

★ **Mental wellbeing: What we aspire to.**

Supporting people with mental health conditions into work requires open and transparent channels of communication, and the person with a mental health condition in the driving seat. Anne Hawker writes.



Creating healthy workplaces has often concentrated on the physical environment and its impact on physical health. Today it is recognised that the most successful workplaces are those that also acknowledge the importance of mental wellbeing, not as a health and safety issue but as part of effective people management. Positive mental health is all about creating communities and workplaces where all people can flourish psychologically.

The Mental Health Foundation has identified that “too often in the past we’ve seen mental wellbeing as a liability, whereas in fact mental wellbeing is one of New Zealand’s greatest resources. All New Zealanders stand to benefit from a new approach reducing mental illnesses and improving wellbeing across the whole population.” ¹

Forty seven per cent of New Zealanders are likely to experience mental distress in their lifetime so understanding wellbeing and creating a safe environment for people with mental health issues is an important skill in all people managers. Skilled people managers who have created a workplace environment that fosters mental wellbeing will have created a trusting environment where people with mental health conditions are happy to build a plan that includes strategies to manage any changes. We know that people with mental health conditions who are employed are more likely to seek support earlier if they are becoming unwell and consequently have shorter exacerbations. A good people manager recognises the skill and potential of all their employees including those with a mental health condition.

How do we change the conversation from being about an individual’s impairment to one of creating a work environment that enables everyone to flourish?

Language is important, for instance moving away from using the word “disclose” to acknowledging that information about a person’s impairment is personal information; they can decide what to share, who to share the information with, and who not to share personal information with. Skilled line managers understand and respect all their employees’ personal information.

Line managers’ own values can impact on how they respond to situations and information. Understanding how their values and unconscious biases may impact on their decision-making is important in creating an inclusive workplace environment and helps promotes mental wellbeing.

A skilled manager recognises that each of their employees needs to reach their potential and actively engages in conversations with each employee about how to help create an effective workplace to work in.

Utilising the skill and expertise of the person with a mental health condition is recognised as important in building disability confidence. Debra Lampshire, the Supreme Attitude winner for 2016, is one of the leaders in the mental health movement driving a new approach to mental health. As she says:

The system works best when clinicians and people like me come together. Remarkable outcomes are possible. We are a group of people that need to be cared about, not cared for. ... Never underestimate the power of love, never underestimate your ability to impact the lives of others. Always expect the best of everyone, have the highest expectations. No one truly knows what they are capable of until they are put in the position to excel.”²

These are powerful words especially for those involved in supporting people with mental health conditions into work. One of the challenges for anyone working across systems is ensuring that all people are involved and that the channels of communication are open and transparent, with a clear agreed set of outcomes, and the person with a mental health condition in the driving seat.

The Mental Health Foundation has identified five key factors in creating wellbeing³. They are:

- Connect me – talk and listen. Be there. Feel connected. – whakawhanaunga
- Give your time, your words, your presence – tukua
- Take notice – Appreciate the little things. Savour the moment – me aro tonu
- Keep learning – Embrace new experiences. Seek opportunities. Surprise yourself – me ako tonu
- Be active – do what you can. Enjoy what you do. Move your mood – me kori tonu

The Mental Health Foundation has some valuable resources that can help, especially their new resources around employment, found at www.mentalhealth.org.nz/home/our-work/open-minds.

In working with people with mental health conditions and their employers what can you do to assist in creating an environment that promotes wellbeing and enables everyone to flourish?

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Notes

1. The Mental Health Foundation. (n.d.). [Mental Health 2.0: A new, population-wide approach to improving mental health] [Infographic]. Retrieved from <https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/assets/Our-Work/MHF-MentalHealth-2-0-infographic.pdf>
2. Bailey, J. (2017, March 2). Judy Bailey meets Attitude Award winner Debra Lampshire. *The Australian Womens Weekly NZ*. 72-74. Retrieved from <https://www.pressreader.com/new-zealand/australian-womens-weekly-nz/20170302/281651074897880>
3. The Mental Health Foundation. (n.d.). *Ways to wellbeing*. Retrieved June 21, 2017 from <https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/home/ways-to-wellbeing-2/>