

Mentally Healthy Workplaces and COVID-19: Emerging Issues



Responding to COVID-19 concerns in the workplace

2022



Australian Government
National Mental Health Commission

**THE MENTALLY
HEALTHY
WORK
PLACE ALLIANCE**

Overview: COVID-19 concerns in the workplace



People may be impacted by a wide range of potential concerns related to COVID-19. These include fear of infection, concerns about vaccination or even a sense of judgement or shame if they contract COVID-19.



Workplaces may have to manage a wide range of different concerns related to COVID-19 and vaccination within staff, suppliers and customers.



In addition to actions required to meet work health and safety obligations, workplaces can help manage these concerns through open communication, trust and building a positive culture.

Introduction

As many organisations and businesses transition into a period of COVID-19 recovery, it is possible for their people to be impacted by a range of concerns related to COVID-19. These concerns can include vaccination hesitancy, fear of infection, differing preferences for health and safety measures or even a sense of judgement or shame for contracting COVID-19.

Separately or together, these concerns may create tension, stress, anxiety or even conflict within workplaces.

This guide helps organisations and businesses identify some of the potential concerns their people may experience and presents ideas for addressing these within the workplace.

“Employers need to give people options, address their hopes and fears, and help them feel in control of the situation. Communicate your COVID policies, protocols and any available supports clearly to your people. If public transport is a concern, can you offer parking discounts? And if vaccinations are required, explain the reasons why transparently and firmly. Giving employees certainty about the future of hybrid work also helps; if an employee knows they have a choice, they can choose the option that is safest and most comfortable for them.”

Dr Zena Burgess, CEO of the Australian Psychological Society

About varied COVID-19 concerns

Vaccine hesitancy

With almost 95% of people aged 16 and over fully vaccinated in Australia, only a small proportion may still have hesitancy around COVID-19 vaccines.¹ In its last update in December 2021, the University of Melbourne's Vaccine Hesitancy Tracker reported that vaccine hesitancy continues to fall across all age groups and states.²

"We are only dealing with a small number of people who are hesitant about getting their vaccine. And we need to point out they do have a right to choose not to be vaccinated," says Dr Warren Harrex, Consultant Occupational and Environmental Physician and Fellow of the Australasian Faculty of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (AFOEM).

Managing vaccine hesitancy can be a challenge for workplaces and individuals alike. Personal beliefs about vaccination can create conflict or tension within teams. Understanding more about vaccine hesitancy can help workplaces manage instances where this becomes an issue. People may be hesitant about vaccination for a range of reasons, and they may have underlying health concerns that influence their decisions. In many workplaces, employees may be required to be vaccinated.

Fear of infection

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, people have reported concerns around COVID-19 transmission in the workplace, according to Monash University researchers.³

Such concerns have included fear of infection, infecting other people, being able to maintain physical distance from colleagues when in the workplace, and being concerned about work colleagues coming to work when sick.

With greater numbers now vaccinated, and restrictions lifting, some people may find their fear of infection reduces. Whereas other people may find their fear of infection increases as they physically interact with more people. Navigating through different levels of concern can present a challenge for workplaces.



"It is important to have vaccine champions, who can include team leaders or organisational leaders. People who are influential who will talk about the importance of vaccination. Because peer opinions can influence attitudes."

Dr Warren Harrex, Consultant Occupational and Environmental Physician and Fellow of the Australasian Faculty of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (AFOEM).

Different responses to COVID-19 infection or infection protocols

In addition to fear of infection, some workplaces have noticed a range of different emotional reactions to COVID-19 that can be challenging to manage in a workplace.

Some people have described a sense of shame about contracting COVID-19, including a sense that they should have taken more steps to prevent infection. Others have described feeling judged for contracting COVID-19, including for being perceived as having poor hygiene. Some people have experienced racism related to COVID-19, particularly in the earlier stages of the pandemic. There can also be a sense of guilt if people have required extended periods off to manage COVID-19 symptoms.

"Now that more people have had COVID-19 there are some moral concerns emerging," says Stephanie Thompson from WayAhead Workplaces, a network of individuals and organisations interested in employee health and wellbeing.

"Some people might be feeling that if they get COVID-19 they've done something wrong. If someone tests positive and they're working from home, they may not want to disclose they have COVID-19 to their manager, and they keep working and perhaps not taking sick leave," says Ms Thompson.

In late 2021, WayAhead Workplaces produced a Post-Lockdown Guide to support its members with issues arising with returning to the workplace ([access it here](#)).

Research conducted from late 2020 into 2021 found that shame, stigma, fear and anxiety were among the barriers preventing young Australians and some people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds from getting tested for COVID-19.⁴

Other Australian research found that almost 40% of 2,003 Asian Australians reported experiencing racism during the pandemic, which the researchers suggest may be partly caused by the "racialisation of the pandemic".⁵



How organisations can respond

1. Managing vaccine hesitancy

Dr Harrex says some core principles that underpin mentally healthy workplaces are useful in managing a range of concerns related to COVID-19, including vaccine hesitancy.

These include:

- **Communicating openly:** for instance, when talking about vaccination, acknowledging both the small risks and the many benefits and protections it offers.
- **Promoting quality information:** advocate for official sources, such as the Department of Health, over social media.
- **Use leaders:** tap into leaders to highlight the importance of measures taken to prevent COVID-19 infection, such as vaccination, physical distancing and face masks.
- **Establishing trust:** build trust with people by listening to concerns, respecting opinions and working collaboratively on responses.
- **Giving people time to consider:** it is important not to force people into quick decisions about vaccination, and instead allow them time and space to consider their options.
- **Having relatable vaccine champions:** champions can include team or organisational leaders, or people not in formal leadership roles but who have influence among people in the workplace.
- **Being inclusive:** considering how accessible and inclusive your communication and approaches are, which is particularly important among culturally and linguistically diverse groups.

Considering vaccination mandates?

Australia has placed a significant emphasis on vaccines in our response to COVID-19. In 2021, through National Cabinet and at State and Territory levels, Governments moved to mandate COVID-19 vaccines for certain sectors. Employers were faced with having to manage both these mandates and a lack of mandate in their own workplaces.

The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry released a vaccine guide for employers in August 2021. The guide was designed to address queries employers had over communicating with employees on vaccines, assisting employees to get vaccinated and associated risks, and employment, WHS and privacy legal considerations ([read the guide here](#)).

Australian Unions and the ACTU Centre for Health and Safety developed a range of fact sheets for workers to help ensure their workplace is COVID-Aware. This includes answers to common questions about vaccinations and workers' rights ([read the guidance here](#)).

Lead Government agencies also developed targeted advice for employers such as:

- **The Fair Work Ombudsman** who advised there are only certain circumstances in which an organisation can require workers to get vaccinated, such as if a specific law in that state requires it, if the direction is lawful and reasonable, or if included in enterprise agreements or contracts ([read the guidance here](#)).
- **Safe Work Australia** who developed a series of industry-specific pages that provide information about obligations under the model WHS laws and how these relate to COVID-19 vaccines ([read the guidance here](#)).
- **The Office of the Australian Information Commission** advised organisations they can only collect information about workers' vaccine status in certain circumstances where the employee consents ([read the guidance here](#)).

2. Managing infection concerns

All workplaces should be considering infection control as part of their work health and safety obligations. Workplaces have an obligation to consult with workers on matters that impact health and safety, such as how risk of COVID-19 infection is managed in the workplace. It is also important that people have ways to raise safety concerns related to COVID-19. Safe Work Australia has further information on actions organisations can take ([read the information here](#)).

Some people's fear of COVID-19 infection will be reduced by seeing the safety measures a workplace has put in place. However, other people may still have concerns about contracting COVID-19. These elevated fears may be due to a range of factors including being at personal risk, or living with someone at increased risk of complications from COVID-19. Or it could be due to other concerns such as potential lost income, isolation periods, personal experiences with COVID-19, anxiety or exposure to misinformation about COVID-19.

Approaches to manage infection concerns can include:

- Giving people opportunities to express their concerns freely and without judgement
- Considering changed working arrangements or conditions for those concerned about infection.

"This may include looking at things like staff changeover times, where coffee breaks are held and whether working areas and meeting rooms are well ventilated. Infection can also spread if staff are carpooling. It may also include whether people should be wearing masks and providing those masks. And perhaps rapid antigen tests being provided," Dr Harrex says.

3. Managing misinformation

Managing misinformation about COVID-19 in the workplace can also be an important step in addressing vaccine hesitancy and fears about infection. The World Health Organization suggests some key steps to manage misinformation ([read them here](#)). These include:

- Listening to concerns and questions
- Promoting understanding of risk and health expert advice
- Engaging and empowering people to take positive action.

4. Managing different reactions

People may also have different reactions to infection control protocols in workplaces. Some can feel anger towards others who are not following these protocols. Other people may feel anger about their personal freedoms being limited by infection control measures.

These different personal reactions can create tension and conflict within a workplace.

As with managing other concerns, effective approaches can include:

- Clear communication
- Providing opportunities for people to express their concerns confidentially
- Managers acting early to address tensions as this can help people navigate these reactions
- Supporting people to talk through their experience
- Encouraging people to access further advice through the services listed below.



Where organisations can get support



Resources for organisations

[Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, COVID-19 Vaccinations and the Workplace | Employer Guide](#)

[Safe Work Australia, COVID-19 information for workplaces](#)

[Safe Work Australia, National guide for safe workplaces – COVID-19](#)

[Safe Work Australia, Work health and safety consultation, cooperation and coordination Code of Practice](#)

[Fair Work Ombudsman, COVID-19 vaccinations: workplace rights and obligations](#)

[The Office of the Australian Information Commission, Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Vaccinations: Understanding your privacy obligations to your staff](#)

[Department of Health, COVID-19 vaccination – Business kit](#)

[Comcare, Supporting others in times of uncertainty](#)

[Comcare, Transitioning to usual workplaces as restrictions ease](#)

[The Australasian Faculty of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, Find a consultant](#)

[The Australian and New Zealand Society of Occupational Medicine, Find an expert](#)

[SANE Australia, Mental illness & the workplace](#)

Resources for individuals

[Australian Unions, COVID-aware workplaces](#)

[Department of Health, Is it true? Get the facts on COVID-19 vaccines](#)

[Department of Health, COVID-19 disease, symptoms and variants](#)

[Beyond Blue, Coronavirus Mental Wellbeing Support Service](#)

[Black Dog Institute, 10 tips for managing anxiety during COVID-19](#)

[Australian Psychological Society, Tips for coping with Coronavirus anxiety](#)

[Black Dog Institute, HeadGear app](#)

[Black Dog Institute, My Compass program](#)

[This Way Up, Coping & Resilience Tools](#)

[MindSpot Clinic, Online assessment and treatment](#)

[SuperFriend, Wellbeing check-in and Self-care action plan](#)

[Comcare, Responding to uncertainty](#)

References

- 1 Australian Government Department of Health, Vaccination numbers and statistics [Internet]. Available from <https://www.health.gov.au/initiatives-and-programs/covid-19-vaccines/numbers-statistics>
- 2 The University of Melbourne, Melbourne Institute. Vaccine Hesitancy Tracker: Key insights from December 2021. [Internet] Available from <https://melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/publications/research-insights/ttpr/vaccination-report>
- 3 Monash University. COVID-19 has Australians worried about returning to the workplace. [Internet] 2021, July 14. Available from <https://www.monash.edu/news/articles/covid-19-has-australians-worried-about-returning-to-the-workplace#:~:text=COVID%2D19%20has%20Australians%20worried%20about%20returning%20to%20the%20workplace,-Share%20this%20page&text=Four%20in%20five%20workers%20surveyed,concerns%20for%20half%20of%20workers>
- 4 Burnet Institute, Shame, stigma barriers to COVID-19 testing for young and culturally diverse, report finds. [Internet]. 2021, April. Available from https://www.burnet.edu.au/news/1408_shame_stigma_barriers_to_covid_19_testing_for_young_and_culturally_diverse_report_finds
- 5 Kamp A, Dunn K, Vergani M, Denson N, Sharples R. 'I don't think the police would do much': new research shows racism during COVID is rarely reported. The Conversation. 2021, August 4. Available from <https://theconversation.com/i-dont-think-the-police-would-do-much-new-research-shows-racism-during-covid-is-rarely-reported-165312>

About this guide

This guide is part of the *Mentally Healthy Workplaces during COVID-19: Emerging Issues* series, created by the National Mental Health Commission and the Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance.

The series explores key issues workplaces are facing due to the challenges created by COVID-19. Each guide provides a summary of the issue, expert guidance on actions organisations can take and links to further resources.

This guide has been developed in association with:

- **Dr Warren Harrex**, Consultant Occupational and Environmental Physician and Fellow of the Australasian Faculty of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (AFOEM). Member of the COVID-19 Expert Reference Group of the Royal Australasian College of Physicians.

Read more

- The guides in this series include:
 - Helping people return to workplaces after extended periods working at home during COVID-19.
 - Strategies to support wellbeing of decision makers through periods of sustained pressure.
 - Identifying and managing fatigue and burnout during COVID-19.
 - The hidden impact of COVID-19 on sleep.
 - Creating mentally healthy hybrid teams in the recovery from COVID-19.
 - Responding to COVID-19 concerns in the workplace.
 - Supporting people experiencing post-COVID-19 syndrome.
- [Visit the Commission's website](#) to download the series.



National Workplace Initiative

- The National Mental Health Commission and Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance are developing the National Workplace Initiative to create a national approach to mentally healthy workplaces.
- [Visit the Commission's website](#) to learn more about the National Workplace Initiative.

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