



Realising the opportunity of prevention and promotion strategies for a mentally healthy and productive Tasmanian workforce.

White Paper

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The aim of this paper is to communicate accumulated scientific evidence on the protection and promotion of mental health in the context of work and occupation, discuss the changing work, health and safety policy landscape and guide action by Tasmanian employers and policy makers.

Background

In 2017, The University of Tasmania's Work, Health and Wellbeing Network released a white paper **"An integrated approach to workplace mental health: Nine priorities for implementation in Australia."**¹ The paper aimed to communicate the importance of taking an integrated approach to workplace mental health to organisations, practitioners and policy makers and illustrate areas of priority for action. The 2017 white paper, and an integrated approach² more generally, has had significant impact nationally and internationally.

Mental health is complex and multifactorial. Biological factors, lifestyle behaviours, and life events and circumstances all play a significant role. Engaging in activities such as the **'5 Ways to Wellbeing'** and using healthy coping and emotional self-regulation strategies can protect and promote mental health as well as assist in recovery from mental ill-health. However, in addition to the need for individual awareness and management of mental health, there is increasing recognition of the critical role of industrial and employer practices. Working conditions and occupation are important social determinants of health, and as evidence of this continues to grow, so too does the obligation for employers to provide a mentally healthy workplace and job.³⁻⁶

Broad-based support and advocacy for mentally healthy workplaces has been seen in Australia and globally. The unprecedented challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic have only underscored the need for businesses and organisations to develop their capability in relation to mental health and wellbeing. A strong business case for action is clear both ethically and economically, and related employer practices will be increasingly relevant to attraction, retention, and reputation.



An integrated approach to workplace mental health

In the past decade, workplace mental health activities have been primarily focussed on responding to psychological distress and mental ill-health. Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) have been in place for many years, in larger organisations, and perform an important function in relation to early intervention. They can also provide a pathway into specialist support for workers who may be struggling with personal or work-related issues. Many organisations have also supported their workers to engage in Mental Health First Aid training to develop knowledge and skills to offer immediate help to someone who may be experiencing a mental health problem. Initiatives such as RuOK day have also made inroads into workplaces, encouraging supportive communication, reducing the stigma of discussing mental health problems at work, and raising

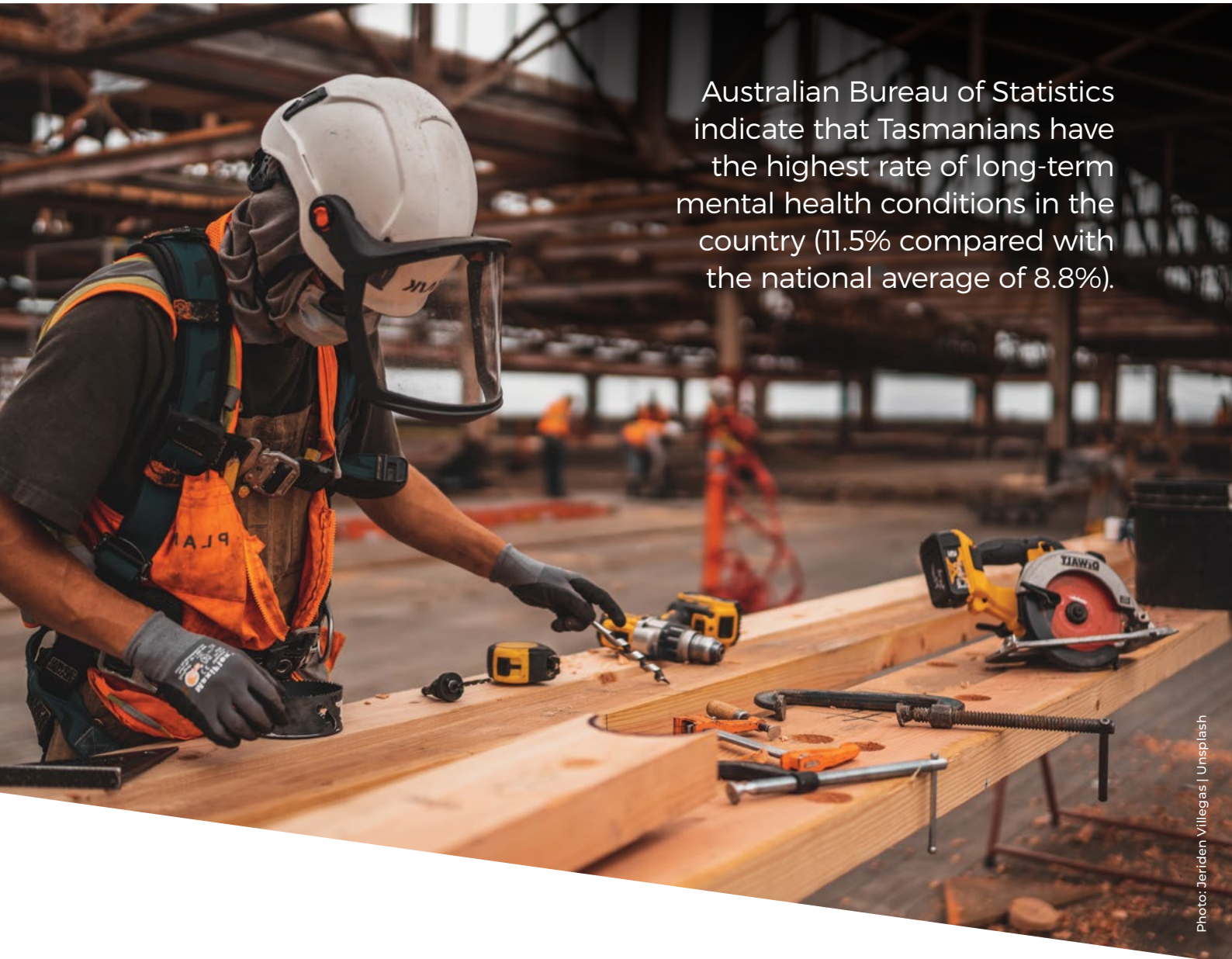
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awareness of the professional help available to those who may need it. However, the stigma associated with mental ill-health may have become further entrenched due to fears around disclosure and job security during a time of economic uncertainty.⁷

Tasmanian workplaces have made progress in raising awareness of the supports available to those experiencing mental health problems. However, recent national statistics from the Australian Bureau of Statistics indicate that Tasmanians have the highest rate of long-term mental health conditions

in the country (11.5% compared with the national average of 8.8%).⁸ We argue that greater *protection and promotion* of workforce mental health presents a substantial opportunity to be realised in Tasmania.

There are significant issues that need to be addressed in the mental health services available in Tasmania⁹, however a strong focus on the prevention of mental health problems as well as the promotion of good mental health at, and through work, will help to increase workforce participation and productivity.



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Changing policies and practices to protect employee mental health at work

As noted by the Black Dog Institute (BDI), changes to the way we work are impacting the mental health of Australians: *“Australian workers report their jobs are now more complex and difficult than the previous decade, that they worry more, at all ages, about the long-term future of jobs”*. The BDI reports that there is *“a steady increase in claims relating to harassment or bullying in the workplace, a sustained reduction in people’s freedom to decide how to do their work and strong trends emerging in younger workers that need to be countered through decisive action”*.¹⁰

There are also important transitions related to work and mental health at different stages of the lifespan that need to be considered by employers (entering the workforce, becoming a parent or carer, undertaking leadership roles, exiting, and re-entering the labour force, retirement etc).

The 2020 final report of the Australian Productivity Commission’s Inquiry into Mental Health¹¹ contained a chapter on the workplace as a lever for population mental health. A key observation included low levels of awareness among business owners and executives of already existing obligations to provide work that is both physically and psychologically safe.

Changes are now in train with respect to work, health, and safety (WHS) legislation that make employer expectations more explicit and provide greater powers to regulators to investigate the adequacy of psychosocial hazard management. The Model WHS regulations were updated in June, and a Model Code of Practice released by SafeWork Australia in August 2022¹². These documents detail the expectations for PCBU’s (persons conducting a business or undertaking) to assess, and take action that is ‘reasonably practicable’ to control work-related risks to

What is a psychosocial hazard?

A psychosocial hazard is a hazard that:

- (a) arises from, or relates to:
 - (i) the design or management of work; or
 - (ii) a work environment; or
 - (iii) plant at a workplace; or
 - (iv) workplace interactions or behaviours; and
- (b) may cause psychological harm (whether or not it may also cause physical harm).

psychological health. Regulators in each state of Australia are now taking steps to update their own legislation to be in line with the Model WHS regulations and Code of Practice. At the time of writing this paper Victoria, New South Wales and Western Australia are the first states to take steps to update their WHS legislation.

Known psychosocial hazards, such as those listed by SafeWork Australia, should be assessed and a consultative risk management process undertaken to determine and monitor the effectiveness of any risks requiring controls. However, good psychosocial risk management is about more than simply assessing for the psychosocial hazards suggested by SafeWork Australia. Good practice should involve organisations taking steps to understand the internal and external factors unique to their workplace, as well as how

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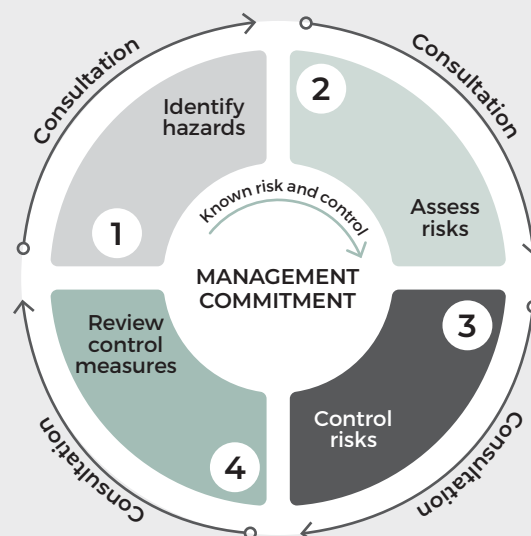
What is legally expected of employers?

Regulations are changing and new policy documents have been released to provide clear direction to employers about what the expectations are with respect to managing risks to psychological health and safety. Mental health conditions are also covered under Anti-discrimination law.

different hazards may affect different groups of workers. **Industry-led strategies** are starting to emerge as they provide for nuance in the risk profile and solutions to be developed.

Exposure to psychosocial hazards is associated with an increased risk of developing a mental health condition, or exacerbation of an existing mental health condition. Poor working conditions and low-quality jobs also interact with low socio-economic status and other forms of disadvantage to put some groups of workers at even greater risk of mental health problems. It is also important to note that these factors are also implicated in the development of musculoskeletal disorders and a range of physical health problems including heart disease, cancer, and diabetes¹³.

Psychosocial risk factors interact, and their effect can be multiplicative. For example, a worker with high job demands AND low job control (a combination that is well known to produce 'job strain') will experience greater psychological distress than a worker with high job control. It is estimated that approximately 17% of depression incidence in working women and 13% in working men could be prevented by eliminating job strain (just one of the many known psychosocial hazards)¹⁴. Psychosocial hazards can be acute (related to specific incidents and events) or chronic (long term exposure i.e., burnout).



PSYCHOSOCIAL HAZARDS THAT MAY ARISE AT WORK

- Job demands
- Low job control
- Poor support
- Lack of role clarity
- Poor organisational change management
- Inadequate reward and recognition
- Poor organisational justice
- Traumatic events or material
- Remote or isolated work
- Poor physical environment
- Violence and aggression
- Bullying
- Harassment including sexual harassment
- Conflict or poor workplace relationships and interactions

Figures credit: SafeWork Australia

Even when considering potentially traumatic exposures in some lines of work, such as policing, research shows that the quality of the operational environment predicts PTSD symptoms at a greater level than a range of other factors, including traumatic exposure prior to entering the police force, current negative life events, and critical incident exposure over the last year.

It is therefore essential to ensure that the work environment is functioning optimally to protect against the effects of duty-related critical incidents and negative life events outside of work¹⁵. Psychosocial factors are also critical in the speed and effectiveness of the return-to-work process for injured workers.

Recent reviews have shown that effort-reward imbalance, low organisational justice, and high job demands increase the risk of stress-related disorders by as much as 60% to 90%¹⁶. Job insecurity, not listed in the psychosocial hazards above, is associated with an increased risk of suicide mortality even after controlling for other work factors and prevalent/previous mental health problems.¹⁷

Accordingly, organisations are increasingly adding psychosocial issues to their risk registers to enhance their ESG (environmental, social and governance) profiles. The first global standard in this area, the **ISO 45003 Psychological health and safety at work — Guidelines for managing psychosocial risks**, encourages organisations to manage psychosocial risks through an occupational, health and safety approach¹⁸.

Implementing the ISO 45003 standard, which aligns with seven of **the United Nation's sustainable development goals (SDGs)** sends a strong message to stakeholders that an organisation truly cares for the safety and wellbeing of its people.

The relationship a business has with its contractors, subcontractors, suppliers, and other interested parties (the supply chain in which the organisation operates), are also in scope and should be included in good psychosocial risk management approaches. Volunteer involving organisations also have a duty of care for their volunteer workers.

The power of preventative intervention via psychosocial hazard management is that it is *environment directed rather than person directed*. Organisations that offer training programs with the objective of improving worker mental health have found that participation can be low, dropout rates are high, and offerings are mainly taken up by 'healthy workers.'

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Promoting employee mental health at work

Once a foundation for preventing harm to employee mental health is established, further benefits to workforce mental health and productivity can be achieved through a focus on the provision of good work and a mentally healthy workplace culture.

The Australasian Faculty for Occupational and Environmental Medicine argue that 'good work' enhances all workers health, safety, and wellbeing including those with mental health problems, whilst also allowing people who are already healthy to thrive¹⁹. In contrast, long term work absence, work disability and unemployment generally have a negative impact on health and wellbeing²⁰.

Jobs that are designed with mental health benefits in mind are also jobs that attract, develop, and retain people and promote good performance. Objective indicators of 'good work' are job security, access to paid leave and flexible work arrangements. Other indicators of good work are opportunities for social connection and inclusion, support and appreciation from others, and the ability to obtain a sense of purpose, creativity, or enjoyment.

SMART Work Design considers the elements of a job that can promote mental wellbeing including aspects of work that are (*Stimulating*), that give opportunities to master tasks (*Mastery*), provide sufficient autonomy to workers when making decisions (*Agency*), gives opportunities to build relationships (*Relational*), and that has a manageable workload (*Tolerable demands*)²¹.

Inadequate job resources in the face of high job demands can erode mental health. Alternatively, ensuring that job demands are achievable by

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providing adequate job resources (physical, social, or organisational factors that help you to achieve goals and reduce stress) is a key strategy for motivation and engagement outcomes that promote good mental health²². In addition to adequate staffing and equipment, resources can also include autonomy, trust, strong work relationships, opportunities for advancement, coaching and mentoring, and learning and development.

After looking at organisational and job factors that can promote employee mental health, individually focussed interventions to promote mental health and wellbeing should also be considered. There is emerging evidence that depression is preventable through Mindfulness and Cognitive Behaviour Therapy based education^{23,24} but more well-designed studies are still needed²⁵.

Organisations should provide opportunities for workers to use their strengths, with research indicating that daily strengths use improves positive affect, work engagement, and leads to more dedicated and energised workers²⁶. Another factor that can strengthen individual wellbeing, while enhancing organisational health and success, is the practice of gratitude²⁷. Taking a strengths based approach and cultivating an environment where workers can experience more positive emotions will help complement efforts to reduce and control psychosocial risk factors in the workplace.

The role of leaders and line managers

Leading people can be challenging, and it is well recognised that poor leadership can result in problem workplace behaviours. Those with leadership responsibilities need to be self-aware and have good quality support themselves to cultivate a positive team or organisational environment. The way that a leader or manager interacts with their people can be guided by 5 principles of mentally healthy leadership, or the RIGHT²⁸ approach:



Recognition



Involvement



Growth



Health & safety



Teamwork

The 'tone from the top', or the example set by top management, is critical to the implementation and continued uptake of good quality organisational policies. The psychosocial safety climate in an organisation is defined as *"shared perceptions of organisational policies, practices and procedures for the protection of worker psychological health and safety, that stem largely from management practices"*. This climate is predictive of workplace bullying and harassment, job resources, psychological health and employee engagement and can be improved through a focus on the following²⁹:

- Management commitment to stress prevention,
- Management prioritisation of health and safety,
- Organisational communication channels for employee concerns,
- Organisational participation and consultation regarding the protection and promotion of psychological health and safety.

Research shows that inconsistency among managers can be a problem when it comes to policy implementation in relation to psychosocial hazards³⁰. A recent legal case in Victoria (**Kozrov vs State of Victoria**) showed that merely having a policy in place to protect worker psychological health is not enough. An organisation that does not implement, uphold, and reference their psychological health policies when making management decisions may be held liable in the event a worker is found to be harmed in the course of their work.

The role of government and industry

To create a mentally healthy workplace, different organisational functions, such as WHS, human resources, diversity and inclusion, business transformation, learning and development and service procurement, need to collaborate.

As is already acknowledged when it comes to suicide prevention, a whole of government approach is also required. Key government portfolios are health, justice, business, workforce development and education. Evidence suggests a psychologically specific approach to suicide prevention typically fails. An integrated approach must encompass the social, economic and physical environments in which we live, known as the social determinants of wellbeing³¹.

As a major employer the Tasmanian State Service can also demonstrate best practice. Mental health is a critical priority for Tasmania and as such the Department of Premier and Cabinet can drive and coordinate the necessary changes that need to be made to create a mentally healthy workforce.

Larger employers in Tasmania should lead the charge when it comes to practising and investing in workplace mental health management and capability. The demonstration of effective workplace mental health management by

key Tasmanian employers is likely to see all levels of Tasmanian business strive to improve in this space. Our island state provides us with an opportunity to develop a well-integrated university, state government and industry collaboration toward this common objective.

Given Tasmania is largely a small business-based economy, industry-based initiatives and government funded supports and strategies will be required in some sectors. Establishment of a representative population survey of both employers and employees is required to obtain a baseline measurement of current practices and problems by organisation size and sector. Securing funding from stakeholders for this work is our current priority in the workplace mental health research group at the Menzies Institute for Medical Research.

Embedded in this priority is working more closely with industry and government to evaluate workplace mental health interventions and further build our knowledge of 'what works'. Our recent work shows that system wide, multi-component organisational approaches to health, safety and wellbeing in the workplace are effective³² and that an integrated approach to workplace mental health is feasible for small businesses to implement.^{33,34}

We conclude this paper with a call to action for government and industry to urgently invest in evidence-informed approaches to the protection and promotion of the mental health and wellbeing of the Tasmanian workforce.

Recommended resources

The **National Workplace Initiative** (led by the Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance and administered by the National Mental Health Commission) is currently producing a comprehensive digital portal to guide the efforts of businesses and organisations. Their blueprint for protecting, promoting, and supporting mental health at work provides clarity and consistency regarding legal obligations vs better and aspirational practices.

SafeWork Australia has released a Model Code of Practice to guide employers and state-based work, health and safety regulators.

Model Code of Practice: Managing psychosocial hazards at work (2022).

People at Work, and **APHIRM – a Participative Hazard Identification and Risk Management toolkit**, and **the Copenhagen psychosocial questionnaire** are free evidence informed resources that help organisations understand and manage psychosocial risks.

The Centre for Transformative Work Design considers the elements of work that can promote mental wellbeing in their **SMART Work Design model**.

The Black Dog Institute has a range of research, resources and programs related to mental health conditions including a **workplace program** and specific material for **health professionals**.

Everymind's **Ahead for business program** helps small business owners take action on their mental health and wellbeing through personalised resources and tools tailored to their specific needs.

Worksafe Tasmania has a free **business advisory service** that can visit your workplace and help you:

- identify hazards
- conduct your own risk assessments
- recognise opportunities for improvement
- understand and meet your work health and safety obligations
- ensure your policies and procedures are up to date and effective
- communicate with your workers.

Head4Work is an online training tool that is aligned with an integrated approach to workplace mental health that is currently provided free for Tasmanian businesses and organisations (WorkCover TAS/TCCI). It can help your organisation get everyone up to speed with shared knowledge about workplace mental health and help you find common knowledge gaps that could be addressed through further training or initiatives.

The Mental Health Council of Tasmania's **Check In** website provides local information including a NEED HELP NOW link.

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We acknowledge the palawa/pakana of lutruwita and Gadigal people of Sydney, the traditional owners of the land upon which we live and work. We pay respects to Elders past and present as the knowledge holders and sharers. We stand for a future that profoundly respects and acknowledges Aboriginal perspectives, culture, language and history.