

DEALING WITH WORK STRESS

You have the right to be treated with respect and to be protected from stress and trauma at work.

Your job is one of the most important parts of your life. If you are not respected and protected at work it can make you unwell. You might notice feeling tired, withdrawn, easily upset, less interested in things you normally enjoy, nauseous, irritable, panicky, short of breath, or teary. You might find new difficulties in your personal relationships, or experience difficulty sleeping, a racing heart, a lower appetite, headaches, or stomach pain. Sometimes these feelings add up to what is called a **psychological illness** - like depression, anxiety, adjustment disorder, or post-traumatic stress disorder.

These are all very normal and common reactions to feeling disrespected or threatened at work. If you feel this way, you are not alone.

Where can I get help?

Speak to a supportive doctor

Find a supportive General Practitioner (GP) if you do not already have one already and make them your regular GP. You should feel comfortable with and believed by your doctor. If you don't, try seeing someone else.

You can talk to a GP in a language other than English. All GPs have access to phone based interpreters and some GPs consult in languages other than English. If you'd prefer to see a GP who speaks a language other than English, ask family and friends if they know of a doctor who consults in your preferred language or search online to find someone.

Make an appointment with your GP and tell them about your issue, keeping in mind that doctors are very used to talking with patients about stress, trauma, and problems at work. Talking with your GP can help you get better, and might also help with a workers' compensation claim in future.

When you see a GP, ask about getting a mental health plan. As well as providing a pathway to better mental health, a plan can offer you access to cheaper psychology appointments.

Seek counselling

Speak with a psychologist or counsellor. Your GP can help you find someone suitable or you can search online to find someone.

Find out if you have access to free counselling or medical treatment through an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) at work and use it if you do. Information about and EAP might be posted on a notice board at work, in documents you were given when you started work. You can also ask a colleague, your manager, or Human Resources.

If your issue involves sexual harassment, abuse, or domestic or family violence, you can call 1800RESPECT (1800 737 732) any time to speak with an experienced trauma counsellor.

Connect with your union

Join your union if you are not a member already. There is a union for every worker in Australia. Like insurers, unions may not be able to help with a pre-existing issue when you join, so it's important to be in the union before you need help.

A union is an organisation made up of workers in your line of work. Unions are funded by workers, who pay membership fees, and they help workers to fight for and protect their work rights. You can find out what union covers you by calling Australian Unions on 1300 486 466.

Use other supports

Reach out to friends, family, and colleagues. Tell trusted people about your issue and ask for their support. Be specific about what you need – like help caring for children while you attend counselling, or someone to take a walk with once a week.

You can also access a caring voice over the phone between 5pm and 11:30pm any day by calling the Lived Experience Telephone Support Service (LETSS) on 1800 013 755.

Take breaks

Take sick leave if you can and use the time to recuperate.

Make plans to take annual leave and allow yourself a total break from work.

Take your work breaks and leave the workplace during lunch if you can.

Try to minimise your access to work emails and phone calls after hours. Keep work screens out of the room you sleep in.

Consider whether or not any flexible work arrangements could help and might be agreeable to your employer. Changes might include a temporary reduction in hours, agreement to work some hours from home, or different start and finish times. Ask your union for help in seeking changes like these.

Look for new work

Apply for new jobs and ask to catch up with any friends or contacts who may be able to connect you with new work opportunities.

Take time for self-care

Check out the resources about mental health and work available at headsup.org.au. Use the exercise that deals with helpful and unhelpful thoughts whenever you feel confronted by something that happens at work.

Try some relaxation exercises. Breathing exercises, muscle relaxation, guided visualisation, and mindfulness meditation can help. There are many free phone apps that can help you to try relaxation exercises for the first time, as well as resources at beyondblue.org.au.

Take time every day to do one or more pleasurable things like going for a walk, taking a bath, reading in the sun, watching your favourite TV show, sitting under a tree, or calling a friend to talk.

Consider making a workers' compensation claim

If you have an illness that is **caused or contributed to** by your work, you can claim lost wages, treatment costs, and in some cases, lump sum compensation. This is called a workers' compensation claim. In South Australia, workers' compensation claims are generally dealt with by Return to Work SA.

You can make a claim whether you are a part-time, full-time, casual, or labour hire worker. Sometimes you can even make a claim if you are a contractor or self-employed.

We encourage you to strongly consider making a claim about a work injury if it has already caused you to take sick leave, or if you feel your only option is to leave your workplace.

You should also consider whether or not you have access to income protection through, for example, your employer or superannuation fund, or if you have access to Centrelink payments.

What are the risks of making a claim?

Your employer will know about and see your claim. If you have time off work or are noticeably unwell, your colleagues will know something is wrong but they will only know you have made a claim if you or your employer tells them. You can ask your employer to honour your privacy by not telling colleagues about your claim.

Future employers will only know about your claim if you or your current employer tell them about it; there is no publicly available register of past claims. In Australia it is unlawful to refuse to give a person a job because they have made a workers' compensation claim in the past.

Your claim might be rejected. If this happens, you can challenge the decision. Your **union** or one of the services listed in this factsheet can help you with this. You can also talk with a lawyer.

When you make a claim, Return to Work SA will most likely ask for more information about your illness and its cause. Providing this information can be difficult and for some people, it will also bring up past difficulties or trauma.

In an emergency

Call 000 in an emergency.

If you want to speak with someone about a personal crisis or thoughts of suicide, call Lifeline on 13 11 14 any time of day. If you need an interpreter, call TIS National on 131 450 (local charge applies) and ask to talk with Lifeline on 13 11 14.

The Mental Health Triage Service 13 14 65 can also help with mental health emergencies, any time.