



# The Leading Mentally Healthy Workplaces Survey Report 2023

Understanding employee mental health, burnout  
and performance in Australian workplaces

# Foreword

The Corporate Mental Health Alliance Australia (CMHAA) is proud to share the findings of our inaugural Leading Mentally Healthy Workplaces survey. This important initiative was designed to help our member organisations better understand the mental health and wellbeing of employees.

Being mentally healthy enables people to thrive in the workplace and beyond, and this survey supports CMHAA's mission to put mental health at the heart of the business agenda. Over time, we believe it has the potential to become the single largest common survey of working Australians, assessing their state of mind and the psychological health and safety of their workplaces.

CMHAA received almost 8,000 responses from employees of the 14 member organisations that participated in our inaugural Leading Mentally Healthy Workplaces survey between August and December 2022. These organisations varied from employees in the hundreds to the many thousands and operate in varied sectors including retail, insurance, high technology, legal, pharmaceutical, and financial and professional services.

The survey asked employees questions about the key factors that positively and negatively affect their mental health in the workplace, such as stress, burnout, relationships and support. It included questions for leaders about their ability to support employees and maintain a mentally healthy environment for work.

This report provides a wealth of valuable insights across sectors that our members can use and share with other organisations to improve psychological health and safety in the workplace. By working collaboratively, we can accelerate our progress toward this common goal. In addition, CMHAA will use the survey results to establish benchmark indicators that will help us shape future initiatives and drive change in workplaces across Australia.

On behalf of the CMHAA, we'd like to thank the member organisations that participated in our survey – your feedback is much appreciated. We aim to have even more of our 28 members, which collectively employ over 500,000 people, take part in the next survey.



We believe this survey has the potential to become the **single largest common survey of working Australians**, assessing their state of mind and the psychological health and safety of their workplaces.



We'd also like to thank our Expert Advisory Group of mental health thinkers. They play a major role in helping design and execute the Alliance's strategy, and our Leading Mentally Healthy Workplaces survey wouldn't have been possible without their input.

As businesses navigate a challenging economic environment and continue to recover from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the mental health of their employees needs to be front and centre. Normalising conversations around this topic is vital for creating mentally healthy workplaces where people feel valued and supported.

We hope this report will go some way toward answering your questions about mental health in the workplace and empower organisations in Australia to achieve better outcomes together.



Steven Worrall  
Chair, CMHAA



Dr Kim Hamrosi  
CEO, CMHAA



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# Executive Summary

A landmark piece of research, the Corporate Mental Health Alliance Australia's (CMHAA) inaugural Leading Mentally Healthy Workplaces survey was conducted for the first time from August to December 2022.

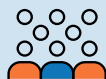
It collected data across CMHAA member organisations on factors influencing the mental health and wellbeing of employees, and the actions organisations have taken to address these. The results are drawn from 7,697 employee responses in 14 organisations, across six industry sectors in Australia.

The Leading Mentally Healthy Workplaces survey sought to understand several key questions. What challenges to mental health are employees experiencing in their day-to-day roles? What drivers are contributing to stress? What are employees saying they value in terms of support? Do they feel safe to speak out about mental health challenges? Where are the gaps?

The analysis of the self-reported employee responses to the survey identified the experiences inside and outside the workplace that positively impact mental health, as well as those most frequently cited to have a negative impact.



**7,697**  
employee  
responses



**14**  
organisations



**6**  
industry sectors  
in Australia

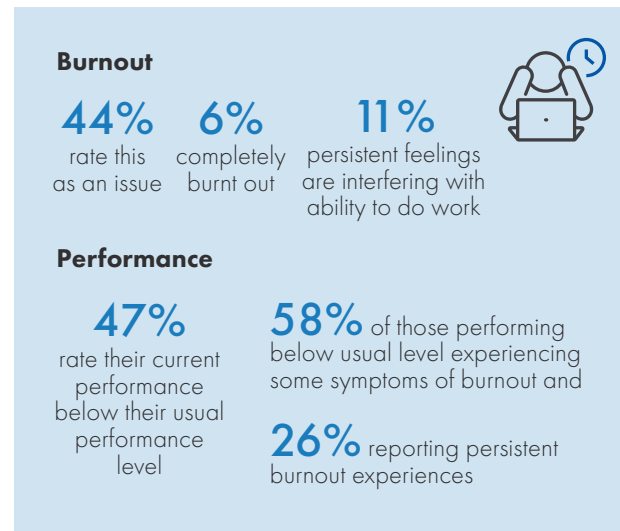




The key findings of the survey:

**Burnout present for 44% of employees and impacts performance**

The results show that employee reported burnout is prevalent, with 44% indicating some level of burnout. When asked to rate their performance almost half of respondents (47%) rated their current performance lower than their usual performance. Amongst those employees who reported performing below their usual level, over half reported symptoms of burnout. Our survey found the likelihood of burnout was significantly predicted by emotional and mental experiences at work, control over work, changes at work, and emotional and financial stressors outside work.



**Most work experiences have a positive impact on mental health**

Employees indicated all work experiences were much more likely to have positive impacts on mental health than negative. Support from and relationships with colleagues and managers are the most frequently rated positive impacts at work for employees (>60%) and rarely seen as negative experiences (<14%). Control over work, emotional aspects of work, changes at work and mental aspects were the most frequently seen as negative impacts, occurring for over 20% of employees. Even those areas that were most frequently rated as negative impacts received moderate ratings as positive experiences. The difference between these experiences (control, change, emotional aspects) being positive versus negative is likely to be related to overall organisational effectiveness (the degree to which the parts of an organisation work well together to achieve its objectives) and the quality of leadership and culture.



### Organisation support is available

Generally, employees highly rated the availability of mental health support at work, as well as the value their organisation and managers place on mental health. However, less than 60% of employees feel safe to speak about these concerns in their organisation or with their managers. Only half of employees feel their leadership team considers mental health as important as getting the job done.



### Employees experience high rates of stress outside of work

While concerns about their personal mental/emotional health are the most common source of external stress, followed by their financial situation and family/relationship issues, many employees reported experiencing multiple stressors. Where respondents report three or more of these external stressors, two-thirds (67%) indicated they are experiencing some degree of burnout, while 53% say they are performing below their usual level. Estimated days lost to presenteeism are over 24 a year in this group.

The results of the research highlight areas where CEOs and leaders of businesses can channel their efforts, leverage strengths and sharpen their focus to address the most significant challenges. The first step is making mental health a clear priority at Board and senior leader levels and demonstrating this priority by putting it on par with operational performance.

The insights gleaned in the study point to the importance of addressing the root causes of burnout through good job design, workload management, especially during change, and empowerment to increase the sense of control. The study also highlights the value of listening to employees to understand their experience and the risks posed in individual organisations.





### Where to next?

The research clearly demonstrates the strong commitment among CMHAA member organisations to support the mental health and wellbeing of their employees. Our CMHAA member principles revolve around putting our people first, walking the talk and treading carefully as we acknowledge we don't have all the answers, and it may take time to do things well.

We recognise some of these findings are confronting and challenging however they provide an opportunity. Our recommendations look at translating this positive intent and support into more concrete action on the work experiences that are negatively impacting employees. Implementing actions that target burnout, stress and work factors will require effort, perseverance and a committed leadership.

This is however only the start of our journey. Every two years we will be conducting this single survey of multi-sector Australian employees across our membership to benchmark ourselves, hold ourselves to account and measure our progress over time. The findings will support and guide our members' efforts to continue to provide a safe setting for all employees, to empower leaders to see mental health as central to their business strategy and to drive lasting change within their own organisations and business more broadly.

The willingness to make these findings available to all businesses publicly underpins our core value to share our learnings, challenges and experiences for the benefit of all businesses and the 13 million employees employed in Australia.



The first step is **making mental health a clear priority at Board and senior leader levels** and demonstrating this priority by putting it on par with operational performance.



# The Leading Mentally Healthy Workplaces Survey

## Why did we conduct this research?

The Corporate Mental Health Alliance Australia (CMHAA), in conjunction with WTW, our survey partners, sought to understand the impacts of work factors and stressors inside and outside the workplace on employees, and gain insight into how wellness initiatives, policies and supports delivered by member organisations are perceived and received.

This research is vital given we spend about a third of our lives at work and work experiences can contribute both positively and negatively to our mental health. Considering this research within the broader context of rising rates of poor mental health in the community<sup>i</sup> and the substantial personal, social and economic impacts, emphasises the important contribution CMHAA can have to lessen the burden of poor mental health on individuals, organisations and society.

When mental health is good, people are productive, happy, healthy, and can manage life's challenges and stresses. When it is poor, we can find it hard to function, to find meaning in our work and daily life. Anyone, no matter their age and background or underlying health condition, can experience poor mental health at any time.

Today, when we overlay this with the prevalence of mental health issues and shifting regulatory environment for managing associated risks, it is more critical than ever for organisations to be prioritising their employees' mental wellness.

A recent World Health Organisation report<sup>ii</sup> emphasises the prevalence, cost and impact of mental health conditions, while calling out the generally poor progress in addressing the issues, urging more action from all sectors including businesses. Further, the 2021 International Standard, ISO 45003<sup>iii</sup> for occupational health and safety management, introduced requirements to address psychosocial risks. In Australia, new Work Health and Safety laws which expand the duties organisations have in relation to managing psychosocial risks came into effect in April 2023.



This research is vital given we spend about a third of our lives at work.





## So, what did we ask?

The survey was designed by CMHAA in collaboration with the experience and insights of our member organisation working group, Expert Advisory Group and with WTW advice, drawing on academic and other research into mental health and wellbeing.

The research consisted of 45 quantitative items/questions assessing a range of experiences of mental health and organisational response, which are grouped into thematic categories for analysis. Demographic information was captured to understand role, age, ethnic/cultural background, and gender.

Survey area	Survey topics	Description
Employee outcomes	Advocacy	Willingness to recommend workplace as mentally healthy
	Burnout	Level of burnout and effectiveness despite stress
	Performance	Current (last month) and past (two years) performance
Experiences & external sources of stress	Experience of work	Positive or negative impact of workplace experience on mental health over the last three months
	Sources of stress	Extent of personal sources of stress factors over past six months
Supports	Organisation, leader and manager support	Degree to which employees feel supported by organisation policies, leadership behaviours and feeling safe to speak up
	Social support	Extent of social connectedness and experience of trusted relationships
	Leader capability	Degree to which leaders feel they have capability to support employees



### How mentally healthy are Australian workplaces?

The CMHAA Leading Mentally Healthy Workplaces survey found many employees are struggling with burnout and stress in the workplace, which is compounded for those experiencing stress outside of work. Current cost of living pressures and financial concerns are key stressors external to the workplace. For many, this is having a detrimental effect on their capacity to perform at their optimum, through increased anxiety, sleep disturbance and work distraction and may come at a substantial cost of lost productivity to their employers.

Encouragingly, respondents indicated their organisations were making positive investments in policies, leader and manager commitment to mental health and creating a culture where it is safe to speak up. Although making constructive inroads, there remains further opportunities to translate these intentions into day-to-day experiences to address workplace challenges and particularly where employees lack feelings of control, do not feel recognised for their work, experience significant change or are concerned about job security.



Respondents indicated their organisations were making positive investments in policies, leader and manager commitment to mental health and creating a culture where it is safe to speak up.



### Employee Outcomes

#### Advocacy

A silver lining to the COVID-19 pandemic has been the reduction in stigma and an increase in normalisation of conversations around mental health in the workplace<sup>iv</sup>. Employers and employees are more aware of the workplace factors that contribute to poor mental health and are taking steps to respond with initiatives and policies to support employees. In 2022, Allianz research found that 53% of managers believed their company had gone above and beyond to provide support and systems to create mentally healthy workplaces<sup>v</sup>.

Companies have been investing in employee mental health<sup>vi</sup>. To understand the impact of this we asked employees about how healthy they felt their organisation was. 59% of employees responded they are willing to recommend their workplace as being mentally healthy while 23% aren't sure if they would recommend and 18% would not recommend.

#### Why should organisations act?

In a competitive world for talent, and with potential employees valuing a flexible and mentally healthy workplace, creating a positive experience that leads to advocacy is an important element of your talent attraction and retention strategy. Advocacy supports greater awareness of the work you are doing and realises the benefits in terms of positive perception as an organisation. The advent of social platforms like Glassdoor, where current and former employees can anonymously provide reviews of their employers, amplify the reach of employee advocacy from person to person to thousands or millions.



## Burnout

“Burnout” is now officially recognised by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the responsibility for managing the root cause factors for burnout sits with the employer/organisation. Employee burnout is increasingly a symptom of the fast-paced, complex and demanding modern workplace as employees feel the pressure of competing demands, the blur in work-life boundaries and expectations. Factors most correlated with burnout<sup>viii</sup> are:

- Unfair treatment at work
- Unmanageable workload
- Lack of role clarity
- Lack of communication and support from their manager
- Unreasonable time pressure.

This same research found that two-thirds of employees experienced burnout on the job.

To understand employee burnout, a validated single item question was included in the survey with a definition of burnout to assist respondents.

Burnout was highly prevalent (44%) among respondents; 6% are completely burnt out and a further 11% are experiencing persistent feelings that interfere with work. The high degree of reported burnout in the survey findings is in keeping with previous research undertaken which found similar or even higher rates of burnout and that it was a more common experience in Australia than other countries<sup>viii, ix, x</sup>.

Analysis (Figure 1) identified that burnout was significantly predicted by the degree to which employees had positive emotional and mental experiences at work, control over work and changes at work, and emotional and financial stressors outside of work.

The results indicated the experience of mental (cognitive thinking) and emotional (interactions with other people) aspects of work have the largest influence on employee levels of burnout. Work impacts including control over work and changes at work and finally, sources of personal stress, particularly mental/emotional health and individual financial situations have strong relationships with employee levels of burnout.

These findings are consistent with research identifying work demands, work resources, workplace bullying and work-related violence are linked to psychological distress and burnout which impact various worker intentions (including intention to resign, transfer jobs, seek medical advice or take sick leave).

The drivers of burnout indicate that it is the contributors to mental and emotional load that are most significant, whether they are within or outside of work. To reduce employee burnout, organisations should focus on actions that impact these factors. The analysis again highlights the experience of control and change within work. It points clearly to action areas for organisations in creating cultures of empowerment with greater perceived and actual control and improving the management of change to better address the emotional and mental impact of change. The identification of ‘financial situation’ as a source of stress leading to burnout is an important finding, highlighting the need for organisations to understand how they can assist employees with financial wellbeing.

Figure 1. Key Driver Analysis of Burnout



## Performance

To understand the impact of employee mental health and wellbeing, the survey sought to assess employee performance using two items from the Health and Work Performance Questionnaire<sup>xii</sup> (HPQ), which ask employees to rate both their current performance (last four weeks) and their typical performance (last two years) on a 1 – 10 scale from one worst to best 10.

Employee self-rating of current (last four weeks) and usual (year or two) performance showed a clear trend towards their current performance being lower than usual.

- The impact was higher when looking at top performers, where 37% rated their usual performance a nine or 10 compared to 19% rating their current performance a nine or 10
- 47% of respondents rated their current performance below their usual level of performance.

It is evident that a large proportion of employees rate their current performance below their usual performance, which should be of concern to employers. The timing of this study coming towards the end of the year and following two years of significant COVID-19 disruption may well have resulted in employees feeling a high level of fatigue which may have influenced their responses. Nonetheless, the likely impact on organisational performance should be of consideration and worthy of further exploration.

Across the second half of 2022, employee fatigue and burnout were themes frequently raised in the literature<sup>xiii</sup>. To understand this experience in more detail we compared performance and burnout responses (Figure 2).

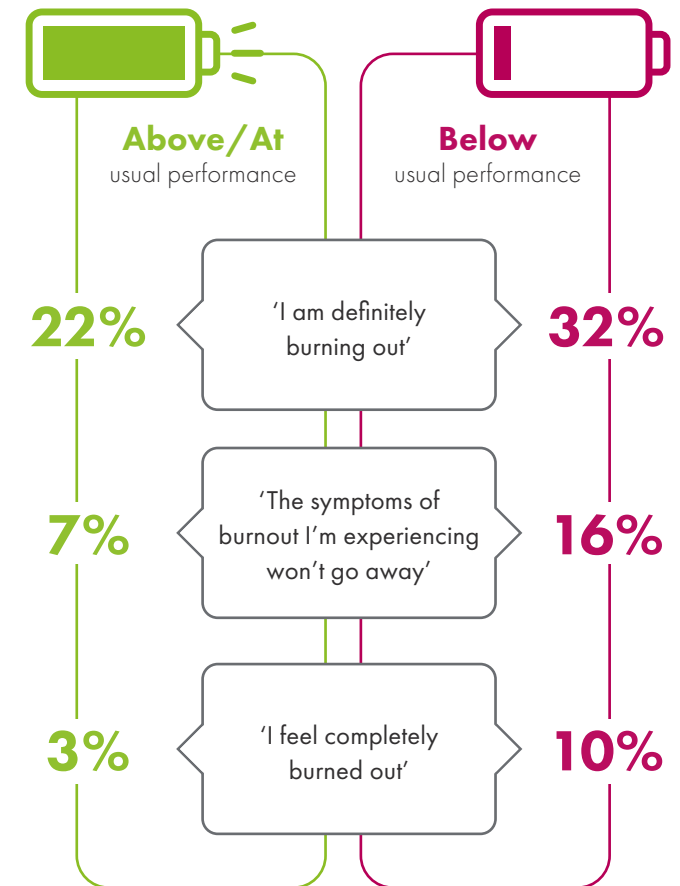
- Burnout shows a strong relationship with reduced performance, with 58% of those performing below their usual level experiencing some symptoms of burnout and 26% reporting persistent burnout experiences
- Those performing “at the usual” or “above usual” levels show no difference in the burnout rate.

What is clear from this analysis is that while a minority of employees can continue to perform At or Above their usual level while experiencing burnout, the far more common and likely experience is for performance to be impacted by burnout.

We conducted further analysis (Figure 3) to understand the relationship between external sources of stress (discussed further under ‘What are the challenges employees are facing outside of work?’), performance and burnout.

- 32% of employees experiencing mental/emotional stress combined with other stressors (physical alone or all others) were far more likely to experience performance impacts relative to those with no stress:
  - >20% fewer rate current performance above seven (62% highly stressed vs 87% no stress)
  - 58% of those experiencing mental/emotional and physical stress are performing below their usual vs 39% for no stressors
  - Rate of burnout was 67% for those experiencing mental/emotional and physical health stressors and 70% for the highly stressed vs 26% for those with no stressors.

Figure 2. Relative performance by burnout



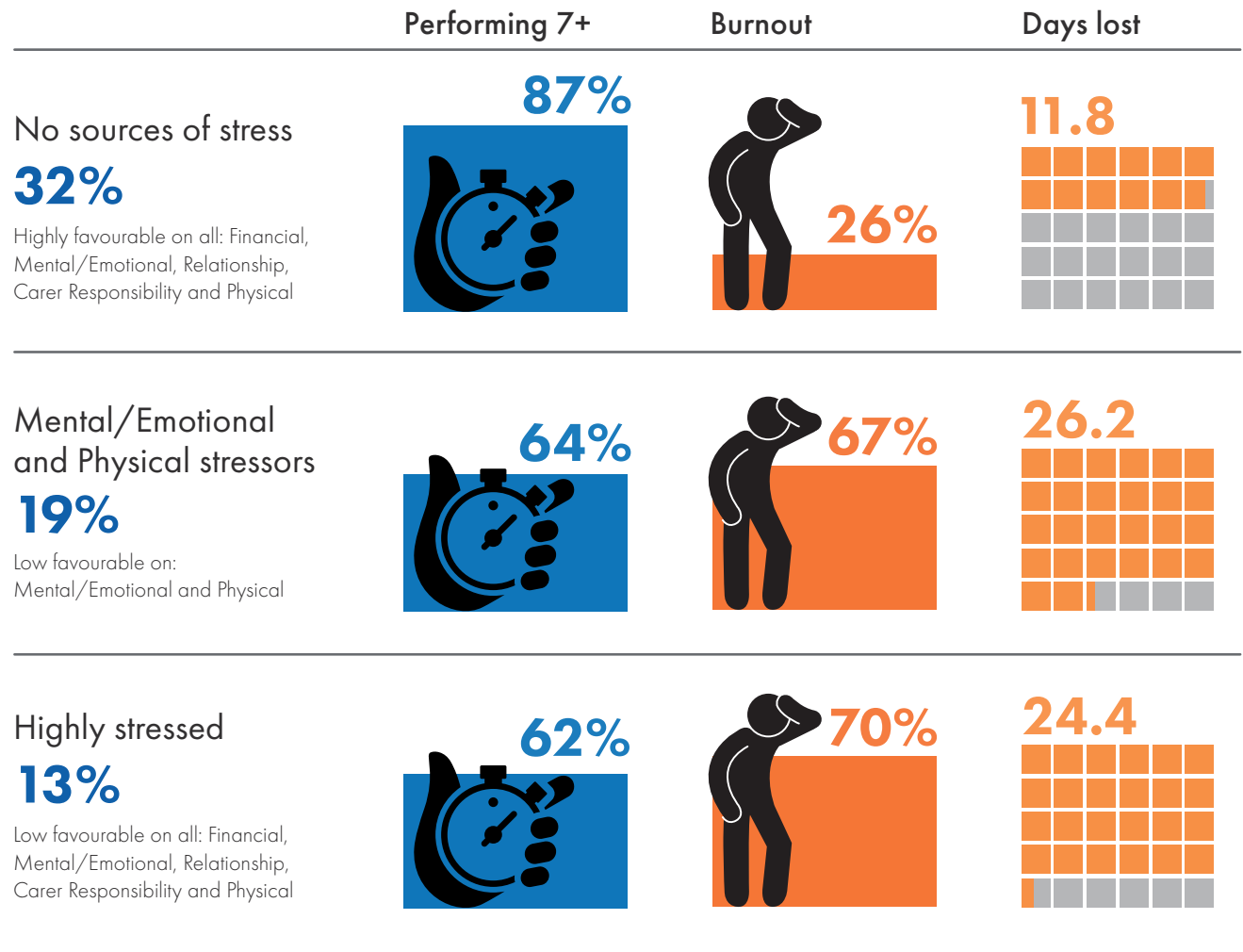
To understand the financial consequences of external stressors and burnout, we calculated the relative presenteeism of employees and translated this into a “days lost” to presenteeism:

- All groups were showing some days lost, which aligns with the general trend of current performance being rated lower than usual performance by a high proportion of participants in this survey
- Employees experiencing mental/emotional and physical health stress (19%), or all stressors (13%) had twice the number of days lost as the no stressors group
- Employees experiencing mental/emotional health and physical health stress, or all stressors lose approximately five weeks.

The Days Lost ranges from a best result of 11.8 for the No Stress group to highs of 26.2 for Mental/Emotional & Physical Stressors, and 24.4 for the Highly Stressed. The impact of having Mental/Emotional Stressors in combination with other stressors results in twice the days lost compared to the No Stress group and that this occurs for over 30% of the workforce.

To make this real, for an organisation with 1,000 people, 130 would be in the High Stress Group and lose on average 24.4 days reflecting a total of 3,172 days lost to presenteeism. If we look at this as an excess over the days lost in the No Stress group, it's 12.6 excess days on average or 1,638 days in total.

Figure 3. Sources of stress, performance, burnout and days lost





What is clear from the combination of results from the burnout and external stress questions is that a significant proportion of the workforce experiences levels of stress that impact their work effectiveness and that for a substantial proportion this experience of stress progresses to persistent feelings of burnout.

The importance of this finding is that while some degree of temporary stress is expected in life and work, the evidence suggests that for 44% of the respondents this stress experience is persistent to the extent their coping resources are exhausted and they experience some degree of burnout. As burnout is characterised by symptoms beyond physical and mental exhaustion, including detachment from work, cynicism and feelings of inefficacy its impacts on both workplace performance and employees' lives can be long lasting and far reaching.

### Why should organisations act on burnout and performance?

Employee burnout can lead to physical and mental health problems which can adversely affect their overall wellbeing and can trigger a downward spiral in individual and organisational performance. The cost is substantial, with implications for productivity, retention, reputation and safety.

Research by Wigert and Agrawal<sup>xiv</sup> has found employees reporting burnout are 63% more likely to take a sick day and 2.6 times as likely to be actively seeking a different job. Even if retained, 13% reported lower confidence in their performance and were 50% less likely to discuss how to approach performance goals with their manager. In certain industries, employee burnout can result in safety hazards or accidents due to fatigue and lack of focus.

Recent analysis<sup>xv</sup> in the UK shows that the cost to employers of poor mental health from absenteeism, presenteeism and staff turnover has increased by about 25% over two years. The Australian Productivity Commission Inquiry into Mental Health<sup>xvi</sup> estimated the 10-12 days per year of absenteeism due to mental health cost workplaces an estimated \$10 billion. In addition to this is the large hidden cost of presenteeism contributing to employer's costs associated with mental health. The Productivity Commission estimated employees with poor mental health reduced their work productivity on between 14-18 days, costing up to \$7 billion. Organisations that focus their mental health and wellbeing interventions open the door to conversations about how to better support employees in a more holistic manner. In practice this does not need to be complicated.

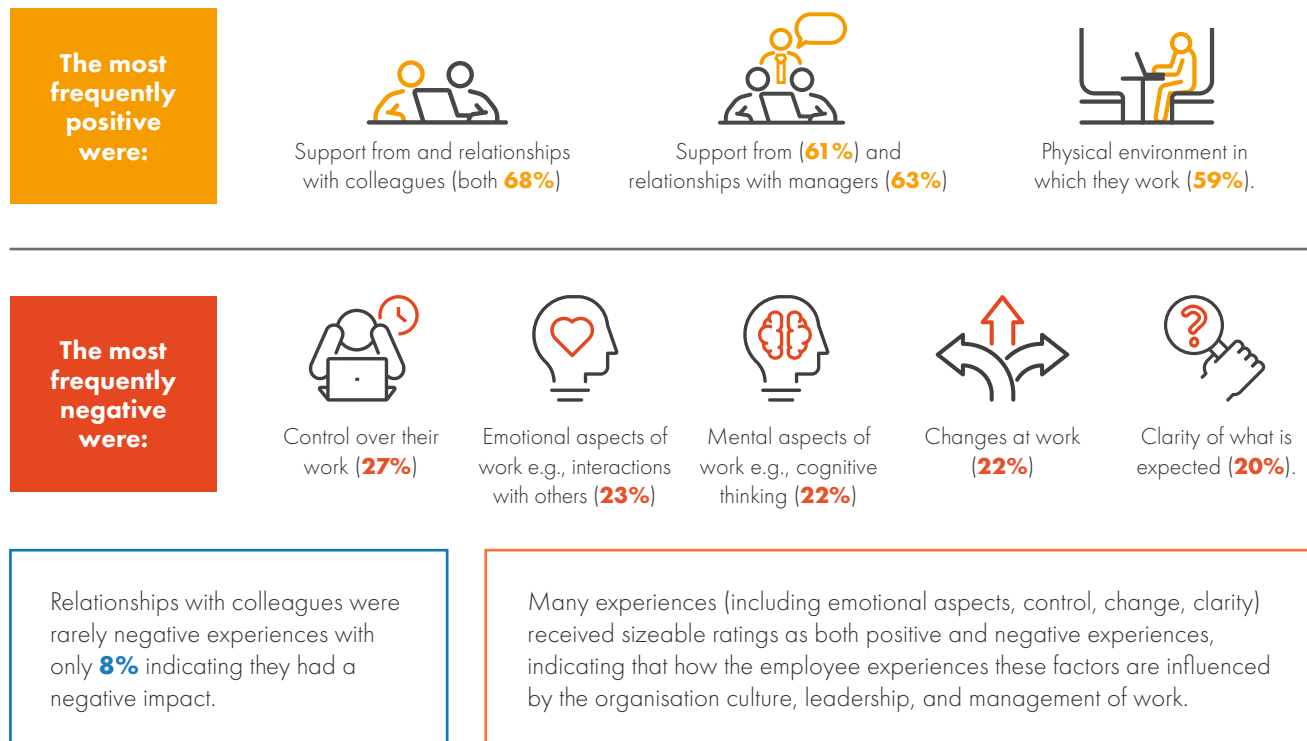
- Review of workload and role design where employees are experiencing high stress or burnout
- Introduction of financial wellbeing education and tools that are well targeted to employee life-stage needs
- Physical health programs and medical support that focus on creating change in most at risk groups (e.g., cardiac risk, diabetes), rather than "lifestyle" activities
- Review of EAP services to ensure full coverage of potential challenges and continued efforts to increase use, including proactively as a preventative/early intervention service.

## Experience of work

Having purposeful activity, including work, is important to positive wellbeing and mental health. It provides feelings of competence, self-esteem, a sense of identity, forms of social connection and social support. To better understand the impact and experience of work, questions focused on factors associated with work and the work environment that may influence employees' mental health and wellbeing (Figure 4).

**Figure 4. Positive and negative workplace experience**

A range of workplace experiences were seen to have positive or negative impacts on mental health.



## Why should organisations act?

Whether an employee experiences the mental health and wellbeing benefits depends strongly on the quality of the work environment and organisational experience, creating a clear imperative for organisations.

Research into wellbeing and mental health has suggested that good work plays a positive role in mental health and wellbeing<sup>xvii</sup>. In addition to providing financial resources, work provides feelings of competence, self-esteem, a sense of identity, forms of social connection and social support, which can flow on to improved physical and mental health.

Compelling research concludes that the evidence is stronger that long term work absence, work disability and unemployment generally have a negative impact on health and wellbeing<sup>xviii, xix</sup>.



## Support

Whilst work health and safety laws require employers to meet obligations and duties to provide both a physically and psychologically healthy and safe workplace, a climate supporting psychosocial safety is largely influenced by senior management and culture.

Supportive and responsive organisations, leaders and managers that actively aim to understand the needs of their employees and help to break down the stigma surrounding mental ill health create a positive environment that supports good mental health.

To understand employees' perceptions about feeling supported at work, the survey asked respondents about their organisation, leaders and managers as well as how supported they felt by their team and peers.

### Organisational, leader and manager support

- Employees were positive about the availability of support for mental health from their organisation (78%) and that they felt the mental health of people was valued by the organisation (73%) and managers (71%)
- However, less employees felt safe to speak about mental health concerns in their organisation (56%) and with managers (58%)
- In line with this finding, only 50% of employees felt their leadership team considered mental health as important as getting the job done.

## Social support

- Seventy-five percent feel that, in their team, people treat each other in a way that positively supports mental health and wellbeing
- Around six out of ten respondents never or rarely feel left out (59%) or isolated from others (61%) at work and feel a strong sense of community with common interests (60%).

### Why should organisations act?

Measures to improve employee mental health benefit both the employee and the employer. There are positive business reasons for supporting employee mental health which include staff morale, productivity and retention.

Leaders and managers play a vital role in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of employees. Research<sup>xx</sup> has demonstrated the significant impact supportive line managers can have. Employees who feel their line manager supports their mental health are more than twice as likely to report good mental health than those who do not (62% against 29%). Further, employees are more than three times as likely to report feeling happy at work (70% vs 18%) when they see their working relationship with their line manager as effective.

There is strong consensus that social connectedness is a significant and protective factor contributing to mental health and wellbeing. Social connectedness moderates various aspects of psychological health and can exert a protective influence to mitigate the negative impact of working conditions and culture. Higher resilience is also associated with strong social support, team cohesion and engagement in the workplace.

Feeling supported, connected and valued by colleagues can act as a buffer against emotional distress even in a challenging and stressful work environment<sup>xxi</sup>. In contrast, poor social support and connection amongst work colleagues has been found to be associated with increased stress, anxiety, depressive symptoms and insomnia.

Practical ways organisations can consider building stronger social connection, are for example, to use in-person time in workplaces to rebuild team bonds and networks to foster community or create a digital employee experience that enables employees to maintain strong connections to their peers, leaders and company culture from wherever they may be working.







### Leadership capability

Supportive leadership and effective management practices can act as a protective factor for employee wellbeing, often mitigating the negative impact of working conditions. A supportive leadership style builds trust and encourages feedback from teams and is associated with better wellbeing outcomes for employees.

To better understand and support leaders, the questions focused on people manager/leader's views on their ability to support, balance and reduce risks to the mental health and wellbeing of their team. This included training, confidence, empowerment, and ability to respond.

Of the survey respondents, 3,221 were managers and leaders, who indicated strong levels of confidence in supporting employees:

- 77% feel they are confident to provide a mentally safe and healthy working environment for their team
- 79% feel empowered to support team members in finding solutions to conflicts in work and personal demands
- 72% feel able to respond in an effective manner to any potential risks to team members' mental health and wellbeing.

This positive finding reflects the efforts by member organisations to build awareness and capability among managers as a key component of their wellbeing strategy.

### Why should organisations act?

Building capability among managers and leaders through education and training raises awareness, combats stigma, and helps leaders with skills and supports to respond to situations and individuals at risk. Appropriate mental health training provided to managers and supervisors also helps them to feel more confident in discussing mental health matters with employees and can reduce psychological distress among employees<sup>xxii</sup>.

Leaders creating a culture of feedback and recognition within their ways of working and performance processes will strengthen positive experiences that support mental health.

One of the findings is the gap between intent and action. While organisations are seen to prioritise and value mental health at an organisational level, improving the day-to-day experience of employees through ways of working and supports is as essential as traditional workplace health and safety measures.



A supportive leadership style builds trust and encourages feedback from teams and is associated with better wellbeing outcomes for employees.



## What are the challenges employees are facing outside of work?

The intertwined nature of work and life is unavoidable for employees. We examined the extent to which employees were experiencing a range of life stressors outside of work.

The most common life stressors reported include:

- Concerns about their own mental/emotional health was the most reported source of personal stress in respondent's lives (37%)
- Financial situation (33%) and family/relationship issues (30%) were the next most frequent concerns.

Many employees experience multiple stressors in their lives. Through analysis five profiles of employees were identified based on their different experience of stress (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Employees' experience of external stressors



## Why should organisations act?



### Mental and emotional health

These finding aligns with a myriad of research reports charting the growth in mental health challenges in the Australian population and workplaces. The National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing (2021)<sup>xxiii</sup> found that

21% of Australians aged 16-85 experienced a mental disorder in the preceding 12 months. As the report notes, one does not have to have a mental health disorder to be struggling with mental health. WTW's Global Benefit Attitude Survey<sup>xxiv</sup> (GBAS) Australia report found that 46% of Australian workers reported mild to severe Anxiety or Depression, the inclusion of mild in this analysis likely accounts for the higher rate.

A recent report by the Committee for Economic Development of Australia (CEDA) reported that while serious workers compensation claims had reduced by 13% since 2000, claims for mental health have risen by 60% over this time. The cost of mental health claims is higher than physical injuries and rising. CEDA<sup>xxv</sup> projects that claims could at least double by 2030.

Taken together the research evidence is clear that mental health has become the single largest concern for employees and the greatest cause of lost productivity and workers compensation claims for employers.



### Financial Wellbeing

A third of participants report that their financial situation is a source of stress. WTW GBAS<sup>xxiv</sup> research has tracked employee concern about financial wellbeing over the last decade. It shows

an increasing percentage of employees living pay-cheque to pay-cheque, with the latest data showing this had grown from 28% in 2017 to 42% in 2022. The greatest growth in those without savings to rely on, is for people earning >\$100k, shifting from 27% in 2019 to 44% in 2022. The findings from the CMHAA member surveys and other research reflect the many increasing financial challenges facing employees, from the cost of rent and housing, increasing costs of living through utilities and fuel, recent inflation, as well as concerns around potential recession and job security.

Historically, Australian organisations have been reticent to play a role in supporting employees' financial wellbeing, beyond their remuneration and benefits. However, we now know that poor financial wellbeing has spill over effects into other aspects of wellbeing<sup>xxvi</sup>. With this evidence it is timely for organisations to consider their role in supporting employees' financial education and wellbeing, by helping to get the fundamentals in place. There is an opportunity for employers to make an overt link between the total rewards (pay, superannuation and benefits) they provide and the ways this supports an employee's financial resilience. Applying a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion lens to total rewards programs can highlight whether there are any gaps and how these can be closed to better support any employees who are more at risk from financial concerns.





## Family and relationships

Over the past six months, thirty percent of respondents report family or other relationships as a personal source of stress outside of work, while a quarter cite

carer responsibilities (children, elderly relatives, people with special needs) as personal sources of stress. Juggling families and caring responsibilities with work has come with increased challenges over the past few years with COVID-19 lockdowns and home schooling, as well as reduced access to supporting resources. When reviewing the results by demographics, carers of school aged children were generally favourable across most topics and appreciate the support offered by employers, while those with multiple caring responsibilities, or caring for disabled persons are generally least favourable.

These findings illustrate the impact focused programs can have and where more work is needed. As part of organisations' gender equity strategies and to retain talent, many policies, benefits and flexible work practices have been put in place to support those (predominantly women) caring for school aged children. While these have clear impact, the cumulative challenge of multiple caring responsibilities or those who have more demanding requirements is less effectively supported by these strategies. Based on the demographic groups who most find family or other relationships and carer responsibilities as sources of personal stress, further work is required to better support these older, again predominantly women, who have these caring responsibilities to ensure their workplace experience is positive and their mental health and wellbeing is protected.



## Physical Health

24% report their physical health (i.e., medical conditions) as a source of personal stress outside of work. Data reported from WTW's GBAS<sup>xxiv</sup> Wellbeing Diagnostic found 57%

of Australian employees were physically thriving (indicating 43% were not). The National Health Survey 2020-21<sup>xxvii</sup> found that nearly half of Australians had a least one chronic health condition (including mental health). Co-morbidity of mental health and physical health concerns is common.

Evidence shows physical exercise is a cornerstone of good health and wellbeing. Regular physical activity can have a positive impact on mental health through reducing anxiety and depression, improving sleep, boosting cognitive function and enhancing personal feelings of self-esteem. When it comes to the workplace employers can play a crucial role in fostering an environment that encourages employees to be active, creating a healthier and more engaged workforce.

A range of policy, practice and benefit approaches should be considered by employers to enable work-life balance, improve health-risk awareness and physical activity, through the use of a combination of digital tools, activity gamification and social facilitation.



## Legal Issues, Substance Misuse and Addiction

Stress reported from legal issues (5%) and addiction or substance related issues (3%) were only raised by a very

small percentage of the survey respondents. While these are undoubtedly serious situations with potential for significant impact on employees' lives and mental health, their relative low frequency means they will not be a focus in this report.

Organisations provide a range of supports and policies to address substance abuse with support via Employee Assistance Programs and subsequent referral being primary amongst them.



A range of policy, practice and benefit approaches should be considered by employers to enable work-life balance.





### Where to next?

The findings of this first Leading Mentally Healthy Workplaces survey provide direction. Set within the context of CMHAA's pillars of Providing Safe Settings, Empowering Leaders and Driving Lasting Change, the findings will help to inform, refine and focus where change is needed and set a baseline that, over time, enables us to measure our impact on workplace mental health.

### Providing Safe Settings

The study has sought to understand the key elements of a mentally healthy workplace. It is evident that workplaces need to continue to look at ways to improve employees' experience of work, including addressing factors such as burnout and negative mental health outcomes.

Attention in supporting organisations will be on:

#### How employees experience work

The focus remains on what organisations can do to improve the positive experience of work and what organisational and systems changes can be made to support prevention and early intervention.

The results highlight the necessity of addressing the key drivers of burnout – emotional and mental load, absence of control, unsupported change and challenges due to life stresses. Organisations can directly address the drivers of burnout which are created by the organisational system, through good work design to reduce psychosocial hazards, as well as creating support systems to reduce impact.

### Supporting open discussion of mental health

It is essential to continue to build open environments where leaders, managers and employees can speak about mental health to reduce stigma and put in place enhanced mechanisms that encourage help seeking and provide appropriate support. Ideally, these mechanisms should extend beyond existing or traditional EAP services to provide more specific support and improved pathways for escalation and organisational action.

### Providing support networks

Both internal and external support networks are crucial for organisations and their people. Companies working together, such as through alliances like CMHAA, to share knowledge, insights, challenges and successes improves the quality of thinking and enables better practice. CMHAA is committed to sharing case studies, initiatives, resources and research to support all organisations, large or small, to help create safe and mentally healthy workplaces.

Developing mental health networks inside organisations also helps communicate commitment, provides peer and specialist support, and a forum for discussing challenges and testing solutions.

## Empowering Leaders

The study found strong positive intent from leaders, but a gap in day-to-day experience. To achieve the objective of providing safe settings, leaders are critical and require ongoing support and investment to enable them to lead internally and influence others. Our future focus is to:

### Build leader capability at all levels

Leaders at different levels of the organisation play distinct and important roles – from taking ownership and setting the tone at the top, to directing resources in the middle and influencing day to day experience at the front line. Action needs to be directed toward capability in all these different leadership roles.

### Support leaders to make change

As leaders drive strategy and change in their organisations, it is essential to ensure that mental health is recognised as an important factor when considering work design, change management and technology adoption. The most difficult change is for leaders to see and act in a way that demonstrates mental health is as important as organisational performance. As has been achieved for physical safety, a true shift in leadership commitment and action is required to address psychosocial hazards and create workplaces focused on sustainable productivity where performance is not at the risk of mental health.

## Drive Lasting Change

Lastly and importantly, this report is about driving lasting change. By creating a baseline view of experience within workplaces it provides a starting evidence point from which to advocate for action. This includes action to:

### Expand understanding on external stressors

While the causes of life stressors are outside of an organisation's direct control, to take a more holistic view of employees' mental health and wellbeing, organisations can play an important role in providing support through policies (e.g., various leave arrangements), employee benefits (e.g., insurances) and education (e.g., financial literacy).

Not surprisingly, in the current environment, financial stress has emerged as a key factor impacting wellbeing for an increasing number of employees. More work needs to be done to understand how organisations can best support employees to improve their financial wellbeing.

### Deliver targeted support for high-risk groups

The survey demonstrated that a substantial segment of employees experience multiple stressors and these employees were more likely to experience burnout and reduced productivity. For these employees, improvements in the organisational system through work design, leadership and peer support are important to reduce the risk of additional work related stressors. Coupling this with programs and resources that support employees with their specific life challenges (by the organisation or externally) will have the greatest impact on improving the mental health and productivity of this at risk group.

## Build a comprehensive picture

The Leading Mentally Healthy Workplaces survey is part of the CMHAA and members' contribution to building a more comprehensive understanding of mental health in the workplace. Further effort could be directed to building the data within and across organisations about employee mental health and understanding its relationship to employee experience, HR metrics, productivity and performance. Over time, this analysis will enable predictive models which can guide action and enable prevention interventions.

## Where to find more information about taking action?

The CMHAA membership base includes some of Australia's biggest and best known brands. Many of them already have the resources needed to improve mental health in the workplace. And yet, they recognise the importance in coming together, in the belief we are 'stronger together'. Their choice to participate demonstrates that mental health is bigger than any one business or person. It shows a passion to combine resources and ideas for the benefit of every working Australian.

We encourage all workplaces, no matter the size, to continue to invest in their employees' mental health. And, vitally, for every leader to see mental health as core to their business strategy, integrating the practices, processes and systems that support good work.

As a start point, our website [cmhaa.org.au](http://cmhaa.org.au) contains a range of information, case studies, guides and toolkits that can be freely accessed to support your work to become a mentally healthy workplace.

### Limitations of the findings

The survey findings reflect the valid experience of those who responded. While the findings are aligned to the broad body of previous research on employee stress, coping and mental health, caution should be applied in generalising the survey findings outside the study population.

A randomised survey study of this size would enable the research to be confident in making generalised findings about the state of mental health in Australian organisations. The CMHAA member organisations and the employees who participated to the voluntary survey are not a random selection of the Australian workforce. They represent leading organisations in their sectors with a strong focus on mental health. The employees motivated to respond to this voluntary survey are likely to be more focused on mental health than the average employee. Both factors potentially influenced the survey responses.

Nevertheless, the results provide fresh insights, understanding and direction as to where organisations can focus to improve the mental health and wellbeing of employees in the workplace.








## About the survey

The survey collected demographic information with role, age, ethnic/cultural background, and gender captured in all member organisation surveys. The opinion section consisted of 45 quantitative items/questions assessing a range of experiences of mental health and organisational response, which are grouped into thematic categories for analysis.

Each of the 14 participating member organisations in Australia surveyed their employees for at least two weeks during the August to December 2022 administration window.

Organisation size varied and included the following industries: retail, insurance, high technology, legal, pharmaceutical, and financial and professional services. A total of 7,697 employees responded.

 <b>Member Organisation Size</b>	<b>Under 500</b> 2	<b>500–1,000</b> 1	<b>1,001–10,000</b> 8	<b>&gt;10,000</b> 3			
 <b>Industries</b>	<b>Insurance</b> 29%	<b>Law Firm</b> 22%	<b>Professional Services</b> 21%	<b>High Technology</b> 7%	<b>Financial Services</b> 7%	<b>Pharma</b> 7%	<b>Retail</b> 7%
 <b>Gender</b>	<b>Woman or female</b> 4,490/ <b>58%</b>	<b>Man or male</b> 2,823/ <b>37%</b>	<b>Non-binary/ Gender diverse</b> 35/ <b>&lt;1%</b>	<b>Prefer not to answer response</b> 231/ <b>3%</b>	<b>No response</b> 118/ <b>2%</b>		
 <b>Level</b>	<b>Executive/ senior leadership</b> 497/ <b>6%</b>	<b>Operational/ middle management</b> 958/ <b>13%</b>	<b>Supervisor/ immediate manager</b> 1,766/ <b>23%</b>	<b>Employee</b> 4,439/ <b>58%</b>			
 <b>Age</b>	<b>&lt;25</b> 458/ <b>6%</b>	<b>25-34</b> 2,167/ <b>28%</b>	<b>35-44</b> 2,286/ <b>30%</b>	<b>45-54</b> 1,869/ <b>24%</b>	<b>55-64</b> 776/ <b>10%</b>	<b>65+</b> 91/ <b>1%</b>	



# About CMHAA and WTW



CMHAA are a business-led, expert-guided alliance of Australian businesses dedicated to providing mentally healthy workplaces for all people. As a community of like-minded organisations, we know that we can do better. Doing better begins with business leaders prioritising the mental health and wellbeing of their people in ways that they experience in the workplace every day. We also believe that when businesses pool their resources, share openly, and work collaboratively towards a common goal, improved and sustainable mental health outcomes can be achieved for more people. To learn more about our principles, priorities and activities go to: [cmhaa.org.au](https://cmhaa.org.au).



WTW (formerly Willis Towers Watson) is a leading global advisory, broking and solutions company that helps clients around the world turn risk into a path for growth. With roots dating to 1828, WTW has 45,000 employees serving more than 140 countries and markets. We design and deliver solutions that manage risk, optimise benefits, cultivate talent, and expand the power of capital to protect and strengthen institutions and individuals. Our unique perspective allows us to see the critical intersections between talent, assets and ideas – the dynamic formula that drives business performance. Together, we unlock potential. Learn more at [wtwco.com/en-au](https://wtwco.com/en-au).

At WTW, our Employee Experience team helps our clients to improve the whole employee experience, both inside and outside of work. Employers – and employees – have a lot on their minds these days: Burnout, retention, flexible work, pay, health, financial wellbeing, and more. Employers need to understand and support a broad range of human experience and wellbeing. But it can be challenging for employers to sort through the issues and find a path forward. Understanding and enhancing the whole employee experience is essential to supporting employees through the moments that matter.

We are proud to be CMHAA's partner of choice for their inaugural leading mentally healthy workplaces survey and to share these insights.



# Glossary of Key Terms

## Absenteeism

A habitual pattern of an employee being absent from work.

## Burnout

Burnout is a syndrome conceptualised as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterised by three dimensions:

- feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion;
- increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and
- reduced professional efficacy.

## CMHAA

Corporate Mental Health Alliance Australia.

## EAP

Employee Assistance Program.

## Emotional aspects of work

Examples include: dealing with other people's personal problems as part of your work or work that is emotionally demanding.

## Emotional health

Emotional health is a person's ability to accept and manage feelings through challenge and change. Someone who is emotionally healthy can allow their emotions to be digestible. The mundane hassles of daily life offer opportunities to practice responses, rather than reactions to allow emotional health to flourish.

Emotional health includes both emotional intelligence and emotional regulation. When the subjective experience of emotions is appropriate over a sustained period, emotional health is thought to be present. Positive affect will be apparent in mundane, daily activities.

## Leadership

Senior executives within the organisation responsible for the company's strategy and direction.

## Manager

The person to whom you directly report, regardless of their role.

## Member organisation

Organisations or companies that are part of the CMHAA. There are currently 28 Member organisations, spanning sectors such as: retail, insurance, high technology, legal, pharmaceutical, and financial and professional services.





### **Mental aspects of work**

Examples include: the cognitive demands, long periods of attention, making decisions, coming up with new ideas, keeping your eyes on lots of things, being required to remember a lot of things.

### **Mental health**

A state of wellbeing in which every individual realises their own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to their community.

### **Mental health (positive)**

Refers to a state of mental wellbeing that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realise their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community. It is more than the absence of mental disorders and reflects the ability to cope regardless of underlying mental conditions. It is an integral component of health and wellbeing that underpins our individual and collective abilities to make decisions, build relationships and shape the world we live in. (Adapted from World Health Organisation)<sup>xxviii</sup>.

### **Mentally healthy workplaces**

Organisations where wellness initiatives, policies and supports are effective in helping employees to achieve positive mental health.

### **Organisational effectiveness**

Refers to the degree by which an organisation's operations and functions are successful in achieving its goals.

### **Organisational support**

An organisation's policies and practices that help its employees to have positive mental health and wellbeing e.g., processes for raising concerns about mental health, leadership behaviours and services (such as an EAP) to support mental health challenges.

### **Physical aspects of work**

Examples include: the level and duration of physical exertion required, including sitting, standing, walking, lifting, carrying, reaching, pushing, and pulling; wearing/using protective equipment while working.

### **Presenteeism**

Where an employee stays at work longer than usual or goes to work while ill, injured, or experiencing a situation that affects their ability to focus.

### **Psychosocial hazards and risks**

Psychosocial hazards and risks are things that could cause psychological or physical harm. Psychosocial hazards can create stress. Stress itself is not an injury. But if workers are stressed often, over a long time, or the level of stress is high, it can cause harm<sup>xxix</sup>.

### **Psychosocial safety climate**

Shared perceptions of organisational policies, practices and procedures for the protection of worker psychological health and safety that stem largely from management practices<sup>xxx</sup>.

### Psychological safety

A shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking and a feeling of confidence that a team will not embarrass, reject or punish someone for speaking up<sup>xxxi</sup>.

### Psychological health

See Mental health definition.

### Team

The people you work with on a day-to-day basis.

### Total Rewards

The package offered to employees comprising pay and compensation (e.g., salary, bonuses, share options), employee benefits (e.g., life insurance, parental leave), employee wellbeing (e.g., flexible working options, counselling services), and career programs (e.g., learning and development initiatives).

### Wellbeing

A positive state experienced by individuals and encompasses quality of life and the ability of people to contribute to the world with a sense of meaning and purpose. Overall wellbeing is a broad experience that is determined by life experiences across four primary areas Mental Health, Physical Health, Social Connection and Financial Security.



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