

ACT PUBLIC SERVICE MANAGER AND SUPERVISOR GUIDANCE PEOPLE MANAGEMENT AND MENTAL HEALTH





PEOPLE MANAGEMENT AND MENTAL HEALTH

This guidance has been prepared for ACTPS managers and supervisors to inform and assist them when managing staff who have disclosed that they are experiencing mental ill health and/ or a diagnosed mental health condition.

INTRODUCTION

Many staff within the ACT Government workforce have a long term, medically diagnosed, mental illness or mental health disorder. Almost half of all Australians will experience mental ill health during their lives¹ however managers may feel unsure how best to engage with mental health issues when they are required to manage a staff member with a mental illness.

“The vast majority of workers with mental illness succeed in their chosen career while managing their mental illness”².

It is important to understand that it is not your job as a manager to diagnose or treat the individual’s mental illness.

Your management style for a staff member who has disclosed that they have a mental illness should be the same as for a member of staff who has disclosed a long term physical condition such as diabetes. Your guiding principles should be:

- communicating effectively;
- making reasonable adjustments; and
- managing within medically defined parameters.

COMMUNICATION

A positive work culture, where staff trust that you will support them to the best of your ability will enable more effective discussion about mental health issues. Conducting regular ‘wellbeing’ checks by way of private but informal conversations are a good place to start communicating about mental health issues.

Three key things to remember are:

- Confidentiality: you must not disclose personal information inappropriately. If you are unsure about where to go for assistance or how much to tell the rest of your team, seek advice from your HR team first.
- A genuine interest in the staff members’ wellbeing: you may have preconceptions about mental illness or experience from your own life. Developing your self-awareness and active listening skills will be valuable.
- Discussion skills: developing your skills will keep discussions on track and outcome focussed.

For more information and guidance on confidentiality, leadership and communication please refer to the resources throughout this document or consider utilising training courses as offered within your directorate.

1 Mental Health Council of Australia factsheet https://mhaustralia.org/sites/default/files/imported/component/rsfiles/factsheets/statistics_on_mental_health.pdf

2 Australian Human Rights Commission Guidance on managing mental illness in the workplace <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/2010-workers-mental-illness-practical-guide-managers/3-managing-mental-illness>

REASONABLE ADJUSTMENTS

ACTPS Managers and Supervisors have a responsibility to assist workers with disabilities by providing realistic and achievable changes which will enable them to perform their duties more effectively in the workplace. These changes are known as 'reasonable adjustments'.

The definition of 'disability' in discrimination legislation is broad and includes both permanent and temporary mental illness. A confirmed medical diagnosis of a mental illness is considered as a disability for the purposes of making reasonable adjustments.

The principles of reasonable adjustment are detailed in the ACT Public Sector Reasonable Adjustments Policy.

http://www.cmd.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0009/699372/ACT-Public-Sector-Reasonable-Adjustment-Policy.pdf.

MANAGING WITHIN DIFFERENT, OR MEDICALLY DEFINED, PARAMETERS

Staff behaviour, performance and conduct should continue to be managed, even where a worker has a mental illness. Whatever their mental health status; ACTPS employees are expected to operate within a common framework of respect, civility and effectiveness.

Inappropriate workplace behaviour or underperformance should be managed using the usual methods but working parameters may be different or adjusted to meet medical or other restrictions.

Example 1: A staff member is repeatedly late for work. When the manager explores the issue with the staff member they disclose a mental health problem which affects their ability to sleep and for which they need to take medication which leaves them unable to function well after waking up. The manager explores further (see below for manager support) and GP advice is obtained. The staff member is cleared to begin work at 10:00AM, rather than the usual workplace start time of 9:00AM. If the staff member continues not to be punctual within the adjusted work time, the manager will proceed to manage that in line with the ACTPS policy.

Example 2: A new staff member joins the team and discloses to the manager that they have an Autism spectrum disorder and can sometimes struggle with aspects of work. The manager asks if there is anything that the workplace can do to support the staff member and they decide together that the team should be informed and that the staff member would prefer not participate in the usual workplace practice of hot-desking. This is agreed to and the team are supportive. An incident occurs where the new staff member becomes distressed and reacts negatively to colleagues' attempts to check their welfare. Afterwards, the manager holds a conversation with the staff member about workplace behaviour which reinforces expectations of conduct and explores any further reasonable adjustments.

Appropriate management is not discriminatory or harassment.

- If you're managing correctly, you shouldn't need to do anything differently. Guidance on conducting difficult management discussions can be found in ACTPS Performance Framework guides "Tips for a Difficult Performance Discussion" and "Responding to Performance Concerns Quickly: a guide for ACTPS Managers and Supervisors" available online at <http://www.cmd.act.gov.au/governance/public/performance/downloads>

GOOD MANAGEMENT: QUICK REFERENCE CHECKLIST

- Take time to find out the history of previous management, or other employment issues, and adapt your approach if necessary.
- Consider medical advice if it is available and seek it if appropriate. Make any requested reasonable adjustments to the work environment and/or working hours to allow the staff member to be the best they can at work.
- Manage the staff member normally but within medically recommended parameters
- Meet with the staff member to discuss your concerns in a timely way. Issues should not be 'stockpiled' for a scheduled meeting.
- The staff member should be given enough time to prepare for your discussion or some 'breathing space' to react to your feedback. Notifying the staff member of the meeting in writing and extending the offer to bring a support person can sometimes be useful.
- The space you have chosen to conduct the meeting should be private.
- As always, you need to be respectful and try to use language which focuses on behaviour or incidents that you have observed rather than overly personal statements.
- Explain your point of view briefly, clearly and unemotionally, using specific examples.
- Work the solution out with the staff member: ask them what they think will help and try their suggestions out if possible. Hold yourself and the staff member accountable for what has been agreed.
- Accurate records documenting your discussions with the staff member should be kept and you should provide them with a copy later. Any records created need to be stored in line with privacy principles.
- If a performance issue is serious and or sustained, seek HR advice to help you decide whether formal underperformance action (under your relevant Enterprise Agreement) is appropriate.

MANAGER AVENUES OF SUPPORT

Human Resource areas will be able to support managers with short or long term people management strategies and customised advice for your workplace.

The Injury Management and Safety team are specialists in return to work management. They will help you liaise with GPs, medical specialists, Comcare (if the worker has an accepted workers' compensation claim) and HR areas.

Phone 6207 9000 during business hours or submit an enquiry via the online form at <https://actgovssc.custhelp.com/app/ask/p/1867>

Many ACTPS workplaces offer **a manager assistance service**. This is a telephone service for managers and supervisors who require confidential advice and assistance on people management issues. Some ACT Government Directorates offer a mental health hotline for managers. Refer to your intranet or HR team to find out what is available to you.

OTHER RESOURCES

For further information on ACTPS Policies: <http://www.jobs.act.gov.au/about-the-actps/managers-toolkit>

Practical and detailed assistance with managing a staff member with a mental illness: <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/2010-workers-mental-illness-practical-guide-managers/3-managing-mental-illness>



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