Workplaces urged to get healthy, mentally

During Mental Health Week (October 8 to 14) researchers at the University of Tasmania are urging workplaces to make employee mental health a priority.

While physical safety is at the forefront of Work Health & Safety laws and many workplaces are starting to implement fitness programs for staff, mental health safety requires just as much attention, said the co-leaders of the University’s Work, Health & Wellbeing Network, Associate Professor Angela Martin and Dr Sarah Dawkins.

“We should be looking out for psychological hazards in the workplace the same way we look for physical ones,” Associate Professor Martin said.

Recent estimates suggest mental ill-health costs Australian businesses around $11 billion a year, comprising costs including absenteeism and compensation.

“Return on investment analyses suggest that on average, for every $1 an organisation invests into workplace mental health they can receive a $2.30 return, achieved through improved productivity and reduced claims,” Dr Dawkins said.

A new survey by the Menzies Institute for Medical Research and the Tasmanian School of Business and Economics aims to help organisations ensure they are mentally healthy places to work. The aim is to survey a broad cross section of organisations and businesses to enable the development of strategies for all types of workplaces.

Dr Dawkins said the past five to ten years had seen improvement in mental health literacy among the general community, largely thanks to awareness campaigns such as RUOK Day.

“But what we tend to see is a bit of a ‘scattergun’ approach, with employers offering one-off initiatives, such as resilience training or mindfulness training. While these can be effective, their impact is limited when they are not embedded as part of an integrated approach to mental health,” she said.

Associate Professor Angela Martin recently led the development of a white paper An integrated approach to workplace mental health: Nine priorities for implementation in Australia with the University’s Work, Health and Wellbeing Network in collaboration
with national and international researchers, practitioners and policy makers.

“If we are to create sustained and systematic outcomes in relation to workplace mental health we need for organisations and employers to be implementing actions in each of these areas,” she said.

A new collaborative project that Associate Professor Martin has started through the Institute for Social Change is looking at ‘gendered workloads' and the implications of the 'double shift' many women face and the implications of this for well-being and productivity.

She has also established Pracademia, a consultancy service that helps organisations put research such as the white paper into practice.

“Organisations around the world are grappling with these issues and looking for evidence-based solutions,” Associate Professor Martin said.

“We have had a lot of interest in the strategies we have recommended from industry and there is movement towards the development of a national framework for mentally healthy workplaces.”

Helpful links:

The Mental Health at Work survey can be accessed at https://redcap.utas.edu.au/surveys/?s=EJCACHFETL


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