



Speech

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Employment and Mental Health: Speech to the 2013 Inspire Foundation Breakfast

Thank you Julia for that kind introduction and for inviting me here to speak today.

Before I start, a few acknowledgements.

Firstly, I'd like to recognise the Traditional Owners of the land we meet on today, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. I would also like to pay my respects to Elders past and present.

I'd also like to thank the Inspire Foundation and Jonathan Nichols, who has recently been appointed to the Mental Health Council of Australia Board, I'd like to congratulate him and welcome him.

Jonathon, I look forward to working with you.

I'd also like to thank Ernst & Young for hosting this event.

Introduction

To the subject at hand – employment and mental health.

There's no doubt in my mind that there's a direct connection between employment and mental health.

In fact, I'd go as far as to say that for many, good mental wellbeing relies in part on a person's ability to participate in interesting, meaningful and fulfilling employment.

The facts

Let's look at some facts.

The September employment data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics has 11.6 million Australians in work.

We know, thanks to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, that one in five Australians will experience a mental illness this year.

That means as many as 2.3 million Australians are working with a mental illness right now.

Breaking that down even further, we know from the September data that around 3.5 million Australians work part time.

And around 700,000 people are unemployed.

But did you know that people with a mental illness make up more than 50 per cent of those people unemployed?

According to the ABS, significantly more people with a mental illness work part time.

In fact, Australia has one of the lowest rates of employment participation by people with lived experience of mental illness in the OECD.

The ABS shows us that total unemployment rates for people with a mental illness are almost a third higher than the general population.

This provides us a snapshot – one that shows us that mental illness is a significant issue for Australian employees.

But what about employers?

In a recent article in *The Australian* newspaper, the current Commissioner of the National Mental Health Commission, Allan Fels, stated that Australian workers with job-related stress and mental illness are absent from work nearly 11 weeks a year

That's a significant amount of time and lost productivity. It demonstrates that increased participation is an economic issue and not just a moral and social issue.

Professor Fels said that more workers are absent from work because of stress and anxiety than because of physical illness or injury

The simple fact is that mental illness costs our economy \$20 billion a year in lost productivity, absenteeism and presenteeism, according to the ABS.

Indeed, Australian research suggests that mental illness in young men aged between 12 and 25 alone costs the economy over \$3 billion dollars per annum.

And so we can see that this is an issue for both employees and employers.

And, because labour productivity and labour participation are central to economic growth, we must all act. And act urgently.

Myths

So what can we do about it? First let's debunk a few myths.

People experiencing mental illness want to work, they want to contribute and they want to lead meaningful lives where they participate and add value to their workplaces and communities.

And in the broader context, we need to remember that people experiencing mental illness can recover and much can be done to prevent the onset or worsening of mental health issues.

We also need to remember that the vast majority of people experiencing mental illness are working.

And we need to remember business cares about mental health – they care about their employees.

Even recently we have seen huge players in the business world, corporations like General Electric and Google, actively recognising mental illness and encouraging their workers to take a mental health day, among other specific programs.

Certainly a very positive step forward is the battle against stigma.

Because myths and stigma represent major barriers for people who are looking for ways to lead a contributing life.

I believe breaking down stigma is everyone's business.

If we are to deal with participation, we must deal with perception, with understanding and with debunking attitudinal stereotypes.

Practical steps

So let's consider some practical steps.

We know that people with lived experience of mental illness want the same work opportunities as other Australians.

That is: to earn an income, have a role in life, and enjoy a routine that connects them with their community and to other people.

It is true that work can be, and is, a vital factor in recovery and rehabilitation for people with a lived experience of mental illness.

For this reason, a key responsibility of all employers is to work hard to create mentally safe, healthy and supportive workplaces.

Through this work, I believe that people will thrive, participate and enjoy meaning in their lives.

A key part of employment participation, of course, is flexible job design.

But let's be realistic here.

The reality when employing a person who may have a more disabling mental illness is that there will be challenges at times.

But much like the flexibility we would not begrudge a person with a physical disability, we should consider the same flexibility for someone who might not have such an obvious, or easily understood, set of circumstances.

Of course we recognise that, for some sectors and some types of mental illness, providing full flexibility is problematic.

But surely it is not beyond us as a nation to look for ways to create jobs and workplaces that can be more responsive to the reality of living with, or just as importantly, caring for someone living with a mental illness.

This will require more collaborative workplaces and more direct engagement between employers and employees.

This would also require an ability by an employee to talk about the issues they are facing, without stigma or discrimination.

Because at the heart of successful and active participation in employment is freedom to discuss the challenges we may be facing.

It is extremely difficult for both employers and employees to create a supportive environment if there is no mutual understanding or worse, an environment where people don't feel safe to talk about their mental health.

Given the numbers of people experiencing mental illness who are unemployed, there is also a compelling case for Job Services Australia to provide more tailored services for unemployed people with a mental illness and for the entire skills and job network to provide appropriate, more specialised, longer-term, pre and post-employment support.

For all these reasons, the National Mental Health Commission, the Business Council of Australia, and the Mental Health Council of Australia, and many others have come together to create the National Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance.

Our alliance will promote awareness and ideas for best practice to increase workforce participation among people with a mental illness.

When I talk to large companies about this issue, they say "well how do I get more information?" and "What does best practice look like?"

The keyword here, of course, is support.

This support can be provided in the workplace through:

- on-the-job rehabilitation and training
- qualified support practices
- flexible and adjustable workplaces
- ensuring education of peers and managers

And I want to reinforce the point here that this includes carers who equally need flexible and sympathetic work arrangements.

I know that many organisations that are part of the BCA have begun looking at this very issue.

Not just because this impacts on productivity but because successful, long-run businesses know one of their most important assets is their people.

Large organisations with a greater capacity to learn and grow are exploring mental health programs, and looking for ways to share that with the business community as a whole.

This is an important step.

Because it is often the smaller organisations who experience a more direct impact on their business from mental illness.

It is my hope and belief that small organisations can learn from businesses with a broader capacity to change, and through this knowledge, provide a more open and flexible environment for their staff.

Even when they only have a half dozen people on board.

In the same respect, I have confidence in the big end of town, to share this knowledge and growth with their small business colleagues.

The business world understands that with each part working well, integrated and effective, we can all thrive together.

I hope that together, with care and meaningful engagement, we can make Australia a great place to work for everyone, including people who live with mental illness and those who care for them.

Let's remember, a job is not just how we pay the bills. It's how we are defined, how we define ourselves.

Thanks

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Our vision is for Australia to be the best place in the world in which to live, learn, work and do business.