The Victorian Workplace Mental Wellbeing Collaboration commissioned a review of recent Australian and international progress in promoting workplace mental health. The review looked at both policy development and interventions that have proved effective. The review was undertaken by Professor Angela Martin, Dr Clare Shann and Professor Anthony LaMontagne.

Workplaces with successful mental wellbeing strategies have staff who are engaged and working harmoniously. These employees are less likely to take days off work or seek employment elsewhere and, instead, perform more productively while at work.

According to a 2016 survey, 51 per cent of Australians have left a job because of a poor mental health environment. No wonder more employers than ever are establishing mental health and wellbeing strategies to ensure the mental health of their employees is looked after as well as their physical health.

The key findings of the review are summarised here, and the full report is available for download at http://leadingwellvic.com.au/what-works
Key Findings

Policy

A national framework to guide best practice for improving workplace mental health would be a significant advantage for Australian workplaces.

Because more research is needed to provide an evidence base for the promotion of wellbeing in the workplace, the willingness of significant Australian organisations and workplaces to trial well-evidenced interventions will be critical for future progress in this space.

Interventions

There should be a balance between developing a positive work environment and building individual resilience. Studies show that integrating workplace mental wellbeing into an organisation’s focus is critical.

Workplace strategies and interventions should focus on both preventing harm and promoting the positive.

A blend of online and face-to-face training and education is more effective than relying solely on online delivery.

For more information, read the full report at http://leadingwellvic.com.au/what-works
Worldwide, the promotion of mental wellbeing in the workplace has developed rapidly over the past few years.

Many countries with economies similar to Australia, including the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States and New Zealand, now have well-established policies and resources available to employers. Australia, too, would benefit from implementing national standards for workplace mental wellbeing.

Key findings

- Harm prevention and the management of mental illness remain the primary focus of many international policy developments. In contrast, policies where promotion of mental wellbeing is the dominant focus often lack integration with harm prevention and illness management. This can lead to policies not achieving their maximum planned impact.
- There may be a growing trend to combine initiatives to implement universal workplace mental illness prevention and mental health promotion programs with disability employment programs for people with a mental health condition.
- Countries with a national workplace mental health standard or framework have facilitated a consistent approach and language for employers who are ready to take action. In the absence of a national framework in Australia, employers are drawing guidance from various sources.

CASE STUDY

UK national workplace mental health guidance

The UK’s National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) provides guidance on all aspects of workplace wellbeing including the Quality Standard: Healthy workplaces: improving employee mental and physical health and wellbeing.

This covers the health and wellbeing of employees, and describes high-quality care in priority areas for improvement.

The four quality statements applicable to these areas are:

- Employees work in organisations that have a named senior manager who makes employee health and wellbeing a core priority.
- Employees are managed by people who support their health and wellbeing.
- Employees are managed by people who are trained to recognise and support them when they are experiencing stress.
- Employees have the opportunity to contribute to decision-making through staff engagement forums.

Workplace interventions that work

There is a considerable body of evidence demonstrating strong ethical and economic grounds for workplace mental wellbeing interventions. Previous studies have also shown that approaches combining worker-directed and organisational strategies are more effective than those focused only or mainly on individuals.

Interventions showing clear evidence of effectiveness:
- Bullying prevention
- Stress prevention
- Depression prevention
- Suicide prevention
- System-wide, multi-component organisational approaches to health, safety and wellbeing

Interventions showing some promise of effectiveness:
- Employees’ increased control over working time and greater use of flexible work arrangements
- Stress management training programs
- Wellbeing-focused manager training
- Recovery strategies, such as using lunch breaks for relaxation activities
- Job crafting – redesigning jobs to better fit individual motivation, strengths and passions
- Positive psychology-based approaches such as resilience building, coaching and mindfulness training
- Psychological Capital (PsyCap) [see box on following page]

CASE STUDY

Multi-component organisational approaches

In studies of health sector employees interventions showing a positive impact included:
- Enforcing health and safety obligations
- Workers’ compensation process improvements
- The provision of flexible work arrangements
- Changes to work schedules
- Employee participation in decision-making

Interventions that showed a negative impact on health included:
- Downsizing and restructuring
- Temporary and insecure work arrangements
- Outsourcing and some home-based work arrangements
- Some forms of task restructuring
With the exception of Psychological Capital, the evidence on positive approaches and mindfulness interventions is not as strong for improved work performance outcomes as it is for mental wellbeing. However, until the evidence around this is fully developed, it is important to focus on promoting workplace mental wellbeing as an element of employer social responsibility, rather than simply as a means to improve performance.

**The motivational power of interpersonal factors**

There is some indication that face-to-face coaching and resilience training interventions may be more effective than online training. It is recommended that consideration be given to the potential motivating role of interpersonal factors in supporting the implementation of workplace wellbeing interventions.

**Focusing on the positive**

One recent occupational health study discussed the concept of ‘red cape interventions’, which are interventions designed to stop negative experiences; and ‘green cape interventions’, which are interventions designed to grow positive experiences. Employers are obligated under legislation to protect workers from workplace harms, including harm to their mental health, so ‘red cape interventions’ are inevitable and necessary. However, positive mental health and wellbeing can help to protect individuals from the harmful impacts of job stressors, so ‘green cape interventions’ may hold a double value – protecting from the negative while simultaneously promoting the positive.

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**CASE STUDY**

**Psychological capital (PsyCap)**

Psychological capital (PsyCap) is defined as ‘a positive individual capacity representing hope, efficacy, resilience and optimism’. One study of PsyCap in a workplace showed it is possible to increase positive emotions, self-efficacy and job satisfaction of the members of a working team by using a learned optimism group intervention.

**CASE STUDY**

**Business champions**

Literature on occupational health interventions consistently identifies the importance of ‘business champions’ as crucial. ‘Business champions’ can pro-actively coordinate project strands, embed a project, encourage participation, raise awareness, encourage changes to work procedures and strengthen networks and partnerships needed to facilitate changes in organisational culture.

They can also achieve leverage with senior management and understand what is needed to hand over ownership of interventions to fellow employees for sustainability. The potential of ‘champions’ to make a difference depends on their existing roles, skills, work setting and motivation.

Recommendations for the future

- Mental illness prevention programs have strong evidence of effectiveness. Combining preventive mental health promotion programs with disability employment programs may help direct more resources to this area.
- More work is required to link health and employment policy from a systems perspective. Promoting mental wellbeing at work may benefit society as a whole via reduced stress and improved overall life satisfaction, which in turn are protective against mental illness.
- Australia would benefit from a comprehensive, national workplace mental health standard or framework, which has been shown to help guide employers to evidence-based action.
- Increased face-to-face training and education may enhance the implementation of workplace wellbeing interventions. For example, a combination of online and in-person training is more effective than online training alone.
- Current research on approaches to promoting wellbeing is disproportionately focused on individuals. More development and evaluation of work-directed approaches (e.g. job design, job crafting, positive work cultures, positive leadership) is needed.
- Much of the research being done still sits within disciplinary silos such as occupational health and safety and psychology. Industry partners need to be involved in designing, testing and evaluating interventions that integrate harm prevention, promotion of the positive and the management of mental health issues.

Further developments in this area promise to enhance the practice and effectiveness of workplace mental health programs, with potential benefits for both workplaces and society.

The Victorian Workplace Mental Wellbeing Collaboration is a partnership between SuperFriend, VicHealth and WorkSafe Victoria. We are working together to help workplaces create positive and supportive work cultures and environments by focusing on organisational leadership and encouraging workplaces to implement positive mental wellbeing strategies that enhance existing policies and processes.

For more information, please visit: http://leadingwellvic.com.au

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Full references and citations for the studies mentioned here can be found in the complete report, available for download at: http://leadingwellvic.com.au/what-works