

Wednesday 11 September 2024

# HR Perspective: Mental Health Issues in the Workplace: Recognising the Signs

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## QUICK RECAP

- WHS legislation applies equally to risks to psychosocial health and physical health
- Some states have introduced specific regulations which are directed towards helping employers comply with their statutory duties regarding psychosocial hazards
- Often, the risk will not become apparent until a worker starts engaging in particular behaviour / exhibiting signs of experiencing stress
- Identifying the risks isn't enough. The risks need to be controlled

# PSYCHOSOCIAL REGULATION

**NT**

- Work Health and Safety (National Uniform Legislation) Regulations 2011
- To adopt the Commonwealth Code of Practice

**WA**

- Work Health and Safety (General) Regulations 2022
- Code of Practice on Psychosocial Hazards in the Workplace

- CTH**
- Work Health and Safety Amendment (Managing Psychosocial Risk and Other Measures) Regulations 2022
  - Code of Practice on Managing psychosocial hazards at work, 2022

**SA**

- Work Health and Safety (Psychological Risks) Amendment Regulations 2023 (from 25 Dec 2023)
- Code of Practice (from 25 Dec 2023)

**TAS**

- Adopted the Commonwealth Code of Practice
- Work Health and Safety Regulations 2022

**QLD**

- Work Health and Safety (Psychosocial Risks) Amendment Regulation 2022
- Code of Practice on Managing Psychosocial Hazards at Work

**NSW**

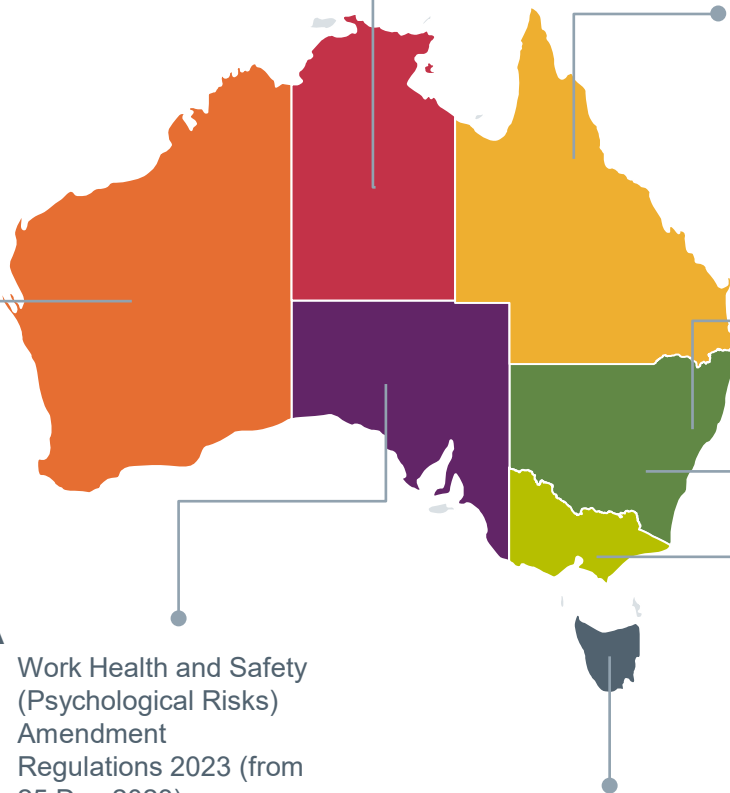
- Work Health and Safety Amendment Regulation 2022
- Code of Practice on Managing Psychosocial Hazards at Work

**ACT**

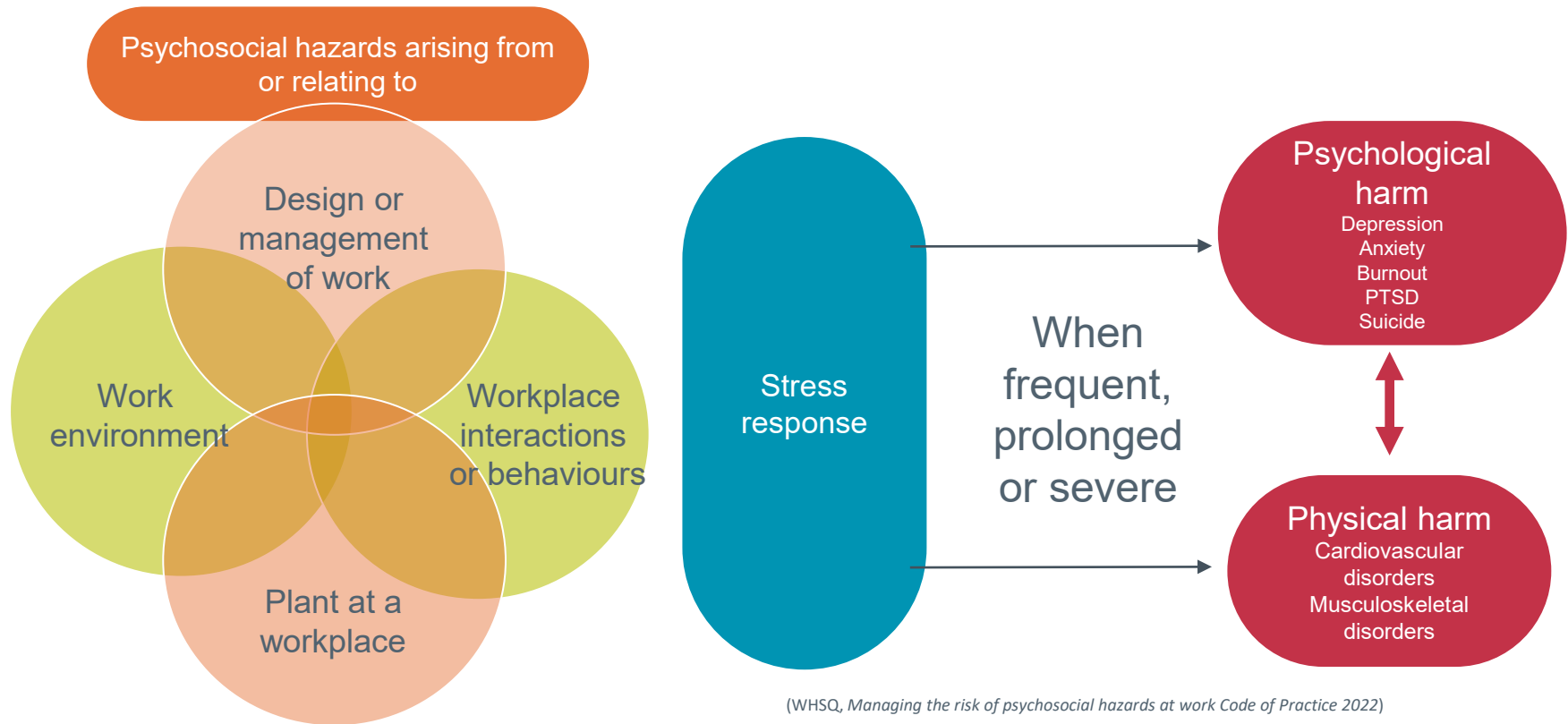
- Work Health and Safety Amendment Regulation 2023 (from 27 November 2023)

**VIC**

- Proposed OHS Amendment (Psychological Health) Regulations



# PSYCHOSOCIAL HAZARDS, RISK AND INJURY



# KEY POINTS RELATED TO THE COST OF MENTAL HEALTH PSYCHOSOCIAL CLAIMS IN AUSTRALIA IN 2024

- 1. Increase in Claims:** There has been a noticeable rise in the number of mental health claims, partly due to greater awareness and reduced stigma around mental health. This has led to an increase in the financial burden on employers and insurers
- 2. Average Cost per Claim:** The average cost per mental health claim is generally higher than that of physical injury claims due to longer recovery periods and more complex treatment needs. Mental health claims often involve prolonged absence from work, extensive medical treatment, and rehabilitation
- 3. Impact on Premiums:** The rise in mental health claims has contributed to increasing workers' compensation premiums for employers. Companies with higher rates of these claims may face significantly higher premiums, adding to the overall cost burden
- 4. Legislation and Compliance:** Employers are increasingly required to comply with mental health-related legislation, including providing a psychologically safe workplace. Failure to do so can lead to costly claims and legal consequences
- 5. Sector Variability:** Costs can vary significantly across different industries. Sectors with high-stress environments, such as healthcare, finance, and emergency services, often see higher rates and costs of mental health claims
- 6. Preventative Measures:** Investing in mental health programs and supportive workplace practices has been shown to reduce the frequency and severity of claims, potentially lowering costs over time. However, these initial investments can be substantial

# TRIGGER WARNING

Today's presentation is focused on education and building awareness of the identification of mental health and wellbeing of employees in the workplace.

Content discussed in today's presentation (including de-identified case examples), may trigger an emotional response for individuals, depending upon a range of factors.

You are welcome to exit the presentation should you experience any distress.

Please also refer to the services listed on the Resources Page of the slides.

Example: Lifeline 13 11 14



# THE VICTORIAN MENTALLY HEALTHY WORKPLACES FRAMEWORK

## Mentally Healthy Workplace:

- Promote wellbeing and positive aspects of work
- Identify and manage risks to create a fair and safe workplace
- Respond early to warning signs, with effective tools, skills and commitment

<https://www.vic.gov.au/victorian-mentally-healthy-workplaces-framework>



# COMMON PSYCHOSOCIAL HAZARDS

Low Job Control

High and Low  
Job Demands

Poor Support

Poor  
Organisational  
Change  
Management

Poor  
Organisational  
Justice  
Performance

Low  
Recognition and  
Reward

Low Role Clarity

Poor Workplace  
Relationships



Poor  
Environmental  
Conditions

Remote and  
Isolated Work

Violent and  
Traumatic  
Events



<https://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/psychosocial-hazards-contributing-work-related-stress>

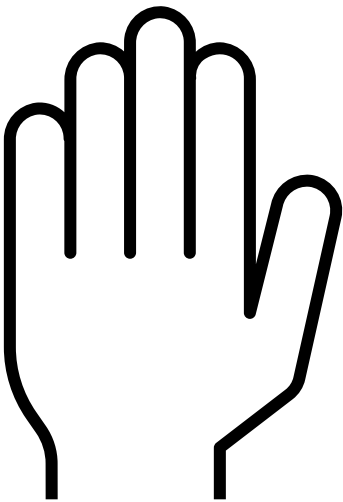


# QUESTIONS TO THE AUDIENCE

How many people who are attending today have completed Mental Health First Aid training or similar?

Of those who have raised their hand, please keep your hand raised if you have implemented the training in your current role?

Please keep your hand raised if you implement Mental Health First Aid in your workplace AND you receive regular (minimum monthly) supervision/debriefing support?



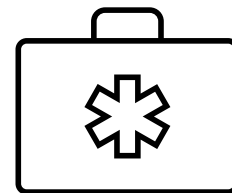
# MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID TRAINING

When attending mental health in the workplace training in Australia, attendees are provided with advice to identify indicators of mental or emotional distress among employees.

This advice is aligned with Australian workplace laws, including the Work Health and Safety (WHS) Act and relevant anti-discrimination laws. Some of the information typically covered within this training includes...

## MH First Aid Training

- **Recognize Common Indicators of Distress:** During Mental Health First Aid, attendees are educated to observe behavioural, emotional, and physical signs that may indicate an employee is experiencing mental or emotional distress. These include:
  - **Behavioural Changes:** Increased absenteeism, lateness, reduced productivity, or withdrawal from social interactions
  - **Emotional Signs:** Visible signs of distress such as mood swings, irritability, or tearfulness.
  - **Physical Symptoms:** Complaints of headaches, fatigue, or other stress-related conditions
  - **Changes in Work Performance:** Difficulty concentrating, missed deadlines, or errors in work that were previously uncharacteristic
  - **Social Withdrawal:** Avoiding team activities or isolating from colleagues



# MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID TRAINING: ENCOURAGE OPEN COMMUNICATION

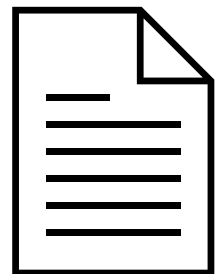
Managers are encouraged to create a supportive environment where employees feel comfortable discussing their mental health. This includes being approachable, actively listening, and offering support without judgment.

**Confidentiality:** Managers are reminded to maintain confidentiality regarding any mental health disclosures, in line with legal and ethical obligations.

## Documentation and Reporting

- Managers should document any conversations and actions taken in response to an employee's mental health concerns. This is important for both legal compliance and ensuring that appropriate steps are being taken to support the employee
- Incident Reporting: If an employee's mental health condition poses a risk to their own or others' safety, it should be reported in accordance with workplace policies and WHS requirements

By following these guidelines, managers in Australian workplaces can better identify and support employees at risk of mental or emotional distress, while also complying with relevant laws and regulations.



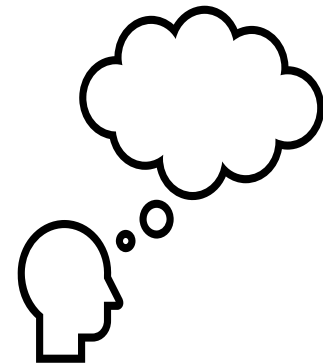
# IDENTIFICATION AND SIGNS COMMON QUESTIONS ASKED IN LEADERSHIP COACHING AND DEBRIEFING SUPPORT

**What are the most subtle signs of mental or emotional distress that we should be aware of?**

Subtle signs of mental or emotional distress can include changes in work habits, such as a normally punctual employee starting to arrive late or an employee who usually participates in meetings becoming unusually quiet. Other subtle indicators might be decreased productivity, small mistakes in their work, or a drop in enthusiasm. It's important to be observant and notice these small changes over time.

**How can we differentiate between normal stress and signs of more serious mental health issues?**

Normal stress is usually temporary and tied to specific events or deadlines, while more serious mental health issues persist over time and affect various aspects of an individual's life. Look for signs that go beyond temporary stress, such as chronic fatigue, ongoing mood swings, withdrawal from social interactions, or a noticeable decline in work performance. If the behaviour continues for more than a few weeks or starts to impact their overall functioning, it might be more than just normal stress.



# DE-IDENTIFIED CASE EXAMPLES



- John is a high performing IT Specialist. He began missing deadlines and showed a marked decrease in productivity. He became withdrawn, avoiding team interactions and his sick leave increased over a three-month period
- Sarah, a marketing manager, exhibited signs of severe stress including stating she was experiencing frequent migraines. Sarah was staying late at work most days and working through her lunch breaks
- Liam, a sales representative, starting showing signs of depression, including neglecting his appearance and expressing feelings of hopelessness with his colleagues. His sales performance had dropped over the last two quarters and Liam had stated to colleagues he was now looking for new housing since his recent relationship separation

# DE-IDENTIFIED CASE EXAMPLES CONT.

## *Case Example 1: Invalidating the Employee's Feelings*

Scenario:

Jane, a team member, has been visibly struggling with her workload and seems overwhelmed. Her manager, Peter, notices this and decides to talk to her.



Incorrect Approach:

Peter approaches Jane and says, “Everyone gets stressed; it’s just part of the job. You just need to toughen up and push through it.”

Why This is Wrong:

- **Invalidation:** By dismissing Jane’s feelings and suggesting that stress is a normal part of the job that she should just endure, Peter invalidates her experience.
- **Impact:** Jane may feel misunderstood, isolated, and less likely to seek help in the future, worsening her distress.

Better Approach:

Peter could say, “I’ve noticed you’ve seemed under a lot of pressure lately. How are you feeling? Is there anything I can do to support you?”

# DE-IDENTIFIED CASE EXAMPLES CONT.

## *Case Example 2: Public Confrontation*

Scenario:

Ahmed, an employee, has been making noticeable mistakes at work, and his mood has been fluctuating. His manager, Sarah, decides to address the issue during a team meeting.



Incorrect Approach:

Sarah, during the meeting, says, “Ahmed, you’ve been making a lot of errors lately. What’s going on with you?”

Why This is Wrong:

- **Public Embarrassment:** Addressing Ahmed’s issues in front of his colleagues can lead to humiliation and increased anxiety.
- **Impact:** Ahmed might feel singled out and humiliated, which could worsen his mental state and strain his relationship with the team.

Better Approach:

Sarah should have waited until after the meeting to speak with Ahmed privately, saying, “Can we have a chat after the meeting? I’ve noticed some changes in your work and wanted to see how you’re doing.”

# DE-IDENTIFIED CASE EXAMPLES CONT.

## *Case Example 3: Making Assumptions*

Scenario:

Lucy, a typically outgoing employee, has become withdrawn and has been taking more sick days. Her manager, Tim, is concerned.



Incorrect Approach:

Tim assumes Lucy's behaviour is due to personal issues and says, "Is everything okay at home? You've been really quiet and absent lately."

Why This is Wrong:

- Making Assumptions: Tim assumes Lucy's behaviour is due to personal problems without understanding the situation.
- Impact: This could make Lucy feel judged or pressured to share personal information she isn't comfortable disclosing, increasing her stress.

Better Approach:

Tim should approach Lucy with an open-ended question like, "I've noticed you've been a bit quieter lately and taking more time off. Is there anything going on that I can help with?"



# DE-IDENTIFIED CASE EXAMPLES CONT.

## *Case Example 4: Giving Unsolicited Advice*

- Scenario:  
Emily has been struggling with anxiety, and it's affecting her work. Her colleague, John, tries to help by offering advice.



### Incorrect Approach:

John says, “You should really try meditation or maybe even take a vacation. That worked for me when I was stressed.”

### Why This is Wrong:

- Unsolicited Advice: John’s well-meaning advice may come across as dismissive or oversimplified, especially if Emily’s situation is more complex.
- Impact: Emily might feel that her anxiety is being trivialized and that John doesn’t understand the depth of her struggles.

### Better Approach:

John could say, “I’ve noticed you seem anxious lately. If you want to talk or need any support, I’m here for you.”

# SUMMARY OF KEY TAKEAWAYS



- **Avoid invalidating** the employee’s feelings by downplaying their distress or suggesting they simply need to “toughen up.”
- **Don’t confront or address issues** related to mental health in a public setting. Always choose a private and confidential space
- **Refrain from making assumptions** about the cause of the employee’s distress. Ask open-ended questions to understand their perspective
- **Never minimise** the situation or suggest that the employee is overreacting
- **Avoid giving unsolicited advice** that may not be applicable to the employee’s situation

# ARE YOU READY TO ASK – ARE YOU OK?



## AM I READY?

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



## AM I PREPARED?

- Do I understand that if I ask how someone's going, the answer could be: "No, I'm not"?
- Do I understand that I can't 'fix' someone's problems?
- Do I accept that they might not be ready to talk? Or they might not want to talk to me?



## PICKED MY MOMENT?

- Have I chosen somewhere relatively private and comfy?
- Have I figured out a time that will be good for them to chat?
- Have I made sure I have enough time to chat properly?

Are you OK Day – Getting Ready to Ask: <https://www.ruok.org.au/how-to-ask>

# PRACTICAL STEPS

## **What are some effective communication strategies for approaching an employee who seems to be struggling?**

Approach the conversation with empathy and confidentiality. Start with open-ended questions like, 'I've noticed you seem a bit different lately, is everything okay?' Use active listening techniques, validate their feelings, and avoid making assumptions. It's also important to offer support, such as suggesting they take advantage of available resources or speaking to HR and utilising free counselling support through EAP.

## **How can we ensure confidentiality when addressing mental health concerns with employees?**

Confidentiality is key to building trust. Ensure that conversations take place in private settings and only share information on a need-to-know basis. Familiarise yourself with your organization's policies on confidentiality and make sure employees are aware of these protocols. Reassure employees that their privacy will be respected and that any information shared will be handled sensitively.

## **What steps should we take if an employee is experiencing a mental health crisis in the workplace?**

In a mental health crisis, ensure the employee's immediate safety and provide a calm and private space. Contact emergency services if necessary. Offer support and listen without judgment. It's important to follow any established crisis protocols and involve trained mental health professionals or EAP services as soon as possible.

# PROACTIVE SUPPORT MEASURES

- **Early Intervention:** Managers should take action early when they notice signs of distress, which may include checking in with the employee privately to offer support and discussing potential adjustments to their workload or responsibilities.
- **Reasonable Adjustments:** Managers should be prepared to make reasonable adjustments to the employee's role, such as flexible working hours, reduced workload, or changes in job duties to support the employee's mental health, as required by anti-discrimination laws.
- **Access to Resources:** Provide information about available support services, such as Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), mental health hotlines, or counselling services.



# TRAINING AND AWARENESS



Ongoing education for managers and staff about mental health is emphasised. This includes understanding common mental health conditions, stigma reduction, and the importance of early intervention



Legal Training: Managers should receive training on relevant Australian workplace laws, including the WHS Act, to ensure they understand their obligations and the legal context in which they operate



Attending free training: **K&L Gates Webinars**



Participating in peer mentoring and external professional supervision/ coaching support

# AWARENESS AND PREVENTION OF VICARIOUS TRAUMA FOR LEADERS AND HR SPECIALISTS

**Vicarious trauma** is a significant risk for people in leadership and HR roles, particularly in environments where they are regularly exposed to employees' experiences of stress, trauma, or distress.

*In Australia, HR professionals and leaders often serve as first responders to employees' emotional needs, which can lead to the absorption of traumatic stress.*

This can manifest in symptoms similar to those of direct trauma, including anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and a diminished sense of empathy or accomplishment.

The risk is heightened when HR staff and leaders lack adequate support, resources, or training to manage these stressors effectively.

**Addressing vicarious trauma is crucial not only for their wellbeing but also for maintaining a healthy workplace culture.**

Employers should implement regular debriefing sessions, access to mental health resources, and training on recognizing the signs of vicarious trauma to mitigate its impact.



# CREATING A SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT

What are some low-cost or no-cost ways to create a more supportive work environment for mental health?

## Examples of free resources:

- **Victorian Government:** <https://www.vic.gov.au/victorian-mentally-healthy-workplaces-framework>, which provide a PDF a user friendly 'Guide to developing your Mentally Healthy Workplace Strategy and Action Plan
- **Beyond Blue** and **Heads Up** offer comprehensive toolkits and resources for creating mentally healthy workplaces
- **Workcover:** <https://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/mental-health> including information relating to their Workwell Program with downloadable Workwell Toolkits

## Low to Medium Cost resources:

- Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) provide confidential counselling services for employees (and sometimes their immediate family members)
- EAPs often offer leadership support across a range of service needs including recruitment, outplacement, conflict resolution and change management services



# WHEN I AM CONCERNED

If you are concerned for your safety or the safety of others, seek immediate assistance by calling Triple Zero (000)

If you're finding life tough or need some extra support, it can help to talk about how you're feeling with someone you trust

Family and friends can also call the services below for advice and assistance on how to support someone who is struggling with life

# RESOURCE LIST

Service	Phone	Website
Lifeline (24/7)	13 11 14	<a href="http://lifeline.org.au">lifeline.org.au</a>
Beyond Blue (24/7)	1300 224 636	<a href="http://beyondblue.org.au">beyondblue.org.au</a>
13 YARN (24/7)	13 92 76	<a href="http://13yarn.org.au">13yarn.org.au</a> Support line for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
QLife (3pm-midnight)	1800 184 527	<a href="http://qlife.org.au">qlife.org.au</a> Anonymous, free LGBTIQ+ support
Kids Helpline (24/7, for ages 5-25)	1800 55 1800	<a href="http://kidshelpline.com.au">kidshelpline.com.au</a>
Suicide Call Back Service (24/7)	1300 659 467	<a href="http://suicidecallbackservice.org.au">suicidecallbackservice.org.au</a>
MensLine (24/7)	1300 78 99 78	<a href="http://mensline.org.au">mensline.org.au</a>
1800RESPECT (24/7)	1800 737 732	<a href="http://1800respect.org.au">1800respect.org.au</a> 24/7 free counselling and support for people impacted by domestic, family or sexual violence.
Head to Health (Mon-Fri)	1800 595 212	<a href="http://headtohealth.gov.au">headtohealth.gov.au</a>
Head to Health is a Federal Government platform that provides a directory of Australia's most trusted mental health organisations. Head to Health brings together apps, online programs, online forums and phone services, as well as a range of digital information resources		

# CONTACTS



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