

# Mental health in the workplace

Information for managers of mines and quarries



**MinEx**

Health and Safety in NZ extractives



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This resource is adapted from 'Let's Make Mental Health Part of the Conversation – A Guide for Managers', a free Open Minds resource developed by the Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand as part of the Like Minds, Like Mine programme led by the Health Promotion Agency.

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# 1 Why talk about mental health at work?

Talk about wellbeing	Understand what is supportive	Work together for shared success
Make talking about wellbeing an everyday thing.	Listen non-judgmentally and understand the issue from their perspective.	Collaborate to find solutions that work for both you and your workers.

Everyone has mental health and nearly half of all New Zealanders are likely to meet the criteria for a mental illness at some point in their lives, with depression and anxiety being the most common. Because mental health problems can affect anyone at any time, it's critical that workers make talking about mental health a normal and safe thing to do.

There are huge benefits to creating a workplace culture where it's OK to talk about mental health. Your workers are your greatest asset - you need them to feel confident, happy and engaged in their work, so that productivity is high.



## Opening up a dialogue about mental health in the workplace can result in:

- more positive mental health
- better physical health
- reduced absenteeism
- lower staff turnover
- improved work performance, motivation, commitment and energy
- less tension and conflict, more connectedness, kindness, tolerance and patience.

Despite the benefits, many employers are reluctant to talk about mental health. It can feel too personal, and they may be nervous about saying the wrong thing, or not having the answers or knowledge. For employees living with a mental illness it can be equally as difficult – they may be worried their employer won't think they're capable of doing their job, or they may have concerns that details of their mental health problem won't stay confidential.

New Zealand research has suggested that employers value workers with experience of mental illness and are wanting to support them in the workplace. This resource has been created with workplaces to support managers to have successful conversations where the needs of both the worker and the employer can be taken into account.



## **There are several reasons to make mental health a priority in your workplace:**

### **Mental health issues are common**

In New Zealand one in five people over 16 years of age experience some form of common mental health issue in any year and almost two in five adults have experienced a mental health issue over their lifetime. Workplaces which are supportive of people with mental illness are better able to provide non-discriminatory services that benefit all workers.

### **Safe and healthy workplaces are good for business**

A healthy work environment reduces staff turnover, stress, and personal grievance claims, as well as increasing productivity.

### **Ignoring mental health issues costs employers**

Workplaces feel the effects of poor mental health of employees through increased absenteeism – when workers are off sick – and increased presenteeism – when workers are at the workplace but not mentally engaged with work. The Southern Cross Health Society ‘Wellness in the Workplace’ survey of 2015 (Business NZ, 2015) estimates that New Zealand lost approximately 6.7 million working days to absence in 2014. The direct costs of absence alone, most commonly from minor illness, amounted to \$1.4545 billion across the economy in 2014. It is estimated that on average, employees have nearly three times as many presentee days as absentee days resulting in much higher ‘hidden’ costs of poor mental health.

### **Mental health is affected by both work and what is happening in our lives**

Worker health affects the workplace and the workplace affects the health of workers. It is important for employers to understand the difference between pressure, which keeps us all going and makes us productive, and stress, which makes unmanageable demands that damage both workers and the business. There should also be an awareness that life outside of work affects the wellbeing of workers.

### **It is the law**

Workplaces are legally required to take all practicable steps to ensure the health and safety of their workers. Under the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015, workplaces have a role to play in the prevention of harm to all people at work. This includes mental harm caused by work-related stress. In providing an environment where workers are not exposed to hazards, employers must consider the traditional concepts of health as well as safety.

# 2 It is as simple as 1,2,3



“1 in 5 New Zealanders will experience mental illness this year.”

1. **Talk** – about mental wellbeing: Make talking about wellbeing an everyday thing. Keeping the kōrero (chat) alive and open in your workplace positively affects mental wellbeing.
2. **Understand** – what is supportive: To find out how you can support, listen non-judgmentally. Acknowledge the person’s feelings and don’t take them personally. Let them know you’re asking because you’re concerned about them. Their knowledge will help understanding, and support problem solving.
3. **Work together** – for shared success: Work together to find solutions that work for both you and your workers, keeping the mana of everyone intact. Focus on strengths and abilities brought to the workplace and what resources you can both bring to tautoko (support) wellbeing and achieve shared goals.

“Right now, you or someone in your workplace is likely to be affected.”

# 3 How to have a conversation about mental health

## Talk about wellbeing

If you notice a worker is struggling with their mental health, don't ignore it. But be aware that talking about personal struggles can be difficult and they might get emotional, embarrassed or upset.

It's good to remember that no special skills are required to talk about mental health. You just need to be empathetic, approachable, and willing to listen.

Common symptoms of mental health issues that may signal to the manager that the worker is experiencing difficulties include:

Change in emotional reactions	Change in thinking	Change in behaviour
<b>such as an increase in:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- fear and anxiety</li><li>- anger and irritability</li><li>- sadness and despair</li><li>- emptiness or hopelessness</li><li>- disconnectedness</li><li>- withdrawing from favourite activities</li></ul> <b>less:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- involvement or enjoyment</li></ul>	<b>such as difficulties in:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- concentrating</li><li>- following complex instructions</li><li>- remembering</li><li>- communicating</li><li>- conversing including hesitation, silence, and broken sentences</li></ul> <b>more:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- intrusive (unwanted) thoughts</li></ul>	<b>such as:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- withdrawing from others</li><li>- being unavailable</li><li>- being overprotective</li><li>- startling easily</li><li>- denying and avoiding</li><li>- taking greater risks</li><li>- abusing substances</li><li>- speeding or careless driving</li></ul>

## Before you approach the person ask yourself:

- Am I in a good headspace?
- Am I willing to genuinely listen?
- Can I give as much time as needed?

## Where and when?

It is important that your first approach is not a formal one.

- Ask when will be good for them to chat. If they can't talk when you approach them, ask them for a better time to come back.
- Choose a place where the worker feels comfortable being open. Taking them offsite is a good idea – grab a coffee or go to a local park.
- Make sure they can talk somewhere quiet and private.
- Let them know that anything they say will remain confidential.

## Ways to start the conversation

Don't worry if you don't quite know what to say. Just by being supportive and listening, you're helping to make a difference. So be as relaxed as possible.

## Help them open up by asking questions like:

- "How are you doing?"
- "What's been happening for you lately?"
- "I haven't caught up, and wanted to check in about how you are feeling."
- "How's life? How are the family?"

## Mention specific things that have made you concerned for them, for example:

- "You don't seem yourself lately, anything up?"
- "I noticed you've been quiet this week, you OK?"
- "You seem less chatty than usual."

If there are issues that are impacting their productivity – such as prolonged absences – talk about these early on. It's best to address these issues before they become a bigger problem.

## What if the person doesn't want to talk?

Be relaxed if the discussion doesn't go as you'd hoped. If the person doesn't want to speak about it, respect their choice, but leave the door open for further dialogue.



# 4 Understand what is supportive



Always try to listen non-judgmentally and see the issue from their perspective.

Let them know you're asking because you're concerned about them.

Acknowledge the person's feelings. If they get angry or upset, stay calm and don't take it personally.

**Ask questions to explore what's going on, for example:**

- "Have you spoken to anyone else about this?"
- "What would help you manage the load?"
- "What else is happening for you at the moment?"
- "How do you think you might resolve that situation?"
- "What can we change to make life easier?"

Don't interrupt or rush the conversation, If they need time to think, sit patiently with them in silence. **Most importantly, take what they say seriously.**

# 5 Work together for shared success

It is important to work collaboratively to find solutions that work for both you and your worker.

Help them to create a plan for how to address issues when they arise. Identify the signs that may indicate they are not doing well and what triggers them. Ask about who to contact in a crisis, and what supports need to be put in place in the workplace.

## **Explore what supports are available to them, for example:**

- EAPs (Employee Assistance Programmes)
- Family, whānau, and friends they trust who they can talk to
- Community leaders such as church ministers or local kaumātua
- Their GP.

Remember that you can – and should – make reasonable accommodations for your team member if needed. Think about the flexibility you currently have in your workplace – sometimes the same adjustments offered for staff with physical health issues may be all that’s needed to support a mental health issue.

## **Avoid assumptions about what they might need.**

### **Ask! Questions that may help include:**

- “What would be a good first step for us to take?”
- “How can I help?”
- “What has helped in the past?”

Look at the practical supports your organisation can give them, such as changes in work hours, extended leave, or changes in duties for a short time.

## **Follow up**

Remember to follow up in a few days and then regularly to check in and see how the person is doing and review any plans made.



**Further guidance and advice on this topic can be found in the Open Minds Guide for Managers produced by the Mental Health Foundation at [www.mentalhealth.org.nz/openminds](http://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/openminds)**

If you find yourself dealing with a crisis situation:

1. If it is an emergency phone 111  
If you feel you or someone else is at risk of harm.
2. Or go with the worker to your nearest hospital emergency department (ED).
3. Or phone your local DHB Mental Health Crisis Team (CATT Team).  
The phone number for your local team can be found at **[www.mentalhealth.org.nz/get-help/in-crisis/](http://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/get-help/in-crisis/)**
4. Or if you or your worker need to talk to someone else:  
Free call or text 1737 any time for support from a trained counsellor.

#### **Lifeline**

0800 543 354 or (09) 522 2999  
Free text 4357 (HELP)

#### **Youthline**

0800 376 633

#### **Samaritans**

0800 726 666



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[www.minex.org.nz](http://www.minex.org.nz)