

Mental health & alcohol and drug use

There is a complex relationship between mental health and alcohol and drug use. Alcohol or drugs may be used to help cope with:

1. workplace stressors and work/life challenges
2. existing mental health disorders
3. trauma and life changes
4. physical and emotional pain.

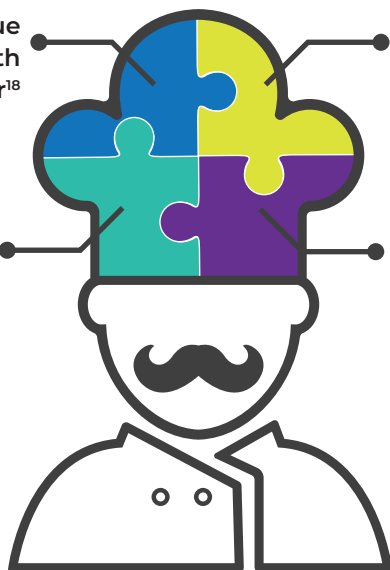
Working conditions may cause stress, fatigue and/or injury and contribute to the development of mental illness (e.g., depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder) or worsen an existing condition. For example:

- injured or fatigued workers may develop depression and/or anxiety
- stressed or anxious workers may experience headaches, back pain, poor sleep, and lack motivation to eat well, exercise, and/or seek help.

Workplace impacts

Lost productivity due to poor mental health costs \$10.9bn per year¹⁸

93% of work-related mental disorders are due to work-related mental stress²⁰



A mental disorder compensation claim typically costs \$23,600²⁰

A time off work compensation claim is typically for 14.8 weeks²⁰

What is mental health?

Mental health is a positive state in which people experience emotional, social, psychological and spiritual wellbeing and resilience.

Workers with good mental health can:

1. cope with life's normal stresses
2. work productively
3. achieve their potential
4. contribute to the community
5. enjoy positive relationships with others.

Injured, stressed, fatigued, anxious, and/or depressed workers may use alcohol and drugs to ease mental or physical pain.



What is the cost of poor mental health?

Poor mental health is costly for Australian workers and businesses.

Workers compensation claims for mental health problems are almost 3 times greater than claims for physical injury.²⁰

Alcohol, drugs and mental health

Using alcohol and/or drugs as coping mechanisms can cause further harm to mental health and contribute to mental health disorders.

Alcohol and drug use can:

1. Worsen original conditions (e.g., stress/fatigue)
2. Contribute to secondary physical and/or mental health problems
3. Develop into an alcohol and/or drug use disorder.



Work-related risks for stress, poor mental health, and substance use

Work conditions

- Being on call
- Extended/excessive hours
- Fly in/fly out (FIFO), drive in/drive out (DIDO)
- Hazardous/dangerous work
- Heavy responsibility
- Hot/dusty conditions
- Poor quality equipment
- Retrenchment/insecure employment
- Shift work.

Organisational culture

- Discrimination
- Inadequate supervision
- Insufficient accountability
- Limited support from managers
- Low morale
- Workplace bullying/harassment.





Job design

- Lack of role clarity
- Lack of, or inconsistent, performance standards
- Limited control over work tasks
- Over/under work
- Poor performance feedback, praise and recognition
- Unrealistic performance targets and deadlines.

See Fact Sheets: [Fatigue & Alcohol and Drug Use](#) and [Workplace Stress & Alcohol and Drug Use](#).



Impact of alcohol and/or drugs on mental health

Drug type	Mental health impact
Alcohol 	<p>Risky alcohol use can contribute to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. depression and/or an alcohol-related mental health disorder2. increased risk of self-harm and suicide3. poorer outcomes for people with existing mental health conditions.
Cannabis 	<p>Regular cannabis use can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ increase the risk of experiencing a mental illness episode■ worsen an existing mental health condition. <p>Cannabis use has been linked to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ panic attacks■ depression and anxiety■ psychotic episodes■ schizophrenia.
Cocaine 	<p>Cocaine use can induce:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. depression2. anxiety, paranoia and panic attacks3. mood swings4. sleep disturbances5. cocaine psychosis.
Benzodiazepines 	<p>Commonly known as minor tranquillisers and sleeping pills, benzodiazepines may be prescribed for insomnia and anxiety.</p> <p>Benzodiazepines are highly addictive.</p> <p>Regular or long-term use can contribute to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. anxiety and depression2. confusion, impaired thinking and memory loss3. difficulty sleeping or disturbing dreams4. feelings of isolation, euphoria, or disconnection from reality5. irritability, paranoia and aggression6. suicidal thoughts.



Drug type	Mental health impact
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Methamphetamine



Mental health symptoms may be experienced during the intoxication and/or 'come down' and 'crash' phases of methamphetamine use. Mental health effects include:

1. mood swings and panic attacks
2. anxiety and depression
3. paranoia and hallucinations
4. loss of enjoyment in usual activities
5. difficulty sleeping.

Regular use can also cause a temporary 'ice psychosis' which may result in aggressive or violent behaviour.

Heroin



Regular and ongoing heroin use:

1. is linked to depression
2. can worsen symptoms of depression and anxiety
3. can increase suicide risk.

Heroin can also mask symptoms of psychosis and reduce the effectiveness of psychiatric medication.

Prescribed painkillers/opioids



There is a bi-directional relationship between prescribed painkiller/opioid misuse and depression:

- Workers who misuse painkillers/opioids are at increased risk of depression
- Workers experiencing depression may misuse painkillers/opioids to relieve pain that is a common symptom of depression.

Prescribed painkiller/opioid misuse has also been linked to anxiety and bipolar disorders.

Smoking

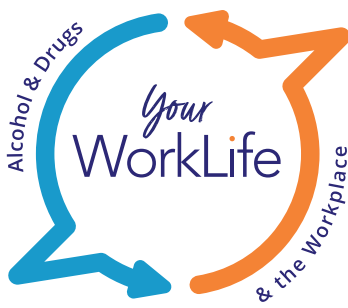


Smoking is associated with mental health problems such as anxiety, depression and alcohol and drug dependence.

Many people believe smoking reduces stress and report feeling less stressed after a cigarette. However, smoking can increase stress.

People who quit smoking become less stressed, anxious and depressed. Quitting smoking for at least six weeks improves:

1. mental health
2. mood
3. general wellbeing.



What can workplaces do to support workers' mental health?

Workplaces can maintain worker wellbeing by:

1. Identifying and reducing workplace risks to mental health and alcohol and drug use (see [How-to-Guide: Assessing Workplace Alcohol and Drug Risk](#))
2. Regularly talking with workers about mental health indicators and support services (see [Toolbox Talk: Alcohol and Drug Use & Mental Health](#))
3. Scheduling regular check ins with workers who may be struggling with their mental health and/or alcohol and drug use (see [How-to-Guide: Having Helpful Conversations](#). Promoting information about and access to mental health services (see [Getting Help Posters](#))
4. Supporting workers to Return to Work (see [Fact Sheet: Getting Help and Return to Work](#)).

Depression and anxiety

Depression, anxiety, and substance use disorder are the most common mental illnesses, and often occur together.

Depression and anxiety are not caused by a single factor.

Contributors include:

- prolonged stress
- fatigue
- chronic physical illness
- alcohol and drug use
- job type
- problematic organisational/managerial environment
- inadequate access to workplace supports and resources.

What is depression?

A worker may be depressed if they have:

1. a persistently low mood for at least two weeks
2. lost interest in their usual activities.



1 in 6 women and 1 in 8 men will experience depression in their lifetime.⁶



Men are less likely to ask for help for mental health problems.

They are more likely to talk about the physical signs of depression and anxiety, rather than the emotional/psychological signs.

See overpage for a list of different types of indicators for depression.

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Depression indicators

Physical

- Tired all the time
- Sick and run down
- Headaches and muscle pains
- Churning gut
- Sleep problems
- Loss or change of appetite
- Significant weight loss or gain

Behavioural

- Not going out and avoiding colleagues
- Not getting things done at work/school/home
- Withdrawing from close family, friends, and usual activities
- Drinking alcohol or using drugs to cope
- Difficulty concentrating
- Being late for work

Thoughts

- *'I'm a failure'*
- *'It's my fault'*
- *'Nothing good ever happens to me'*
- *'I'm worthless'*
- *'Life's not worth living'*
- *'People would be better off without me'*

Feelings

- Unusually emotional
- Easily angered or frustrated
- Overwhelmed
- Guilty
- Irritable
- Frustrated
- Lacking in confidence
- Unhappy
- Indecisive
- Disappointed
- Miserable
- Sad



What is anxiety?

Anxiety can be a normal response to everyday challenges and situations. However, if workers experience frequent or persistent anxiety that impacts their wellbeing and day-to-day functioning, they may need assistance.



1 in 4 Australians will experience anxiety during their life⁶

Anxiety indicators

Physical

- Panic attacks
- Hot and cold flushes
- Racing heart
- Chest tightening
- Rapid breathing
- Restlessness
- Feeling tense and on-edge

Psychological

- Excessive fear and worrying
- Catastrophising
- Obsessive thinking

Behavioural

- Avoiding work, social, or other engagements

Resources and handouts are available at <https://worklife.flinders.edu.au/external-site-resources>.

References are available at <https://worklife.flinders.edu.au/references>.