Creating mentally healthy workplaces – healthy minds

Queensland Government is focused on improving the health and wellbeing of all Queenslanders. The Keep Queenslanders Healthy Roadmap places a priority on healthy minds. Similar aspirations exist within the Queensland Mental Health Commission's *Shifting Minds Strategy*, with a focus on workplace action.

As Queensland's largest and most diverse workforce, the Queensland public sector (the sector) has a significant role in supporting the government's agenda and in fostering workplaces that support mental health and wellbeing.

The commitment to creating healthy and safe workplaces where people thrive and achieve their best is outlined more broadly in the *Be healthy, be safe, be well* framework.

Mentally healthy workplaces play a big part in promoting positive mental health practices, preventing psychological harm, intervening early in stress or distress and supporting recovery. Yet in Australia only 52% of employees believe their workplace is mentally healthy.[1]

Authorising environment

There are five strategies that speak to the importance of mentally healthy workplaces in the sector:

- Advancing Queensland Priority: Keep Queenslanders Healthy – focuses on healthy eating, active living and healthy minds
- *Be healthy, be safe, be well* framework – a holistic and preventive approach to improving health and wellbeing outcomes for the sector workforce
- *Shifting Minds* – a strategy that looks beyond the health sector to ensure Queenslanders achieve their best mental health and wellbeing through prevention and early intervention in the workplace
- *Every life: Queensland Suicide Prevention Plan* – a plan to reduce suicide rates in Queensland by reducing vulnerability through creating mentally healthy workplaces
- *Mental Health at Work Action Plan* – plan to tackle mental health in the workplace

Queensland public sector

There are high costs associated with poor mental health and the sector needs to get this right, for individuals affected, agencies and the state. Workers compensation claims for mental disorders costs the sector approximately $15M annually. Mental disorder costs nearly double other injury claims and tend to last longer. There are also a growing number of non-work related mental health conditions that affect the workforce. The line between work and home is blurred. Our breadth of care and concern needs to consider the whole person, both work and non-work.
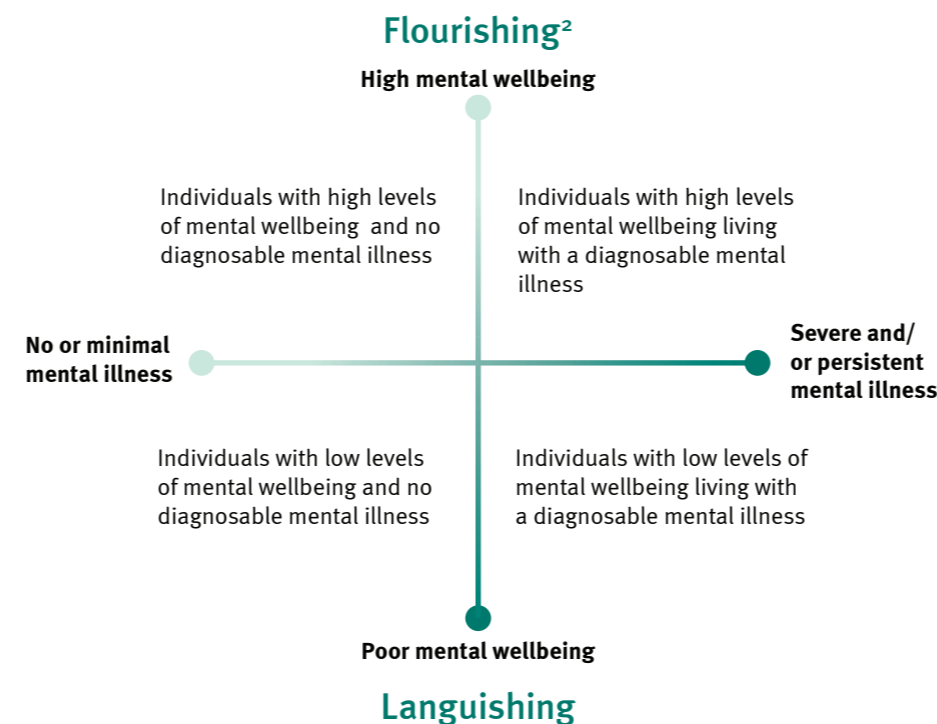
The opportunity

Mental health and wellbeing is vital to us all, it helps us cope with normal stress, realise our potential, relate well with others and participate at work and in the community.

There are many documented benefits of positive mental health and wellbeing. Mentally healthy workplaces can experience:

- reduced absences
- reduced employee turnover
- increased performance
- increased morale and employee engagement.

Mental health and wellbeing model

Mental health is fluid and while most people experience good mental health, approximately 1/5 are at risk, and in any 12-month period, 20% of Australians will experience a mental health condition. Additionally, individuals can be experiencing poor mental health with or without experiencing mental illness, just as it is possible to live with mental illness and experience positive levels of mental health.

Flourishing[2]
High mental wellbeing

Individuals with high levels of mental wellbeing and no diagnosable mental illness

Individuals with high levels of mental wellbeing living with a diagnosable mental illness

No or minimal mental illness

Severe and/ or persistent mental illness

Individuals with low levels of mental wellbeing and no diagnosable mental illness

Individuals with low levels of mental wellbeing living with a diagnosable mental illness

Poor mental wellbeing

Languishing

Initiatives already making a difference

- Flexible by Design – principle-based framework transforming traditional approaches to flexible work
- Inclusion and diversity strategy – with initiatives such as Disabling the barriers, reducing the stigma of mental illness in the workplace
- Domestic and family violence workplace reforms aimed at creating respectful relationships
- Employee Assistance Programs
- Manager Assist support from Employee Assistance providers
- Early intervention programs
- Gov2gov recovery at work pilot
- Employee support networks – peer support, mental health coaches and first aiders

Old barriers to overcome

- Leadership capability to respond to mental health concerns and intervene early
- External and internal work and time pressures
- Managing competing priorities
- Stigma and cultural norms that may hinder efforts to improve workplace mental health

Initiatives to invest in

- Developing and building on leadership competency and capabilities
- Preventing and minimising harm by addressing top psychological health risks
- Promoting better understanding of workplace mental health
- Reducing stigma in the workplace and supporting those living with a mental illness
- Creating conversations about mental health and wellbeing and looking out for those who may be showing signs of stress or distress
- Intervening early in workplace relationship issues and promoting respectful, inclusive cultures

Queensland Government

A holistic approach

The sector can play a leading role in creating and sustaining mentally healthy workplaces by addressing evidenced-based risks and protective factors, including:

- Individual
- Social
- Organisational
- Work design
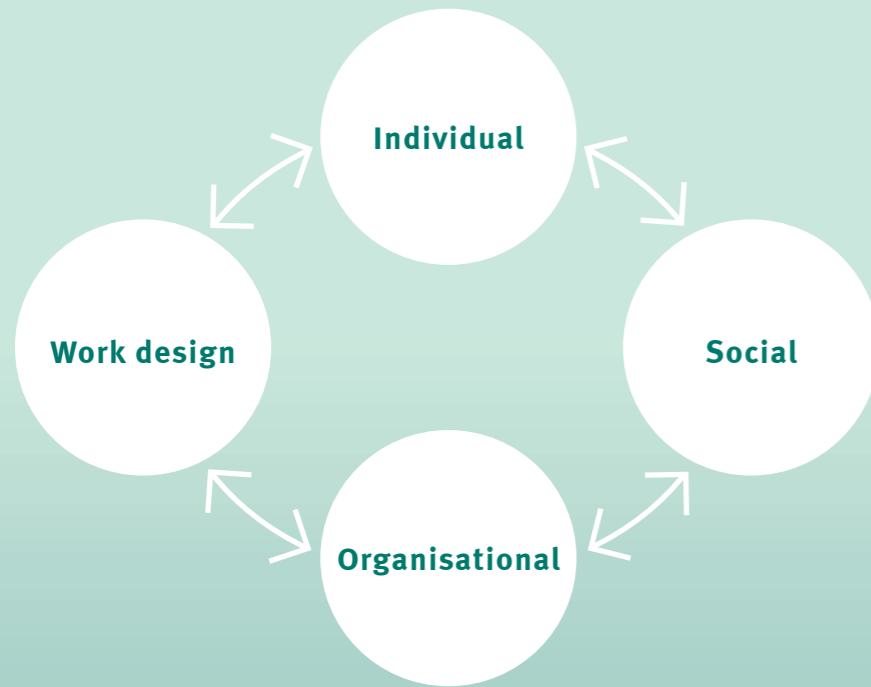
Risks to mentally healthy workplaces in the sector

- **Workplace pressure and stress** – workload health was one of the lowest performing factors in the 2017 Working for Queensland (WfQ) survey:
  - nearly 1/3 of respondents believe they were overloaded with work
  - 27% feel burned out by work
  - 25% say work has a negative effect on their health.

  WorkCover 2016-17 indicates 36.9% of serious mental health disorders were for 'work pressure'.

- **Leadership knowledge and skill** – the ability to promote positive mental health practices, prevent harm, intervene early and support recovery are critical to success. Managers in particular are a key determinant in the health of an employee, and occupational outcomes for those who become unwell. Investing in development can have one of the highest ROIs of psychosocial safety interventions of $10: $1. [3]

- **Occupational violence and exposure to traumatic events** – 59% of workers compensation claims in the past year were due to exposure to traumatic events or work-related violence. Many of our workforce are engaged in higher risk occupations due to the inherent nature of the role. This includes first responders such as fire fighters and police, health and welfare support workers, prison and security officers and social and welfare professionals. [4]

- **Organisational factors** – such as role clarity, management of change, and level of control and support can have a significant impact on mental health. 52% of WfQ respondents have experienced significant workplace change and transition in the past 12 months.

- **Respectful workplace relationships** – 17% of WfQ respondents were subjected to bullying and 28% had witnessed bullying or harassment.

Looking ahead

Implementing strategies that address all aspects of mental health and wellbeing will ensure workplaces:

- prevent psychological harm
- promote positive mental health practices
- intervene early to signs of stress or distress
- support those living with a mental health condition, or those recovering from psychological injury/illness.

Prevent

- Identify psychological hazards and risks in the workplace
- Design policies, work and work practices to minimise harm
- Increase awareness of the mental health and wellbeing model
- Reduce stigma of mental illness
- Build resilience and protective factors
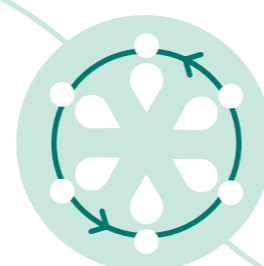
Promote

- Demonstrate visible management commitment through role modeling and regular communication
- Promote healthy and inclusive work cultures
- Build leadership capabilities
- Encourage early help seeking behaviours
- Promote positive self-care practices

Intervene

- Recognise signs and symptoms of stress or distress
- Reach out to those who may need additional support
- Offer voluntary workplace health and wellbeing checks
- Pro-actively manage workplace conflict and interpersonal relationships
- Engage in coaching or Manager Assist services to support intervention efforts

Support

- Keep in touch with those away from work due to psychological injury/illness
- Provide reasonable adjustments to those living with a mental health condition or returning to work following an illness or injury
- Reassess the work environment following an injury to prevent recurrence or exacerbation of the psychological injury/illness

3 Risks associated with factors identified in WorkHealth Safety Queensland's Mentally Healthy Workplace Toolkit

4 Workplace Health and Safety Queensland