

Mental health is becoming a significant issue for New Zealanders.

Not only is there the immense personal cost to people with experience of mental illness and their families, there is also a cost to employers and the Government, Workwise chief executive Warren Elwin says.

"The costs to both the welfare and health system are very high. We spend around a billion dollars a year in mental health services only.

"Add to this the cost of unemployment, sickness benefits, imprisonment, physical ill health and damaged family structures and you have a potentially very large cost indeed, both in terms of the economy and in terms of society as a whole," Elwin says.

The cost to New Zealand businesses due to mental health conditions in the workplace has not been calculated. However, based on overseas research and the New Zealand experience, he considers the cost is likely to be significant.

Research in Britain, published in 2007, estimates the cost to employers of mental health problems among staff in Britain at 1035 (NZ\$2000) for every employee a year. The business costs are made up of sickness absence, reduced productivity at work and replacing staff who leave their jobs because of mental ill health.

The study, by the Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health, found that simple steps to improve the management of mental health in the workplace, including prevention and early identification of problems, should enable employers to save 30 per cent or more of these costs.

Managing mental health well in the workplace not only saves money and makes good business sense, it also improves quality of life for everyone, Elwin says.

## **SPECIALISTS ON EMPLOYEES WITH A MENTAL HEALTH CONDITION**

As an employer, would you know what to do if one of your staff experiences depression, anxiety or other mental health condition at work?

A specialist employment agency offers guidance on how to support your employee while keeping your business running smoothly.

Workwise is a Hamilton-based agency with offices throughout the country.

It helps people with mental health conditions find and keep paid work.

The agency works with employers interested in hiring people with mental health conditions and has 300 such employers on its books in the Waikato alone.

Workwise chief executive Warren Elwin said the agency put together information after being asked by bosses how to respond if a staff member had a mental health condition.

"Stress, anxiety, depression, relationship or money issues or other psycho-social issues come to work with people," Elwin said.

"Some managers will deal with it well and some won't. Many don't know what to do. We wanted to help people respond by putting all the best information together in one place.

"If you have a mental health condition, you have an illness – you do not have a character fault, weakness or something inherently 'wrong' with you," Elwin said. "With the right support, people with mental health issues can, and do, perform well in the workplace."

In most cases, it was better for people with a mental health condition to be supported to stay at work, or to have a short time off work and look at a staged return to work, Elwin said.

Latest international research shows having a paid job is a key part of getting well and staying well. "Studies have shown that having a job not only improves symptoms of a mental illness, but it reduces the contact time people need from mental health teams.

"It also reduces the number of hospital admissions as well as the length of those admissions," Elwin said. "The problem with being signed off work for a long period is weeks can turn into months and months can turn into years."

A key to supporting employees with a mental health condition is for the employer to put a plan together with the employee.

"Putting a plan in place is not only the right thing to do as an employer to meet the business needs, it's also the most caring thing to do to support your staff member. When a person feels their world is falling apart and everything is chaos, having a plan and a structure around their job is one less thing they have to worry about," Elwin said.

The information, on the Workwise website at [www.workwise.org.nz](http://www.workwise.org.nz), sets out the steps employers should take to first recognise there is a mental health problem, how to relate to the person and how to respond. It includes advice on signs of mental illness, how to talk about it, what types of support can be considered in the workplace and when to seek external help.

"Most employers want to do the right thing to support their employees but they also want to maintain productivity and ensure they can continue to run their business," Elwin said.

"Balance is important in your approach. We're not talking about employers being a social services agency, but the needs of many businesses are intrinsically tied up in the wellbeing of their staff.

"We all know happy, healthy businesses are productive ones – for everyone. Employers also know it is really expensive to bring someone new on board or to lose a valued staff member," Elwin said.

## **KIWIS AFFLICTED**

Just under 50 per cent of New Zealanders will experience mental illness or addiction at some time in their lives, with one in five people affected within one year. (source: Health Ministry.)

About 40 per cent of people off work nationwide are absent because of a mental health condition, including people on sickness benefits and income replacement insurance. (Workwise).

Mental illness accounts for 15 per cent of the total disease burden in the developed world, with depression set to become the second leading cause of disability worldwide by 2020. (World Health Organisation).

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