

## Men's Health- Reducing Stigma in the Workplace



*Talking about mental health issues creates understanding and acceptance.*

**"Mental illness is nothing to be ashamed of, but stigma and bias shame us all."  
- Bill Clinton**

Misunderstandings about mental health can lead to prejudice, discrimination and stigma. While there have been changes recently in the media reporting on mental health concerns e.g. sports people and politicians talking about mental health issues, stereotypes are often perpetuated in sport, films, media and social networking especially by images portraying unrealistic images of men as strong, self-sufficient and “practical providers”. In reality these are unhelpful and often untrue and, there is even more scope for the role of media and social media in debunking myths and raising awareness about mental health and suicide prevention.

The messages men often receive are that they avoid being seen as weak, should be able to cope in every situation and never need to reach out for help. Men start to believe the stereotype that manliness is being a strong masculine man who “doesn’t cry”. This view can lead to internalised stigma with many men not seeking help when needed. In reality none of us is invincible, life experiences can be difficult and seeking support to be able to express feelings and emotions, can lead to improved feelings and empowerment.

Men who suffer with Mental Health issues feel societal stigma is often more disabling than the illness itself. Coping with a mental health issue often includes increased use of drugs and alcohol, risk taking behaviour and social isolation. Over time these activities negatively influence self-esteem and confidence and in extreme circumstances can lead to suicide. Men are afraid of the impact on their relationships and career if they open up and talk about or show their feelings. Often feelings like anger or aggression can mask underlying depression.



Research by the Mental Health Council of Australia (2013) found that discussing a mental health issue is still taboo in the workplace. Research conducted states that 69% of people are uncomfortable to disclose a mental illness to their employer, while 35% would never disclose. The study reported that 48% of respondents had taken time off work for a mental health issue and not disclosed the reason to their employer. These are alarming statistics and reflect the need for action to eliminate the stigma and fear of disclosing a mental health issue in the workplace.

The most effective way to break down prejudice and stereotyping of mental health issues is through; education, awareness and listening to people's personal stories. When celebrities like Grant Hackett and Ian Thorpe discussed their mental health issues in the media it gave others the courage they needed to seek help and reach out to friends and family.

1 in 8 men will suffer from some form of mental health issue over a lifetime, if we imagine that this was a physical ailment that others could see, would we be more compassionate? Life's issues such as the death of a loved one, illness, injuries, genetics, interpersonal conflict as well as drug and alcohol abuse can all contribute to levels of anxiety and depression. Seeing a person 'with' a mental health issue rather than labelling them is a helpful shift. Acceptance by peers and family, knowing that there is help available and being supported to access help are critical in helping individuals seek the appropriate assistance.

Organisations should have procedures in place to manage mental health in the workplace and work towards eliminating the fear of disclosure. They should provide training to leaders and supervisors to help them have sometimes difficult conversations with the team members around their personal wellbeing and potential mental health concerns. We often are reluctant to offer support because we are afraid of saying the wrong thing.

Addressing the issue of stigma in the workplace starts with a question – Do we actively promote a mentally healthy workplace and would I disclose an issue to my manager? If the answer is no then the time for positive action is now.

For more information or to book an appointment, call us on **1800 818 728** or visit our website, [www.accesseap.com.au](http://www.accesseap.com.au).

