

What is workers' compensation stigma?

Support injured workers to claim workers' compensation

Workers' compensation provides an important safety net to workers who become injured or ill because of work. It provides financial support and other assistance so workers can focus on getting better and back to work safely.

Stigma can prevent injured workers from accessing workers' compensation or delay their recovery. Organisations can take action to reduce workers' compensation stigma and support workers to get the help they need and have a safe, timely and lasting return to work.

Supporting injured or ill workers to get back to work safely benefits everyone. One of the most important factors contributing to a worker's recovery and safe return to work is whether they have a supportive and inclusive work environment, free from stigma around workers' compensation.

By understanding what workers' compensation stigma is, where it can occur, and how to identify it, employers can take action to prevent it and policy makers can support workplaces to reduce it.

What is workers' compensation stigma?

Workers' compensation stigma is discriminating or stereotyping against a worker seeking workers' compensation. It can come from other workers, or from organisational processes, structures or systems. Workers' compensation stigma affects everyone — the injured or ill worker, their team, and the broader organisation.



Investing in recovery and return to work = better outcomes for all

Stigma around work-related injury and illness is common.

- **1 in 3 workers** thought they would be treated differently by people at work if they knew about their injury or illness.
- **1 in 5 workers** were worried about stigma associated with being on workers' compensation.

*Source:
Safe Work Australia's 2021 National Return to Work Survey*

What are the impacts of workers' compensation stigma?

If left unmanaged, workers' compensation stigma can prevent or delay workers disclosing their injury or illness, making a workers' compensation claim, getting treatment, recovering and returning to work. Stigma can also lead to psychological harm that may substantially delay the workers' recovery. It also affects the organisation more broadly, lowering morale and productivity, and leads to increased costs due to delayed reporting and treating of injuries. These impacts are less likely in organisations that take action to reduce workers' compensation stigma.

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Where can workers' compensation stigma happen?

Workers' compensation stigma can occur in any workplace, however, it is less likely to occur in workplaces with a positive workplace culture and a supportive and inclusive work environment. Workers are more likely to experience stigma around their injury, illness or workers' compensation claim in workplace cultures that promote workers 'getting on with the job' and 'battling through'. Bullying and harassment may also occur when other workers are exposed to psychosocial hazards that have not been adequately controlled, such as high work demands, which may increase if they also have to take on the work of an injured or ill worker.

What are things to look out for?

Workers' compensation stigma takes many forms – some are more obvious than others. Behaviours that lead to stigma can be subconscious and unintended, or in some cases deliberately used to disadvantage and negatively influence an injured or ill worker accessing workers' compensation. Those looking to identify and take action to reduce workers' compensation stigma should look out for:

- **Poor workplace culture.** A workplace culture that discourages workers from raising issues, talking about mistakes or seeking help may prevent workers disclosing an injury or illness or making a workers' compensation claim.
- **Bullying, harassment and gossip.** Injured or ill workers may be bullied or harassed by others at work because of their injury, illness or workers' compensation claim. For example, the injured worker might be subjected to comments that make them feel like they don't belong, judgement about missing work or gossip about their injury or illness.
- **Isolation.** When injured or ill workers are isolated, ostracised or made to feel like a burden, they may be hesitant to seek support, make a workers' compensation claim or return to work before they are ready, impacting their recovery and causing further harm.

- **Inflexible or adversarial injury and illness management processes.** Organisations can unintentionally embed discrimination and prejudice into their workers' compensation processes, structures and systems. This is called organisational stigma. Inflexible management practices, limited access to information or support services, and poor communication can force injured or ill workers to return to work too soon, not get the help they need or even leave the organisation.
- **Demoting or terminating the employment of injured and ill workers.** Some organisations directly discriminate injured or ill workers by demoting them or terminating their employment.

Work health and safety (WHS) laws and workers' compensation stigma

Under the model WHS laws, persons conducting a business or undertaking (PCBUs), such as employers, must eliminate or minimise risks to health and safety, including psychosocial risk such as bullying or harassment caused by stigma, so far as is reasonably practicable. The model WHS Regulations require PCBUs to have regard to a range of relevant matters when controlling psychosocial risks, including the design of work, workplace interactions and behaviours and information, training, instruction and supervision provided to workers. PCBUs must also consult workers and their representatives on identifying and controlling psychosocial risks.

Workers also have duties to take reasonable care for their own health and safety and to not adversely affect the health and safety of others. Workers must comply with any reasonable instructions, policies and procedures given by their employer at the workplace, including policies and procedures to reduce stigma in the workplace.



Taking action to reduce workers' compensation stigma

We can all contribute to creating positive and supportive workplace cultures which will help reduce stigma around workers' compensation. Injured or ill workers who feel included and supported are more inclined to seek help, which benefits the individual, their team and the organisation more broadly.

Learn how you can take action to reduce workers' compensation stigma at: swa.gov.au/workerscompensationstigma.



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