

# Mental Health and Work Issues and Perspectives

Lou Morrow, Irene Verins, Eileen Willis

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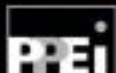
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Ausernet - The Australian Network for Promotion,  
Prevention and Early Intervention for Mental Health

# **Mental Health and Work**

## **Issues and Perspectives**

Edited by  
Lou Morrow  
Irene Verins  
Eileen Willis

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The opinions expressed in this document are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the Commonwealth, Auseinet or VicHealth.

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## Foreword

In Australia, there is increasing attention being paid to the promotion of mental health and the prevention of serious mental disorder by policymakers, funders, academics and service providers. This has required a shift in thinking to focus on health and wellbeing, not just on illness and treatment. The *National Action Plan for Promotion, Prevention and Early Intervention for Mental Health 2000* is a national framework endorsed by the National Mental Health Working Group and the National Public Health Partnership. It is a joint Commonwealth, State and Territory Initiative under the Second National Mental Health Plan, which provides a policy framework for the promotion of mental health and prevention and early intervention for mental health problems and mental disorders. The Action Plan 2000 identifies the important relationship between work and emotional and social wellbeing and regards it as a priority area for action.

Auseinet (The Australian Network for Promotion, Prevention and Early Intervention for Mental Health) is a national project funded by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing to support the development and implementation of activities and initiatives that address mental health promotion and the prevention and early intervention for mental disorder.

The present edited volume on *Mental health and work: issues and perspectives*, commissioned by Auseinet and developed in collaboration with VicHealth (the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation), seeks to address this significant issue from a variety of perspectives. Identity, meaning and participation are critical social and emotional dimensions of work. It has meaning for all individuals in society. As a consequence, work directly impacts on *whole of community* emotional and social wellbeing.

It is our hope that this volume will increase knowledge and understanding of the inextricable relationship between work and mental health and influence the development and implementation of effective strategies to promote mental health and prevent mental disorders.

The original intent for this book was to consider the workplace as a target for universal approaches to mental health promotion and to record a range of successful national programs. What emerged from discussion, and was reinforced by a seminar hosted by VicHealth in

Melbourne in 2001, was a need to consider work more broadly than workers and workplaces, and to therefore consider mental health and its promotion in the context of work in more depth. What has resulted is a rich archive of contemporary issues surrounding work in Australia, as well as seminal work from abroad.

We congratulate Lou Morrow for all her work in bringing together such a wide group of authors, and for seeing this work through with the help of co-editors Irene Verins and Eileen Willis. We commend it to you the reader.

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University of Queensland  
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Jennie Parham  
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Auseinet

## **Acknowledgements**

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Auseinet especially thanks Eileen Willis (Flinders University) and Irene Verins (VicHealth) for their editorial and creative involvement over many months.

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**The Rumbalara Community** members who contributed their time to developing a piece for this book are listed in the chapter by **Rosemary Hoban**. They have all continued over the years to give their time to build and maintain a holistic program that promotes cultural strength, Koori health and reconciliation – which is Rumbalara as we know it now.

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## Introduction

Our view is that mental health is a decent work issue

Juan Somavia, ILO Director-General

It is now widely recognised that social and environmental conditions, and particularly relative social disadvantage, have significant effects on mental health and illness. Economic participation through access to decent, meaningful work, and democratic and social participation through connectedness, belonging and freedom from discrimination and violence, are seen as critical to the mental health and wellbeing of individuals, organisations, communities and nations. The construction of relevant and sustainable mental health promotion policy and programs requires a perspective which regards and values work and workplace mental health promotion as part of a civil society, not only as good business practice. This will also require acceptance at all levels of society of the connection between access to meaningful, safe work, healthy jobs and mental health.

Increased productivity, flexibility and efficiency, and change and competition, are constant features of most workplaces in the globalised marketplace. The pressure to perform within financial restraints in work environments of constant uncertainty and shifting priorities has focused the attention of both public and private sector alike on economic capital, thereby marginalising the value of human capital. There is evidence in Australia of longer working hours with fewer available full-time jobs, while others are either underemployed, increasingly in part-time work, in poor quality work not fit for a machine, or unemployed. Information technology means organisations can increase their wealth without creating jobs, indeed by eliminating positions.

While the workplace is both contributor and threat to wellbeing, *being in* the workforce with access to decent, meaningful work is a dimension of national life and expectation from which many citizens remain excluded, with poorer health outcomes and an inequitable burden of disadvantage. Unemployment, as a by-product of economic and fiscal policy, is an accepted feature and ‘economic tool’ of deregulated market economies, accomplished most potently via discriminatory and inflexible practices and social structures, which exclude certain individuals and groups. Exclusion from work via

unemployment is experienced most drastically in the lives of people who have a mental illness. The stigma associated with mental illness is pervasive and persistent.

These characteristics represent dominant cultural ideas and pursuits, organisational and institutional cultures, and career structures patterned on values which have increasingly ignored the emotional and social aspects of community and family life.

On the other hand, the workplace provides an important opportunity for mental health promotion and prevention of mental ill health, both in terms of access to a large proportion of the adult population and also as a site for encouraging developments to improve the health of communities. However, despite growing awareness around the world and the estimates of many OECD countries of the burgeoning economic cost of work-related illness and injury to national productivity, a new report from the Health and Safety Executive in Britain paradoxically points to a significant decline over the last ten years in occupational health services. Fewer workers in Britain now have access to health support at work (declined by nearly 50% since 1990), and fewer businesses (only 3% of all UK organisations) provide occupational support to help prevent work related illness (HSE, 2002).

In its landmark mental health report in 2001, the World Health Organization reiterated its now well-known prediction for a dramatic rise over the next 20 years in mental illness. Major depression, which has been increasing over the last decade, is already the leading cause of disability globally and is predicted to rise alarmingly over the next two decades (WHO, 2001). There is no doubt that work per se, its changing nature and consequences, and workplaces have been, and will continue to be significant contributors to this rise without important changes in priority and direction.

This publication, a collaboration between Auseinet and VicHealth (the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation), was initiated, funded and published by Auseinet – The Australian Network for Promotion, Prevention and Early Intervention for Mental Health. Auseinet is a national project funded under the National Mental Health and National Suicide Prevention Strategies, based at the Flinders University of South Australia.

In joining with VicHealth to produce this edited collection, Auseinet recognised the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation and CEO Dr Rob Moodie as drivers of the momentum and innovation in health promotion in Victoria and influential nationally. Auseinet's early

development discussions for the publication determined the need to include understandings about structural issues related to work/employment which explicitly link work and the social determinants of health rather than being only limited to workplaces and workers. In 1998 the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation identified mental health promotion as a key area for action over the ensuing three-year period. As a result, VicHealth developed its *Mental Health Promotion Plan 1999-2002*, focusing on three determinants of mental health – increasing connectedness and belonging; reducing discrimination; and maximising economic participation. Through the development and implementation of a mental health promotion plan, VicHealth aimed to focus on improving the social, physical and economic environments that determine the mental health of populations and individuals (VicHealth, 1999).

The intention of this edited collection was to explicitly engage the social, environmental and ethical dimensions of work and wellbeing. The *National Action Plan for Promotion, Prevention and Early Intervention for Mental Health* (Commonwealth Department of Health & Aged Care, 2000) and VicHealth's *Mental Health Promotion Plan 1999-2002* have provided the guiding documents in bringing together this joint publication.

And so to the contributions. While it was the editors' hope for the publication to elaborate the terrain which constitutes the field of mental health and work, we cannot claim that the chapters represent or draw from the entire diversity of contemporary thought in this area. That is not surprising. To date, and reflected to an extent in some contributions to the book, much attention and research in this field has narrowly focused on individuals. One effect of this narrow approach has been to minimise attention to, if not invisibilise, organisational practices and characteristics or wider structural/societal factors which are in themselves detrimental to mental health, for instance discrimination, intolerance of difference, and fundamental abuses of human rights and human dignity in the context of employment.

However, importantly, what are elaborated here are key opportunities for mental health promotion and prevention of mental ill health related to work, workplaces and communities. What is also clearly apparent in a number of contributions are the levels of operation at which these opportunities must be pursued for an effective public health response – not only at the individual, local or business and organisation levels, but also at the level of whole of community. The

chapters reflect contributions and common ground from Australia, New Zealand, Italy and the United Kingdom. The structure of the book was determined by the nature of the contributions, organised as sections around the themes of the context, identity, safety, emotions and the last section, people, places and processes. Each section is introduced by the editors. We hope you enjoy the collection and find it useful.

Lou Morrow, Irene Verins and Eileen Willis  
Editors  
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## **References**

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