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Spotlight on OTs in Mental Health



The Future of OT and Mental Health in Australia

From the Bottom Up: Learning with and from Covid-19

**Bringing an Occupational Perspective
to Forensic Mental Health**



Spot the difference: poor performance, bad behaviour or mental illness?

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Managing staff in a private practice comes with its challenges. It is important for practice owners and managers to recognise the common red flags of staff performance and be able to ascertain whether they are dealing with poor performance, poor behavioral conduct or a mental health issue such as work-related stress or burnout.

Each of these possibilities – performance, behavior or mental health – relates to a different set of rules, expectations, management processes and consequences. However, making the distinction can be tricky. On the surface, the red flags of poor performance, poor behavioral conduct or poor mental health can present as very similar or the same.

For example, if you had to label the list of red flags below as a staff issue based on performance, behavior or mental health, could you do it? How confident would you be?

- Employee is always late;
- Client complains that receptionist is irritable;
- Employee has missed two team meetings;
- Employee criticises another employee's work via a team email;
- Employee consistently fails to complete the required forms;
- Employee doesn't fit in with the team;
- Employee provides client information to the client's relative;

- Employee posts photos of the work Christmas party on social media;
- Employee is coming to work looking tired and disheveled;
- Employee complains that co-worker is creepy;
- Employee submits a report with spelling mistakes;
- Employee says "that's not my job" and refuses to lend a hand;
- Employee says they need to take a "mental health" day off; and
- Employee borrows petty cash.

For several of the above examples, more information is needed to determine what is really going on.

Poor performance relates to an employee's skill set and not meeting skill-based expectations. Performance management (including performance reviews, giving effective feedback, setting goals, measuring, coaching and training) is an important aspect of the employee life cycle. If performance management is well executed, poor performance is relatively easy to overcome as skills and expectations can be taught and developed.

Poor behaviour relates to an employee's attitude and values, so this is much more difficult to change. Also, the rules, circumstances and consequences around poor behavior and inappropriate conduct are usually much more serious. Inappropriate conduct can pose a health and safety risk

to staff and others, and sometimes leads to suspension or termination of employment.

Poor mental health relates to employee health and safety. Practice owners have a duty to ensure the workplace does not cause psychological or physical injury or worsen an existing condition. Practice managers must exercise due diligence to ensure the employer complies with their duties under Work, Health and Safety (WHS) laws. These obligations include looking out for behavioural changes and responding appropriately when an employee appears to be struggling.

From the time that the Covid-19 pandemic began to impact our lives, awareness around the occupational syndrome of 'burnout' began to skyrocket – and for good reason. Burnout is caused by chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. The pandemic has placed unprecedented stress on workplaces, particularly those considered to be 'high risk', 'tier 1' or 'essential workers', such as health care. Common psychosocial workplace hazards such as heavy workloads and long working hours have been compounded by extra Covid-19-related psychosocial workplace hazards such as low level of control, remote and isolated work, restrictions on family support, high-risk environmental conditions, the demands of PPE and infection control, fear and concern for physical safety, and often poorly managed organisational change.



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Signs of work-related stress or burnout in an individual include:

- Headaches, tiredness, sleeplessness, slow reactions, shortness of breath;
- Difficulty in decision-making, forgetfulness, lack of concentration;
- Irritability, excessive worrying, feelings of worthlessness, anxiety, defensiveness, anger, mood swings;
- Reduced performance, social withdrawal, impulsive behavior, increased alcohol and nicotine consumption and
- Compassion fatigue.

Work-related stress or burnout can also manifest as red flags in a practice. Again, this is where things can get tricky for practice owners and managers who need to respond appropriately to workplace issues. For example, the table on the right shows the strong similarities between signs of burnout and the red flags of a toxic workplace culture. A toxic workplace culture often signifies that leadership has failed to follow best-practice protocols in preventing and responding to serious workplace incidents, such as bullying, harassment/discrimination, which are forms of poor behavioral conduct.

The solution for practice owners or managers is to use their interpersonal communication skills. When they notice any of the above-mentioned red flags in their practice, it is important to check individually with each concerned staff member to ascertain what is going on. These conversations require calm energy, a safe, private setting and good listening skills. Open questions like “What’s happening for you?” and “What can we do to support you?” give the employee an opportunity to paint a clearer picture of what they are dealing with.

Managers and employers need to know the correct course of action when poor performance or inappropriate conduct occurs. Getting this process wrong has a strong negative impact on the culture and productivity of the workplace. Getting it right has a positive ripple effect by reaffirming organisational values, standards and expectations.

When an employee is showing signs of work-related stress or burnout, or if they indicate that they are struggling mentally or physically, it is appropriate to ask, “Do you need to take some time off with leave?” and then help the employee explore their

Signs of work-related stress or burnout in your practice

- Increased absenteeism and lateness
- Increased staff turnover
- Reduced productivity and engagement
- A decline in worker job satisfaction
- Increased accidents and injuries
- Increased workers’ compensation claims
- Increased complaints
- Decreased quality of relationships
- Reduced client satisfaction

Red flags of poor behavioral conduct or a toxic workplace culture in your practice

- Increased absenteeism and lateness
- Increased staff turnover
- Reduced productivity and engagement
- Poor work ethics and attitudes
- Increased staff conflict and complaints
- Increased workers’ compensation claims
- Poor leadership support, communication
- Decreased trust and quality of relationships
- Reduced client satisfaction

options of what this could look like. In most cases, a doctor’s certificate will be required to confirm whether or not the employee is fit for work, and able to access personal leave.

Interpreting red flags in a private practice and handling staff issues appropriately is not always clear-cut. To understand the correct course of action, it is a good idea to seek professional advice from an HR consultancy that works closely with the allied health sector such as WorkPlacePLUS

All OTA members receive special OTA member benefits through WorkPlacePLUS for support with HR and IR issues. For more information, contact Anna on (03) 9492 0958 or visit WorkPlacePLUS.com.au