dealing with mental illness in the workplace and those who had a previous diagnosis of depression or an anxiety disorder.

Professionals aged 20 to 29 years were consistently more likely to hold stigmatising views about people with depression (e.g. 16.5 per cent agreed that people with depression were not as strong minded as others, compared to only 11.0 per cent in the overall sample). Men, general staff, those aged 20 to 29, those working in the property sector and engineers were the most likely to suggest unhelpful ways to help a person experiencing depression (e.g. 'Take them out for a drink to help them forget about their worries').

Managing mental health issues in the workplace

Training

Overall, 17.5 per cent of survey respondents had completed training related to dealing with mental illness in the workplace, with nine out of ten professionals reporting that this type of training was useful. Professionals rated suicide intervention skills (40.6 per cent), the *beyondblue* National Workplace Program (39.6 per cent) and Mental Health First Aid (37.4 per cent) as extremely useful. Only 25.0 per cent of respondents found mental health and wellbeing training to be extremely useful.

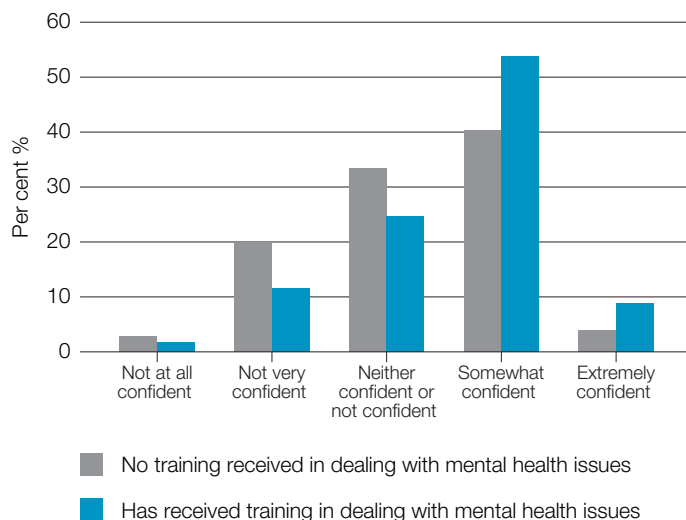


Photo: VicHealth

Knowledge and confidence

Overall, 47.3 per cent of professionals reported being confident in their 'ability to effectively support a colleague with depression, anxiety or another mental health disorder'. Those who had undergone training in dealing with mental illness in the workplace were significantly more confident in their abilities, with 62.5 per cent stating they were somewhat confident or extremely confident, compared to 44 per cent who had not undertaken training (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. How confident you are in your ability to support a colleague with depression, anxiety or another mental health disorder



Similarly, professionals with a previous diagnosis of depression or an anxiety disorder were more confident in their ability to support a colleague with mental health issues (68.7 per cent, compared to 44.4 per cent with no diagnosis of depression or an anxiety disorder). Other groups with higher levels of confidence in their ability to support a colleague included women, senior leaders, and those working in the government and community sector.

Only 51.1 per cent of professionals felt comfortable managing the work performance of a person who was experiencing depression, while 61.1 per cent felt comfortable working closely with a person who was experiencing depression.

Nearly all professionals felt that to manage mental illness in the workplace effectively, it was very important to understand aspects such as signs and symptoms, risk factors and management strategies to support employees. However, professionals were not confident in their own knowledge and skills relating to those aspects, on average rating their levels of confidence as 2.6 out of 6.0. Those who were most confident in their skills and knowledge were professionals who had undergone training in dealing with mental illness.

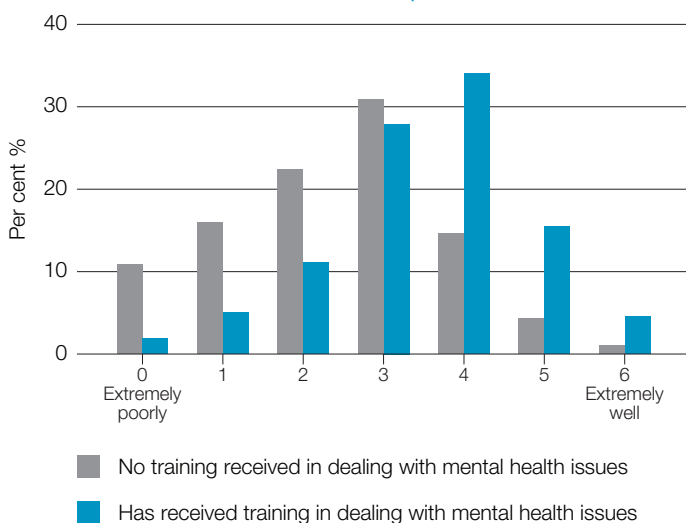
Behaviour

Professionals were generally likely to take appropriate action to assist a colleague who may be experiencing depression, with 65.4 per cent stating they were likely to initiate a conversation about what the person was experiencing and 76.8 per cent stating they were likely to suggest the person go to a doctor or other health professional. Proactive responses were most common among women, senior leaders, those working in shared services, people with a previous diagnosis of depression or an anxiety disorder, and those who had undergone training in dealing with mental illness. For example, 63.4 per cent of professionals who received training would suggest a colleague see a psychologist, compared to 54.8 per cent of those who had not received training. Professionals least likely to be proactive were those aged under 29 and those working in the finance and insurance sector.

Organisational management of mental health issues

Professionals generally felt their organisation was not well equipped to manage mental health issues effectively in the workplace. Older professionals (aged over 60), those in the manufacturing and retail sector and accountants tended to perceive their organisations as being slightly less well equipped. Those who had undertaken training in dealing with mental illness rated their organisations' ability to manage mental health issues higher (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. How well your organisation is equipped to effectively manage mental health issues in the workplace



Professionals generally felt their organisation would be unlikely to respond to an individual with depression or an anxiety disorder in a detrimental way (e.g. ignore the issue and pretend it doesn't exist, find ways to fire the individual, start workplace gossip about the individual). However, professionals did not think it was highly likely their organisation would respond in a supportive manner either – organisations scored between 3.6 and 3.8 out of 6.0 for supportive actions.



Compared to other professions, lawyers felt their organisations were less likely to actively help an individual seek treatment. Engineers felt it was more likely their organisation would encourage the individual to go on 'stress leave'.

Those most likely to feel their organisation would be supportive of an individual experiencing mental health issues included men, senior leaders and those who had received training in dealing with mental illness in the workplace.

Responses from different professions

Lawyers

Lawyers reported the highest levels of mental health training (22.0 per cent) and were the professional group most likely to have completed the *beyondblue* National Workplace Program training. Analysis of responses to identical questions in 2007 and 2011 revealed that in 2011, lawyers were significantly less likely to agree with stigmatising views regarding depression. In 2011, lawyers were also more likely (73.3 per cent) to agree that having a stressful job increases the likelihood of depression, compared to responses from lawyers in 2007 (63.1 per cent). However, findings suggest that barriers still exist in relation to engaging in proactive behaviour and assisting a person in the workplace who may be experiencing depression.

Accountants

Accountants believed their organisations weren't as well equipped to manage mental health issues in the workplace (2.4 out of 6.0, compared to the average of 2.6). Accountants were also least likely to have undertaken training in dealing with mental illness in the workplace (11.3 per cent) compared to the sample average of 17.5 per cent).

Engineers

Engineers differed to other professionals in terms of their confidence in supporting a colleague with a mental health issue – only 38.3 per cent were confident, compared to the sample average of 48.4 per cent.

Conclusions

- Professionals had low levels of stigmatising attitudes towards people with depression and high levels of awareness regarding depression, but not anxiety disorders.
- While almost half of the professionals surveyed reported being confident in their ability to effectively *support* a colleague with depression, anxiety or another mental health disorder, they generally had low confidence in their own skills and knowledge to effectively *manage* workplace mental health.
- Although professionals felt that their organisation would be unlikely to respond in a detrimental way to an individual experiencing depression or an anxiety disorder, they generally felt their organisation was not well equipped to manage mental health issues in the workplace effectively.
- While gender, age, seniority, sector and profession had some influence, overall the two factors which most increased awareness, proactive behaviour and confidence regarding effectively managing workplace mental health were whether the person had completed training in dealing with mental illness in the workplace or had a previous diagnosis of depression or an anxiety disorder.
- Lawyers were less likely to have stigmatising views about depression compared to the 2007 results and were the profession most likely to have undergone training in dealing with mental illness. However, findings suggest that barriers still exist in relation to engaging in proactive behaviour and assisting a person in the workplace who may be experiencing depression.



Photo: VicHealth

Recommendations

The results highlight the need for organisations to better respond to mental health issues in the workplace. Organisations should consider providing mental health training for professionals at all levels within their organisation. Professionals who have undertaken training in dealing with mental illness in the workplace, such as the *beyondblue* National Workplace Program, are more likely to feel that they, and their organisation, are better equipped to support a person with depression or an anxiety disorder.

For more information on the *beyondblue* National Workplace Program, please email workplace@beyondblue.org.au or call **03 9810 6161**.

1 Andrews G, Hall W, Teeson M, and Henderson S (1999). The Mental Health of Australians. Mental Health Branch, Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, Canberra.

2 Hilton M (2006). Assessing the financial return on investment of good management strategies and the WORC project. Psychological Injury and Stress in the Workplace Conference Presentation, Sydney, April.