

Beyond the pandemic: time to break the mental health stigma



Caroline Haines, Mental Health First Aid Australia

It's time for workplaces to break the stigma of mental health and stop sweeping it under the carpet. And this is where businesses and business advisers can help – particularly in light of the mental health impacts caused by the pandemic. These were some of the key messages discussed at Jirsch Sutherland's recent webinar '*COVID-19, Mental Health and you*'.

The guest speaker was Caroline Haines, a Principal Master Instructor with [Mental Health First Aid Australia](#), (MHFA), who in the past two years alone has delivered over 100 Mental Health First Aid courses. Jirsch Sutherland Partners, Managers and Principals undertook the course in 2019 and then again in October this year – and given the huge impact of the pandemic, the firm wanted to share some of the insights. By undertaking the MHFA training, participants become more educated about some of the most common mental health illnesses, which in turn helps to reduce stigma and break down the discriminations that are often associated with poor mental health.

"My colleagues and I learnt invaluable tips from Caroline when we did the course, and we thought it was opportune for her to impart her knowledge to other trusted advisers during National Mental Health Month – particularly because we are at the frontline when a business owner or director is struggling," says Jirsch Sutherland Partner [Andrew Spring](#). "This year's theme is *Mental Health: Post Pandemic Recovery Challenges and Resilience*, and more than ever we need to be mindful of the impact this abnormal time has had. "After having completed the MHFA courses with Caroline, I now feel more empowered to begin conversations around mental health."



Andrew Spring, Jirsch Sutherland Partner

The Blended Online MHFA Financial Service Professionals Course is just one of many MHFA courses Caroline is accredited to deliver. This particular course has been specifically designed for those working in the financial services sector. And at the start of 2022, Caroline will be accredited to also deliver the Blended MHFA for the Australian Legal Profession. The courses do not qualify people to make a diagnosis nor treat them for a mental illness but rather they impart the skills to assist a person until the professionals take over. “It is not group therapy,” Caroline adds.

“The sad truth is that many people don’t know what to say or do when they’re observing someone who is struggling with their mental health; others will actually be in denial this is happening to them,” she says. “Just like physical first aid where you learn how to assist somebody with a physical injury, the mental health first aid courses will enable you to identify some of the most common signs and symptoms of a mental illness and be able to assist that person in their hour of need.”

Alarming statistics

During her webinar presentation, Caroline revealed some of the recent findings regarding mental health in Australia. These include:



- Mental illness is the cause of the third largest disease burden
- In any given year, 1 in 5 adults will experience a mental illness, and this is likely to be higher due to

COVID-19

- Anxiety is the leading cause of mental illness and a major risk factor for developing depression (the



second leading cause)

- Currently, only 35 per cent of people with a common mental illness will seek professional help
- There may be a fear around how someone will be treated if they disclose a mental health issue,

particularly to their colleagues or manager



- Nine Australians die every day by suicide, and males are the most at risk. The suicide rate is more

than double the national road toll

- Mental health illnesses cost Australian workplaces \$4.7 billion in absenteeism and \$1.6 billion in



presenteeism, plus an additional \$146 million in workers compensation claims per year.

“Businesses large and small are actually feeding these figures, by not providing support and understanding. There is often a lack of providing a supportive environment to their employees, especially to those who struggle with a mental illness,” says Caroline. “A person’s financial situation can impact their mental health and their mental health can impact their finances. And people who are in financial distress are at a greater risk of developing a wide range of mental health illnesses.”

[Australia's Mental Health Think Tank](#)’s recent review of mental health impacts of the pandemic found that financial stress was a primary driver and risk factor for poorer mental health outcomes during the pandemic, and those hit particularly hard will find it difficult to recover.

“A period of financial distress can be an emotionally challenging time and can take a toll on people’s mental health. The shame and embarrassment that surrounds financial distress often stops people reaching out and seeking help for their financial situation and also addressing their mental health,” adds Spring.

Knock-on effects

According to Caroline, some mental health issues can be associated with the workplace and one in five people may take sick leave due to a mental health problem. “This creates more work for colleagues and supervisors and some may feel resentful they are having to take up the slack for others. However, if somebody has identified as having some form of other health issue like, say, a broken leg, their workmates may be more than willing to step in and take on the additional work,” she says.

“The longer somebody is on sick leave, the less likely they are to return to work.

There may be difficulties holding down a job, which can ultimately lead to unemployment – possibly even homelessness – and for others, they may be forced to take early retirement.”

To improve this situation, Caroline says trusted advisers need to:

- talk with clients about what their goals are and whether these goals are actually realistic
- encourage clients to discuss what is going on
- refer clients to someone who is experienced in working through financial difficulties and dealing with

people who are struggling with their mental health.

Workplaces can not only help and support their colleagues, but also assist their clientele who may be experiencing poor mental health by:



- getting the message out that it is okay to talk about mental health
- having safe escalation points in the workplace
- mandate mental health into policy and procedures
- get the decision makers involved by:
- providing support and training to all – all the way from the boss to the cleaners

- having mental health first aid friendly areas

- establishing Mental Health First Aid Officers within the workplace, which will go a long way towards

creating a healthier environment

- becoming familiar with the organisations that offer professional help and support

In a *Business Insider Australia* interview, Ben Thompson, Employment Hero CEO, recommends taking the focus away from the business itself and turning the attention to the people who drive it.

It's a view echoed by Caroline: "You can have the best product in the world but if you don't have anybody to get that message out there and sell it on your behalf, what's the point?"



Finally, she reinforces that having dedicated and trained mental health first aid officers in every workplace is vital. “I would personally love to see mental health first aid courses as commonplace as physical first aid and mandated into our business structure. But unfortunately, we’re still a long way from that.”

To watch the webinar, [click here](#).

For more details about Caroline Haines and her upcoming public courses, please click here: <https://mhfa.com.au/instructor/171332>

In addition to delivering online courses, Caroline is also available for corporate bookings, webinars and conferences throughout the entire country. She can be contacted on 0468 473 529 or via mhfa@rejuvenatingspirits.com