

# MAKE THE SHIFT

## *The Family's Guide*

to Supporting the Mental Wellbeing of Shift Workers

## Living With a Shift Worker – The Family’s Guide

This guide has been developed by the Wellington Primary Care Partnership Working Well in Wellington project team as part of the Working Well in Wellington project, supported by WorkSafe’s WorkWell Mental Health Improvement Fund.

It has been developed to help protect the mental wellbeing of shift workers.

We know that working shift work can disrupt sleep, nutrition, exercise and social connectedness – all of which are crucial to physical and mental wellbeing.

This handbook aims to give you some information about the possible impact of shift work on mental wellbeing and offers some simple strategies and resources that your family can use to protect the mental wellbeing of your shift worker.

The project team understands the importance of family, and the Working Well in Wellington project is committed to helping shift workers thrive.

Shift work can place stress on the family as you make changes to accommodate new life patterns. We therefore hope these strategies may be of great benefit to you and your family in everyday life.

We encourage you to read this now, keep it for future reference, and follow up on the resources provided at any time.

It can also act as a great conversation starter for family discussions.

**November 2021**





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# Shift work

## & mental wellbeing

### What is a shift worker?

A shift worker is anyone who works outside the hours of 7am to 6pm.

It is estimated that there are 1.4 million shift workers in Australia. That is about 16% of all employees.

For some people, the flexibility of shift work and the shift allowances can be a positive aspect of working shifts. It can, however, also be more stressful.

Shift work schedules are often out of sync with the normal daily activities of family and friends.

This can lead to:

- » Social isolation or loneliness for the worker and/or their partner
- » Not enough time spent with children
- » Missing events like birthday parties and graduations

- » Decreased quality of time with family and friends due to tiredness
- » Moodiness or irritability with family and friends
- » Conflicting parenting styles or not feeling as though you're a team as parents
- » Sleep deprivation for you or your partner, because you wish to spend time together when you're both not at work
- » Difficulty coordinating or being part of family routines
- » Difficulty making social or family plans

These stressors can impact upon the mental wellbeing of a shift worker. If these stressors are unmanaged for too long, there is a risk that their mental health and wellbeing could be compromised.

## What is mental health?

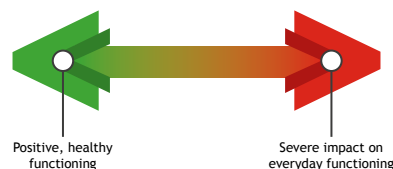
The phrase 'mental health' is often misunderstood. You might hear it used as a substitute for mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety.

According to the World Health Organization, mental health is

*“a state of wellbeing in which every individual realises their own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to their community”.*

Essentially, mental health is the emotional resilience that allows us to enjoy life, create friendships, and be productive, including in our jobs. Emotional resilience also allows us to survive life's disappointments, such as loss and bereavements, family challenges and numerous stressful situations (Keating, F).

Mental health is not merely the absence of a mental health condition, but about being mentally healthy in the way we think, feel and develop relationships. It can be helpful to think of mental health as being on a continuum.



Mental health is not fixed. It is normal to move up and down the continuum throughout the course of a lifetime, or even the day.

For example, a person might feel pretty good about getting a compliment at work, but then get really anxious about an incident they had no control over. This is a normal response to stress and usually resolves relatively quickly, or when the situation changes.

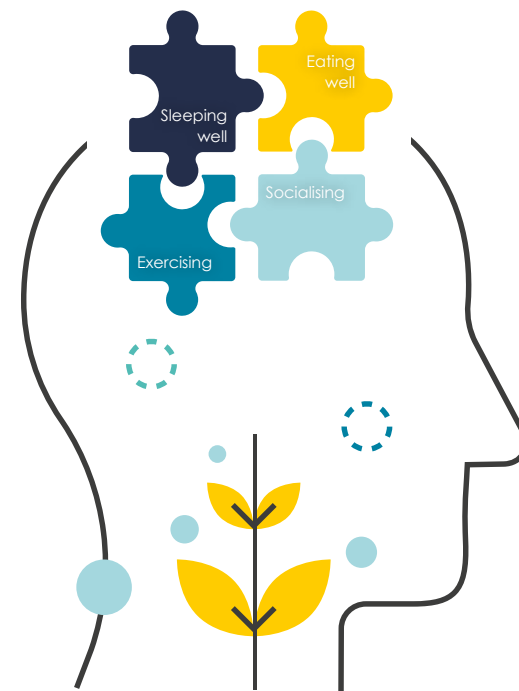
A mental health issue may develop when the feelings are of such long duration and high intensity they start to impact upon the individual's ability to function in everyday life.

## Maintaining good mental health

We know that our mental wellbeing can be assisted by doing four important things:

1. Sleeping well
2. Eating well
3. Exercising
4. Socialising

Shift work can have a negative impact on all of these.



**You can read more about this at**  
[www.headsup.org.au/your-mental-health/what-is-good-mental-health](http://www.headsup.org.au/your-mental-health/what-is-good-mental-health)  
and [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)



## SECTION 2

# How can you *help?*

### Sleep well

Good sleep is integral to our wellbeing. While we sleep many important functions take place that help the body in physical recovery and repair, support brain development, cardiac function and body metabolism, as well as support learning, memory and mood.

Our sleep is regulated or timed by our internal body clock, or circadian rhythm. One circadian cycle is completed approximately every 24 hours. When this rhythm is impaired it can impact upon our general physical and mental health and wellbeing.

Light helps to keep our circadian rhythm synchronised. When the eye senses light, it sends a signal to the brain to be awake. As it becomes dark in the evening, your body produces a hormone called melatonin that tells your body it is time to sleep.

Shift work can confuse the circadian rhythm due to the need to be awake during the night when darkness is signalling that it is time to sleep. This can impair sleep and affect the important repair and recovery work that goes on during the sleep cycle.

**To understand more about circadian rhythms and how they affect sleep, go to**

[www.sleepfoundation.org/articles/what-circadian-rhythm](http://www.sleepfoundation.org/articles/what-circadian-rhythm)

The following tips can help your shift worker to sleep well:

- » The shift worker needs time to wind down after completing a night shift – respect this time-out period. That may mean not expecting them to attend to you or household chores when they get home, but rather giving them space to eat and then sleep
- » Help the shift worker avoid blue light from screens such as televisions, mobile phones, tablets, etc. for at least 30 minutes before going to sleep
- » Support the shift worker to have a light meal before going to sleep after night shift. This should be a breakfast-type meal that includes some protein such as meat or eggs and low GI carbohydrates such as wholemeal bread, leafy vegetables, etc.

- » Create a quiet, dark place to sleep for at least 7 hours
- » Inform family and friends that time to sleep is essential for emotional and physical wellbeing, which may mean missing some events in order to sleep
- » Naps are beneficial and will not affect a person's "long sleep" if they are kept to less than 20 minutes. A note of caution - naps are no substitute for healthy sleep patterns.

**You can read more about sleep and mental wellbeing at**  
[www.theconversation.com/disrupted-sleep-wake-cycle-linked-to-mental-health-problems-new-study-96554](http://www.theconversation.com/disrupted-sleep-wake-cycle-linked-to-mental-health-problems-new-study-96554)

## Eat well

The brain needs a lot of nutrients to function and keep you well, both physically and mentally. Eating well can also help regulate sleep patterns, energy levels, and mental wellbeing.

You may have noticed that mood often affects the types of food you choose, as well as how much you eat. Some foods can lift your mood, energy levels and concentration, while others can have the opposite effect.

The following tips can help your shift worker to eat well:

- » Regular meals are important. Help your shift worker to plan balanced meals that are not too heavy before sleep, but have enough protein to prevent hunger from disturbing sleep
- » Typically, it is best to have the largest meal before commencing a shift. Then during breaks maintain energy levels with a series of snacks that include protein, fats and carbohydrates

- » Hydration is important. Encourage your shift worker to plan to drink at least a litre of water over the period of a shift. This is best taken as regular sips

Eating regular meals that provide the nutrients you need to sustain energy during shift work can be challenging.

**The following links have more information about nutrition and mental wellbeing.**

[www.healthdirect.gov.au/diet-and-mental-health](http://www.healthdirect.gov.au/diet-and-mental-health)

[www.headspace.org.au/blog/the-best-foods-for-mental-health/](http://www.headspace.org.au/blog/the-best-foods-for-mental-health/)

## Exercise

Exercise and physical activity can help maintain your mental wellbeing. Physical activity helps to get blood and oxygen moving around the brain, which has positive effects for brain chemistry and functioning such as:

- » Releasing chemicals like endorphins and serotonin that improve your mood and help you to feel good
- » Increasing connections with nerve cells in the brain
- » Increasing the size of the hippocampus – the area in the brain responsible for memory
- » Reducing symptoms of stress and anxiety and improving sleep.

We know that shift work can interfere with regular exercise or participation in organised sport, however, physical activity doesn't have to be regular programmed or specific exercise.

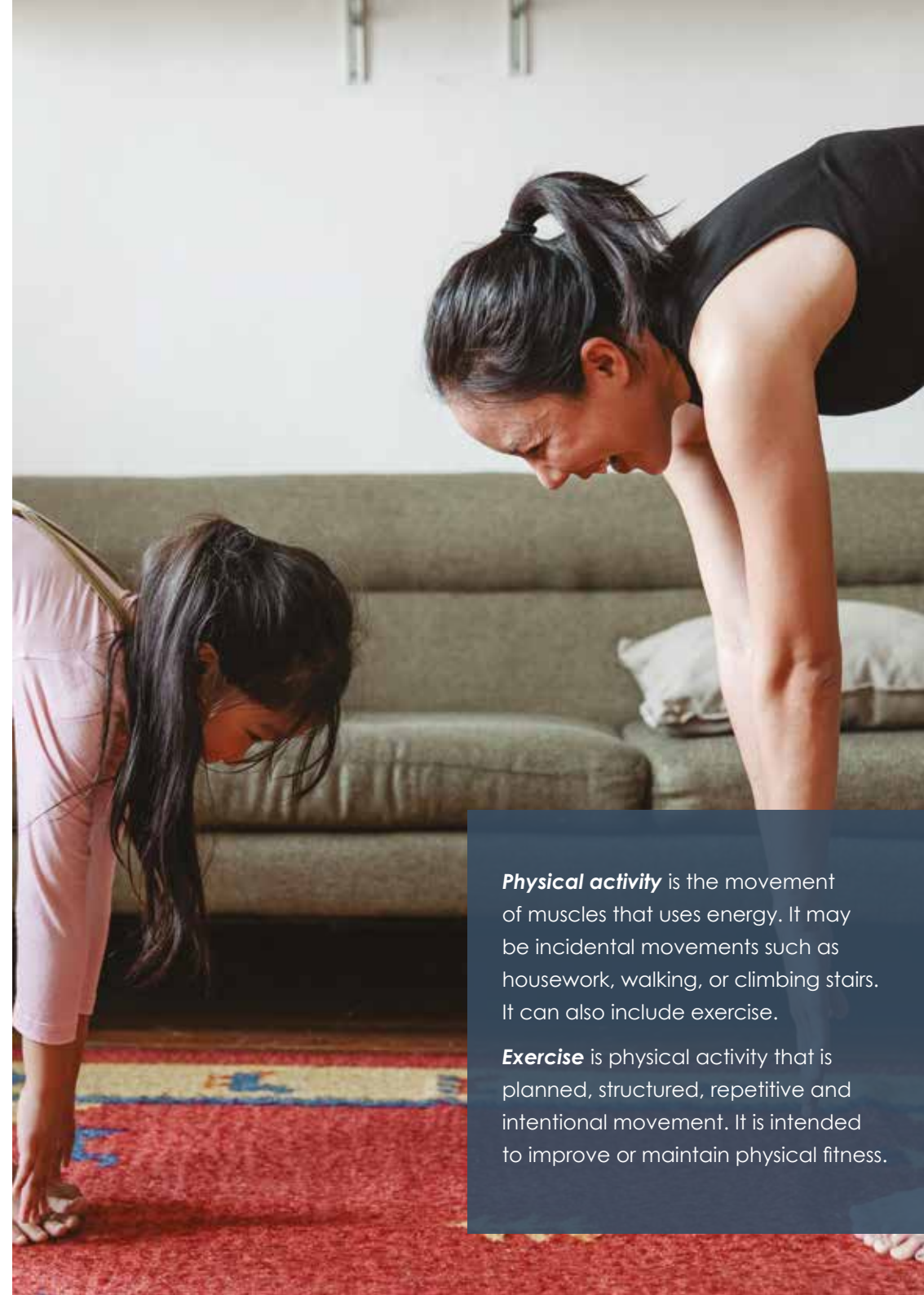
It could be anything you do in your day-to-day life – like running errands or doing housework or walking and cycling rather than taking the car. The following tips can help your shift worker:

- » Go for a walk together – do some light exercise together regularly even if it is for very short periods
- » Find exercise activities that can be flexibly timed such as walking, riding a bike or going to the gym. Team sports can be difficult and can compound feelings of 'missing out' or letting the team down if there are clashes between work and sporting commitments
- » Encourage some form of physical activity five days per week

***You can read more about the benefits of physical activity and exercise and mental health and wellbeing on the sites below.***

[www.healthdirect.gov.au/exercise-and-mental-health](http://www.healthdirect.gov.au/exercise-and-mental-health)

[www.headtohealth.gov.au/meaningful-life/physical-health/being-active](http://www.headtohealth.gov.au/meaningful-life/physical-health/being-active)



**Physical activity** is the movement of muscles that uses energy. It may be incidental movements such as housework, walking, or climbing stairs. It can also include exercise.

**Exercise** is physical activity that is planned, structured, repetitive and intentional movement. It is intended to improve or maintain physical fitness.



## Socialising

Human beings are social creatures.

As far back as we can trace, humans have travelled, hunted, and thrived in social groups. Social groups, including family, provide us with an important part of our identity. The number and strength of our relationships can also affect our mental health and wellbeing.

Socialising can lower rates of anxiety and depression, increase self-esteem, and help us to have greater empathy and more trusting and cooperative relationships.

In contrast, loneliness can lead to disrupted sleep patterns, elevated blood pressure, and increased cortisol (a stress hormone). It is also a risk factor for depression.

We know that the unsociable hours of shift work can limit social interactions. It is therefore important to find ways that enable your shift worker to continue to develop and nurture their social interactions and keep in touch with those who are close to them.

The following ideas might be helpful:

- » A shift worker's schedule can change suddenly. This may impact upon your plans with friends and family. This is usually not the shift worker's fault. Please accept that blame or guilt does not change the outcome and be prepared to re-schedule or attend these events alone

- » Date nights can be helpful but may have to be rotated. Be prepared to re-think the concept of date 'night' as this event may have to occur at breakfast, lunch or early evening as sleepiness can affect concentration
- » It is important to spend family time together, so try to find a time that suits you all to catch up or do some recreation or leisure activities together
- » Plan family events ahead of time – pick a few important dates – and do not overcommit time to attending too many events
- » Talk to other shift workers and their families about how they deal with balancing work and social events

**You can learn more about the importance of social connectedness to your mental wellbeing at these sites:**

[www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/HealthyLiving/Strong-relationships-strong-health](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/HealthyLiving/Strong-relationships-strong-health)

[www.headtohealth.gov.au/meaningful-life/connectedness/community](http://www.headtohealth.gov.au/meaningful-life/connectedness/community)

[www.jeanhailes.org.au/news/friendships-mental-health](http://www.jeanhailes.org.au/news/friendships-mental-health)

## Being a partner

Being the partner of someone who is often absent at odd hours can be difficult. It becomes even more important to develop a program of open communication between you.

- » Allocate small amounts of non-distracted time to be together each day
- » Leave little notes as reminders of your love. Use surprises as a strategy – notes in the car, the bathroom or the fridge, leave small gifts or do something kind for your partner
- » Check in emotionally – remember to say “hi” or “how are you” – and take time to know how your partner is really feeling. Talk about feelings and discuss what can be done to help both partners feel more comfortable

Whilst checking in is important, you do not have to solve the problems. Sometimes your partner will just want to let off steam, and not expect you to solve anything or tell them to ‘cheer up’. Just listening and allowing your partner to talk is often just what is required.

### **You also have needs**

It can be difficult for you if you are taking up the majority of the child care or other family roles during the times when your partner is working shift. It is important that you look after your needs and seek help if needed.

Some suggestions include:

- » Ask family and friends to help out during times when you are feeling lonely or overloaded
- » Talk to other partners of shift workers – they know how you feel
- » Phone calls to check in with extended family who may live far away can be helpful

Please also see the information about the Employee Assistance Program in Section 4 of this handbook.

### **Children and shift work**

Children need time with their parent/s. It can be difficult to balance shift work with time for children, but the following strategies can help:

- » Create small rituals between the shift worker and child, such as including handwritten notes in their lunchbox each day, playing games or doing jigsaw puzzles together. For example, place a jigsaw puzzle on a coffee table so that it can be done at any time when the shift worker and child can sit and do it together

- » Encourage the shift worker to talk to their kids during their planned breaks to help develop the parent-child relationship – regular phone calls can be helpful and can be used to read a book to a child, help them with their homework, etc.
- » Allow children to express their feelings about how shiftwork is impacting them

Often the shift worker wants to be left alone after coming off a difficult shift. It is a good time to remind the kids that people need a bit of rest and ‘me time’ after work and that this is not because the parent doesn’t want to be with them.

But time with the children is really important and we recommend that the shift worker organises special events with the kids – play dates, taking them to breakfast or lunch etc.



# Signs and symptoms *of mental ill health*

## Being aware

45% of Australians between the ages of 16 and 85 experience a mental health condition at some time in their life. In any given year, 20% of Australians will experience a mental health condition, which is usually anxiety or depression.

Mental illness is now the leading cause of sickness absence and long term work incapacity in most developed countries.

The good news is that employers are working hard to create mentally healthy workplaces.

Mental health does not usually deteriorate overnight. It is like many other conditions that develop signs and symptoms over time. It is often family members who first notice the signs of deteriorating mental health and are best placed to assist.

## What to look for

The most common symptom of deteriorating mental health is a change in the person concerned.

These changes are usually behavioral and can include:

- » Changing sleep patterns (sleeping too much or difficulty falling and/or staying asleep)
- » Changing eating patterns (not eating, skipping meals or eating too much, increased use of alcohol)
- » Changing exercise patterns (no longer exercising or excessive/ compulsive exercising)
- » Changing socialisation patterns (no longer enjoying activities that were previously important, complaining that something is no longer fun; avoiding social situations; changing from an introvert to the life of the party; increased use of alcohol in social situations)

## Dealing with crisis, change and uncertainty

We are all more susceptible to mental health issues during times of crisis, uncertainty and change. This can be true for both you and your shift worker and can add another dimension to your family life.

Crisis and change create uncertainty that can take away our sense of control, leading to instability and fear. Mental health symptoms increase during these times, particularly feelings of anxiety and depression.

It is important during these times to look after yourselves as a family unit, checking in on each other and making space to talk about how you are feeling and openly discussing any fears that you might have.

It is good to remember that additional help might be needed during these times and the following section has some excellent resources to help.

The following table (from BC First Responder's Mental Health) can give you some more information and ideas about signs and symptoms of mental ill health and how you might be able to help.

Healthy	Reacting	Injured	Ill
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Normal fluctuations in mood, calm, takes things in stride</li> <li>» Normal sleep patterns, few sleep difficulties</li> <li>» Physically well, good energy level</li> <li>» Consistent performance</li> <li>» Sense of humour, in control mentally</li> <li>» Physically active and socially active</li> <li>» Limited or no gambling/alcohol use</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Nervousness, irritability, impatience, sadness, feeling overwhelmed</li> <li>» Trouble sleeping, intrusive thoughts, nightmares</li> <li>» Tired/low energy, muscle tension, headaches</li> <li>» Procrastination</li> <li>» Displaced sarcasm, forgetfulness</li> <li>» Decreased physical and social activity</li> <li>» Regular but controlled gambling/alcohol use</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Anxiety, anger, pervasive sadness, hopelessness</li> <li>» Restless or disturbed sleep, recurring images or nightmares</li> <li>» Increased fatigue, aches and pains</li> <li>» Poor performance and concentration or workaholic, presenteeism</li> <li>» Negative attitude</li> <li>» Social avoidance or withdrawal</li> <li>» Increased gambling/alcohol use</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Excessive anxiety, easily angered, depressed mood, suicidal thoughts</li> <li>» Unable to fall or stay asleep, sleeping too much or too little</li> <li>» Exhaustion, physical illness</li> <li>» Unable to perform duties/control behaviours/ concentrate, overt subordination, absenteeism</li> <li>» Isolation, avoiding social events, not going out or answering the phone</li> <li>» Alcohol/gambling addiction, other addictions</li> </ul>
<p>Actions to take at each phase of the continuum</p>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Focus on task at hand</li> <li>» Break problems into manageable chunks</li> <li>» Identify and nurture support systems</li> <li>» Maintain healthy lifestyle</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Recognise limits</li> <li>» Identify and minimise stressors</li> <li>» Engage in healthy coping strategies</li> <li>» Get adequate food, rest, and exercise</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Identify and understand own signs of distress</li> <li>» Seek social support and talk with someone instead of withdrawing</li> <li>» Seek help</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Seek consultation as needed</li> <li>» Follow health care provider recommendations</li> <li>» Regain physical and mental health</li> </ul>



# What to do *if you are concerned*

## Useful steps to help

If you are concerned about your shift worker's mental wellbeing, here are some useful steps, formulated by RUOK. Remember not to panic and think of it as you would any other illness or injury.

**1. Ask if they are OK**

"I notice you haven't been sleeping well lately – is everything OK with you? Can I help you with something?"

**2. Listen to them but don't try to solve the problem**

"That sounds really difficult/scary for you. I am glad that you told me. How are you feeling?"

**3. Encourage action**

"I think it might be useful to get some help. Who do you think could help us through this? Let's make a plan."

**4. Check in**

"How did you go today at the doctor? Are you feeling any better now?"



## Employee Assistance Program (EAP)

Most Australian businesses have Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs). These programs entitle employees and their immediate family members to free counselling and support for personal and/or work related issues from an external professional provider.

EAPs can help with a range of issues and concerns including:

- » Interpersonal conflict and tensions
- » Work-related stress
- » Changes in work environment
- » Harassment and grievances
- » Relationship or family matters
- » Personal and emotional stress
- » Grief and bereavement
- » Career issues
- » Mental health concerns
- » Personal crisis or trauma

This help is free and completely confidential. Most programs offer employees (and their families) up to four hours of counselling, per issue, per year.

## How to get help


Most employers provide this information to their employees in their induction pack when they commence work. They may also have posters and flyers around the office. Ask your shift worker for the EAP contact details and keep them handy.

Most EAP providers have a 24 hour response line. Don't hesitate to call this number. The professionals who answer are there to help you and your shift worker.

You can usually choose between face-to-face and telephone counselling options.

## Remember

- » It is completely confidential
- » It is free
- » It is there to help with both personal and work issues
- » You and other immediate family members can also receive this help

A photograph of a man and a young girl sitting in the front seats of a car. The man is on the left, wearing an orange jacket, and the girl is on the right, wearing a pink patterned top. They are both looking out the window towards the right. The background is a blurred outdoor scene with greenery.

***Counselling and support services are not just for those who are overstressed or in crisis. It is better to use these services when you are starting to notice early symptoms. Early intervention can save a lot of pain.***

***If you notice any signs or symptoms of early mental health issues, you can encourage your family shift worker to use this service.***

***Or if you are concerned about your shift worker and want to consult an expert – you can use this service to get advice and support.***

***We also encourage you to use it for your own issues, and those of other immediate family members.***

## Appendix: Key resources

### **Mental wellbeing**

- » [www.headsup.org.au/your-mental-health/what-is-good-mental-health](http://www.headsup.org.au/your-mental-health/what-is-good-mental-health)
- » [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)
- » [www.ruok.org.au](http://www.ruok.org.au)
- » [www.blackdoginstitute.org.au](http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au)
- » [www.opencolleges.edu.au/informed/features/develop-a-growth-mindset/](http://www.opencolleges.edu.au/informed/features/develop-a-growth-mindset/)

### **Shift work tips**

- » [www.healthyshiftworker.com/shop/](http://www.healthyshiftworker.com/shop/)
- » [www.thenewdaily.com.au/finance/work/2016/11/19/shift-work-health-tips/](http://www.thenewdaily.com.au/finance/work/2016/11/19/shift-work-health-tips/)

### **Sleeping well**

- » [www.sleepfoundation.org/articles/what-circadian-rhythm](http://www.sleepfoundation.org/articles/what-circadian-rhythm)
- » [www.re-timer.com/the-product/how-to-sleep-better/](http://www.re-timer.com/the-product/how-to-sleep-better/)

### **Eating well**

- » [www.jeanhailes.org.au/news/foods-for-shift-workers](http://www.jeanhailes.org.au/news/foods-for-shift-workers)
- » [www.worksafe.qld.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0009/109773/shifting-nutrition.pdf](http://www.worksafe.qld.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0009/109773/shifting-nutrition.pdf)

### **Exercising well**

- » [www.workplacewellnessonline.ca/pdfs/Shift%20work%20-%20getting%20enough%20sleep%20and%20exercise.pdf](http://www.workplacewellnessonline.ca/pdfs/Shift%20work%20-%20getting%20enough%20sleep%20and%20exercise.pdf)

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- » Mental Health First Aid England, Line Managers Handbook, 2016
- » National Mental Health Commission and Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance, Developing a Mentally Healthy Workplace: A Review of the Literature, (2014)
- » [www.sleepfoundation.org](http://www.sleepfoundation.org)
- » [www.bcfirstrespondersmentalhealth.com/looking-for-help/self-assessment/](http://www.bcfirstrespondersmentalhealth.com/looking-for-help/self-assessment/)



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[www.maketheshift.org.au](http://www.maketheshift.org.au)



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