



Mental Health & Wellbeing



Creating an inclusive workplace that is supportive of employee mental health and wellbeing.



FIND OUT HOW HEARING LOSS AFFECTS MENTAL HEALTH



HOW TO TALK ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING



ASSESS YOUR CURRENT PROCESSES AND POLICIES



NATIONAL FOUNDATION FOR
Deaf & Hard of Hearing

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide sets out strategies and practical frameworks to help your organisation move towards becoming a more inclusive workplace that embraces hearing loss, mental health and wellbeing.

- Use this guide to help you to become more aware of the challenges employees with hearing loss may be dealing with.
- Be aware of risks and signs of poor mental health and understand the signs.
- Learn strategies and approaches to change workplace culture to be more inclusive and supportive.
- Better understand the gaps in your organisation's current approach to mental health and wellbeing and look at ways to further improve the culture and environment to be more inclusive and supportive.



For five months I searched for a company that understood people with hearing loss. I am now working with the support of my company, which treats people equally. I finally feel like I'm part of the team."



WHY IS MENTAL HEALTH IMPORTANT?

FIVE COMPELLING REASONS

1. One in five New Zealanders will experience a mental illness this year.
2. Right now, you or someone in your workplace is likely to be affected.
3. Employees who have a hearing loss can be even more vulnerable to workplace stress and mental health problems if their workplace is not adequately supportive or inclusive.
4. Workplaces that prioritise mental health have better engagement, reduced absenteeism and higher productivity, while people have improved wellbeing and greater morale.
5. Workplaces are legally required to take all practical steps to ensure the health and safety of their employees. Under the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015, workplaces have a role to play in the prevention of harm to all people at work. This includes mental harm caused by work-related stress.

STARTING THE CONVERSATION

Despite the benefits, many employers are reluctant to talk about mental health. It can feel too personal, and they may be nervous about saying the wrong thing, or not having the right answers. For employees living with poor mental health it can be equally difficult, as they may be worried their employer won't think they're capable of doing their job or have concerns that their health problems won't stay confidential.

EMPLOYERS ARE INCREASINGLY SUPPORTIVE OF MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

The good news is New Zealand research shows that employers value employees with experience of mental health and are wanting to support them in the workplace. Employers are also becoming more open to taking steps to support their employees to build resilience and have positive mental health so they can cope with setbacks and take advantage of opportunities.

HEARING LOSS AND MENTAL WELLBEING IN THE WORKPLACE

There are more than 300,000 New Zealanders working with some type of hearing loss and this number is set to double by 2050. For this reason, it's important to understand the experiences and challenges of people living with hearing loss and how this can impact their mental health and wellbeing.

Mental health, much like physical health, fluctuates throughout everyone's lives. The odds are that one in two New Zealanders will experience a mental illness at some time in their lives.

For some people living with hearing loss, poor mental health can result from the challenges of living with a hearing loss in a hearing world and not from the hearing loss itself.

People living with hearing loss can encounter many challenges beyond those experienced by people who have their hearing. It can be hard living with an invisible and often misunderstood disability and perfectly normal to experience feelings of isolation and frustration. If these feelings are left unaddressed, they can also lead to anxiety and depression.

WHAT THE NUMBERS REVEAL

It's an issue that is still largely under-addressed in New Zealand. Our recent survey showed that:

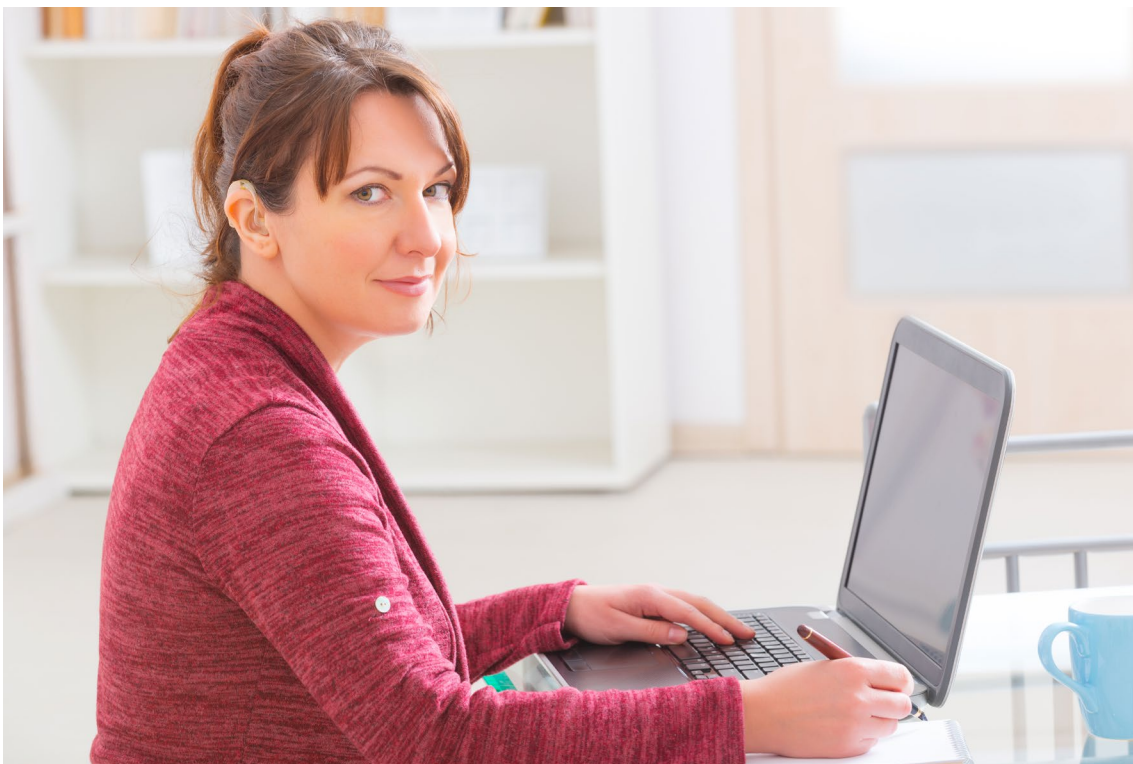
- 78% of respondents who had a hearing loss were not being adequately supported by their employer.

The New Zealand Trak Report 2018 revealed that:

- 90% of employees with a hearing loss feel physically and mentally exhausted at the end of the day.
- 90% of people with a hearing loss reported experiencing feeling depression, isolation or hopelessness.

Having a hearing loss doesn't have to be a barrier to excelling in the workplace, but as an employer it is important to be aware of the challenges your employees who have a hearing loss may be experiencing.

“Hearing loss can be exhausting and when I’m tired, I don’t interact or pursue new things. Sometimes I’m laughed at because I haven’t heard something correctly, or I’ve misunderstood something. The worst is seeing the annoyance of the person I’m talking to having to repeat themselves. I feel quite isolated at times.”



“I started losing hearing after a major car crash 40 years ago- I thought it would get better but it didn’t. I kept on asking people to repeat things, couldn’t enjoy going out, voices sounded like a scrambled mess, a friend recommended a hearing test and was astounded at just how deaf I was. It certainly explained why I was experiencing so much anxiety about going out.”

BE A LEADER

As an employer, you can have a significant impact on your employee's wellbeing by talking openly about mental health. Emphasise how important it is to ask for help when you notice changes – sooner rather than later. Provide training to ensure managers can develop the knowledge and skills to recognise and support workers struggling with hearing loss and any related mental health problems.

SIGNS OF POSITIVE WELLBEING & MENTAL HEALTH

Feeling good

- feeling relaxed and calm
- feeling hopeful and optimistic
- feeling satisfied and content
- feeling in control of one's life

Feeling connected

- Engaging with others
- Being open and available

Functioning well

- feeling life has meaning and purpose
- being engaged and able to concentrate
- communicating clearly
- being able to work to one's fullest ability

SIGNS OF POOR WELLBEING & MENTAL HEALTH

Changes in emotional reactions

An increase in:

- fear and anxiety
- sadness and despair
- emptiness or hopelessness
- disconnectedness

Less:

- involvement or enjoyment

Change in behaviour

- withdrawing from others
- being unavailable
- being overprotective
- startling easily
- denying and avoiding
- taking greater risks

Change in thinking

Difficulties in:

- concentrating
- following complex instructions
- remembering
- communicating

CREATING A SUPPORTIVE WORK ENVIRONMENT

Normalise the conversation by encouraging open discussion about mental health and wellbeing to reduce the stigma often associated with mental health, and to reinforce that mental health and wellbeing is not a taboo topic. Make talking about wellbeing an everyday thing. Share your own mental health stories.

Ask for, and listen to, the whole team's ideas on how to improve mental wellbeing. This may be a group discussion or a survey. If it is a group discussion, be sure to circulate all notes and invite additional feedback from employees with hearing loss in written form or one-to-one, if a group discussion is difficult for them hear.

Emphasis on habits and behaviour in the workplace that reinforce positive wellbeing and mental health can make a huge difference.

ENCOURAGE PRIORITISING:

- quality sleep
- regular physical activity
- good nutrition
- spending time with family and friends
- socialising with colleagues

Having a mentor or a colleague who understands the daily challenges of working with a hearing loss may be an important source of support. Encourage your employees to book in time to talk to a trusted friend or mentor from whom they can get objective feedback from.

Monitor language and make sure language used doesn't stigmatise. Words like "deaf" or 'dumb' even when used casually or jokingly, can be extremely hurtful.

Have hearing awareness and mental health champions in your organisation, including on your Board.

POSITIVE COMMUNICATION IN THE WORKPLACE

This section will explore how to build positive communication behaviours in the workplace, so that employees feel more safe, respected and supported. Positive communication, communication that is based on respect and builds trust and collaboration, is the cornerstone of creating a psychologically safe workplace.

Workplaces are more complex than ever in the face of new challenges, technology and increased diversity. We need other's knowledge, skills and input to achieve our goals. Thus being able to clearly, effectively and respectfully communicate is highly important.

When people feel stressed, anxious, uncertain or fearful about how their hearing loss will be received, saying nothing can feel like the safest option, but this can lead to miscommunication and problems.

CREATE A PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE WORKPLACE

A psychologically safe workplace supports all people to feel good and function well and enables positive interactions and relationships.

THE PRINCIPLES OF POSITIVE COMMUNICATION ARE:

- Based on respect
- Values honesty and builds trust
- Make it safe to show vulnerability
- Encourage openness and information sharing.

WHAT DOES POSITIVE COMMUNICATION LOOK LIKE?

- Positive communication is respectful and builds trust, creating positive relationships that support collaboration.
- Expectations, goals and processes are clearly explained and people's understanding is checked.
- Feedback is encouraged and people feel safe expressing their ideas, concerns and feelings.
- Conflict may still occur but it happens safely, recognising that disagreement or things going wrong are an opportunity to learn and improve.



HEARING LOSS AND COMMUNICATION

Being tolerated but not necessarily included, can lead to feelings of isolation and exhaustion. There is a lot that can be done to create a more inclusive work environment.

People who have a hearing loss may feel anxious, down, isolated and lonely if:

- they think they're not understood by work colleagues who don't know how to communicate with them – this could lead to people feeling confused and detached from what is going on around them.
- they don't know how to express themselves and their feelings – this may be because they can't express themselves in words or the person with whom they wish to communicate is having difficulty communicating e.g. shouting, yelling, negative facial expressions.
- other people do not understand their communication style or needs e.g. failure of a workplace to provide a staff member with an NZSL interpreter or to acknowledge that a person with hearing loss may need information repeated, presented more visually, or via a note taker.
- they are trying to communicate in loud and congested areas – this applies particularly to people who experience gradual and subtle hearing loss.

If an employee with hearing loss faces the above regularly in their workplace, this can take a significant toll on their wellbeing and mental health. It is an issue that needs to be carefully managed, as last year 90% of people with a hearing loss working stated that they experience feelings of depression, isolation or hopelessness (NZ Trak Report).

SIGNS OF ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION

SIGNS OF ANXIETY

It can be helpful to be aware of the warning signs of anxiety and depression to enable you to be more aware of any employees who may be experiencing these conditions. The symptoms will not provide a diagnosis, (for that an individual would need to see a health professional), but they can be used as a guide.

Anxiety is common and the sooner a person seeks support, the sooner they can recover.

The symptoms of anxiety can often develop gradually over time. Given that we all experience some anxious feelings, it can be hard to know how much is too much. In order to be diagnosed with an anxiety condition, it must have a disabling impact on the person's life. There are many types of anxiety, and there are a range of symptoms for each. Anxiety can be expressed in different ways such as uncontrollable worry, intense fear (phobias or panic attacks), upsetting dreams or flashbacks of a traumatic event. Some common symptoms of anxiety include:

Internal experiences

- hot and cold flushes
- racing heart
- tightening of the chest
- snowballing worries
- obsessive thinking and compulsive behaviour

External experiences

- Body language is tense and jittery
- a sense of being “on edge”
- voicing fears that seem misplaced or catastrophic
- poor sleep
- avoid any social situations that prompt too much worry
- need things done a certain way to feel in control
- irritability

SIGNS OF DEPRESSION

A person may be depressed if he or she has felt sad, down or miserable most of the time for more than two weeks and/or has lost interest or pleasure in usual activities and has also experienced some of the signs and symptoms on the list below. It's important to note that everyone experiences some of these symptoms from time to time and it may not necessarily mean a person is depressed. Equally, not every person who is experiencing depression will have all of these symptoms.



Some common signs of depression include:

- not going out anymore, loss of interest in enjoyable activities
- withdrawing from close family and friends
- being unable to concentrate and not getting things done at work or school
- feeling overwhelmed, indecisive and lacking in confidence
- increased alcohol and drug use
- loss or change of appetite and significant weight loss or gain
- trouble getting to sleep, staying asleep and being tired during the day
- feeling worthless, helpless and guilty
- increased irritability, frustration and moodiness
- feeling unhappy, sad or miserable most of the time
- thoughts such as, “I’m a failure”, “Life’s not worth living”, “People would be better off without me”.

HOW YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

WHAT CAN YOU DO AS AN EMPLOYER OR MANAGER?

If you notice your employee exhibiting two or more signs of anxiety or depression it might be a good idea to speak with them confidentially and describe what you've noticed and ask them if they think they may be experiencing any difficulties.

IT IS AS EASY AS ASKING:

- You don't seem yourself lately, are you okay?
- Work's been pretty full on this month, how are you managing?
- I noticed you've been quiet and a bit withdrawn this week, how are you feeling?

If an employee informs you they are struggling with their wellbeing or mental health, try to listen non-judgmentally and understand the issue from their perspective. Acknowledge the person's feelings and let them know you're asking because you're concerned about them. Their knowledge will help you to understand and support them better. Do not assume what they need - ask.

QUESTIONS YOU MAY WISH TO ASK TO EXPLORE WHAT'S GOING ON:

- Have you spoken to anyone else about this?
- What would help you manage the load?
- What else is happening for you at the moment?
- How do you think you might resolve the situation?
- What can we change to make life easier?



WORK TOGETHER FOR SHARED SUCCESS

Once an employee shares information about their mental health with you, it's OK to ask how they feel this affects them at work and what changes you might be able to make to help support them.

Work together to find solutions that work for both you and your employee.

Focus on strengths and abilities brought to the workplace and what resources you can both bring to support wellbeing and achieve shared goals.

FIND OUT ABOUT OTHER SUPPORT YOUR EMPLOYEE CAN REACH OUT TO

- Does your workplace have counseling services?
- Are there trusted team members who they feel could support them?
- What support do they have outside of the workplace?
- Are friends and family aware of what they're going through?
- What practical supports can be put in place to reduce stress levels?

Keep the channels of communication open and arrange to have regular check ins with your employee to ensure they are receiving the support and accommodations they need.



WHAT FURTHER SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE?

There are several free services employees can reach out to if they need to talk to a trained counselor, below are the four services that are recommended by the Mental Health Foundation.

1. Need to talk? Free call or text 1737 any time for support from a trained counselor.
2. Lifeline – Call 0800 543 354 (0800 LIFELINE) or free text 4357 (HELP).
3. Youthline – Call 0800 376 633, free text 234, email talk@youthline.co.nz or online chat.
4. Samaritans – Call 0800 726 666.

For employees who are Deaf, they can also reach out to:

The Coalition of Deaf Mental Health Professionals (CDMHP) can also provide advice and/or link you to Deaf practitioners/advocates in your area. Phone: 022 647 1477 or contact them via their website: <https://cdmhp.pole.net.nz>

Deaf Aotearoa New Zealand provides a number of nationwide services for the Deaf community including service coordination for Deaf people with a range of needs, phone 0800 332 322 or contact them via their website: <http://deaf.org.nz>

SOURCES:

* Mental Health Foundation New Zealand * Beyond Blue Australia * Action on Hearing Loss UK



**Helping you and your team to become more
inclusive of hearing loss in the workplace.**



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