

TCP Queensland Chapter

Mental Health Workshop | 26th May 2020

Exploring mental health during COVID-19 and beyond in the Queensland context. With Guest Marcia Harkins, Acting GM, Workplace, Partnerships and Engagement at Beyond Blue.

Workshop context and purpose

During an informal networking event for the Queensland Chapter, held on 30 April 2020 via Microsoft Teams, attendees brought up the issue of mental health as a major concern for the Queensland community, particularly given the following circumstances:

- The remote and regional environment within Queensland
- The heavy reliance on tourism and farming within the state
- The back-to-back nature of current disasters having compounding impacts on individuals and small businesses (eg Monsoon, drought, COVID, bushfires)

On the back of this conversation, the QLD Chapter Chair and TCP secretariat felt that it would be beneficial to bring people together to have a further conversation about the mental health issues arising from COVID-19 and the above-mentioned factors - to discuss what this means in a QLD context and what organisations within the Chapter could do to support their customers, clients and employees during this time.

TCP engaged with Beyond Blue to bring their knowledge and expertise to help guide the conversation for the Queensland Chapter and were very grateful to have Marcia Harkins, Acting GM, Workplace, Partnerships and Engagement at Beyond Blue to be speaking at the event. TCP Partner Energy Queensland also offered their WebEx video conferencing technology and supported the running of the event.

Over 60 minutes, Queensland Chapter attendees came together to:

- Hear from Marcia Harkins from Beyond Blue who discussed what they are seeing on the front line, and some recommendations about what organisations can do to support customers, clients and employees during COVID-19
- Have a Q&A discussion between participants and Beyond Blue about what this means for communities in Queensland
- Share the challenges that we are facing within our own organisations and examples or ideas of ways we may overcome these

For a more detailed agenda of the session and a list of attendees please see the appendix of this document.



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What we learnt

Beyond Blue reported that they have seen the following trends emerging from COVID-19 relevant to Queensland:

- Increased numbers of people seeking help who have not previously experienced mental health conditions. These people may also not recognise their experiencing as a mental health condition, or their need to seek help (unlike those who are familiar with their personal signs of poorer mental health and are more aware of what to do/who to contact to seek support)
- A 30% spike in calls to Beyond Blue support services
- A massive increase in registration for online peer support forums, and high levels of activity on COVID-19 specific online threads
- In the first weeks of the pandemic and associated interventions, Beyond Blue experienced 7 times more activity than during the Black Summer Bushfires
- In response, Beyond Blue have implemented a dedicated coronavirus support service and website including information on how to cope during the pandemic

Beyond Blues dedicated Coronavirus Mental Wellbeing Support Service

Go to: <https://coronavirus.beyondblue.org.au/>

Call: 1800 512 348

People making contact with Beyond Blue are reporting:

- Increased loneliness and isolation
- Family violence
- The emergence of childhood trauma triggered by the pandemic
- Work-related anxiety (about losing income, job loss, increased workload due to redundancies in their team/organisation)
- Relationship breakdown
- Young people in particular are really struggling with isolation (15-24yrs). It's generally the first time in their lifetime they are seeing something like this.
- Some people approaching COVID-19 as a 'sprint' initially are now experiencing exhaustion as long-term nature of situation is realised
- Challenges of at-home learning for parents
- Fear about restrictions easing and what this means
- Those who have mental health conditions often choose to isolate themselves and the current situation may be used to further enable this, or loved-ones may more easily miss increased isolation as a warning sign
- Emerging risk of increased suicide rates
- Concern about how to reach people who might not seek help from Beyond Blue or other service



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The Queensland context:

- Queensland communities are still recovering from multiple natural disaster events (droughts, North Queensland Monsoon etc.)
- The global animal health company Zoetis reported that the drought has had the most significant impact on the QLD community, and especially for rural communities
- Prior to the floods, Townsville's suicide rate was 2.5 times the national average
- Some people in Queensland feel that they have been forgotten as the public focus shifted to the Black Summer Bushfires and more recently to COVID-19.
- Beyond Blue has contributed to Townsville's Mentally Healthy City Program. The program aims to help the people of Townsville flourish and thrive as a community by heightening the focus on mental wellness and through assisting individuals and organisations to better support those people who from time to time may be mentally unwell
- One of the key objectives of this program is to break down stigma around mental health

Some strategies recommended by Beyond Blue for individuals to support their mental health during COVID-19:

- While we are physically distant, we can stay socially connected
- Sleep hygiene: the importance of rest and getting a good night's sleep
- Physical exercise: maintaining some exercise in our daily routine despite less travel
- Diet: the importance of a nutritious, balanced diet

The following strategies are recommended by Beyond Blue for organisations to support their customers, clients and employees:

Beyond Blue's advice to organisations is to focus on three key areas to support staff and customers during this time:

(1) Promote good mental health:

- Work provides sense of purpose
- Work can enable support and recovery
- Work provides social connection & mental health protection, encourages social connection between employees
- Encourage staff to maintain good work/life balance, particularly those WFH or who are busier than ever (eg those in the healthcare sector), and provide practical advice from trusted sources on this
- Set up channels to consult with staff around mental health: how they are feeling, what do they need
- Implementing any additional mental health support services necessary
- An organisation-wide 'time-out' where no meetings can be booked



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- Focusing on outcomes rather than hours logged for staff members
- Assisting staff by making financial advice available and referring them to trusted sources

(2) Prevent risks to workers' mental health:

- New risks emerging (eg sense of isolation, staff reductions)
- Role changes or work spread across less people = greater pressure on remaining workers
- Consider this in the way we design jobs to minimise risks to staff, like stress and isolation, and promote wellbeing
- Ensure role clarity in new environment – staff need to know what's expected of them, have manageable workloads and grow and develop skills
- Recognise that there are complexities in individuals' unique circumstances when working from home. Everyone copes differently with stress and their needs will vary in terms of their working arrangements

(3) Support workers experiencing issues:

- Covid-19 has actually opened up a lot of conversations about mental health
- Opportunity to focus on opening up conversations, and removing barriers around seeking mental health support,
- Offer Employee Assistance Programs (EAP)
- Sensitively accommodate employees' return to the office

Three critical factors for success:

- Need support and endorsement from senior leaders to gain traction
- Employee participation in the process of putting together an organisational mental health plan
- Ongoing conversation and keeping up the dialog with staff. Being open, honest and transparent in communications, and reviewing and updating plans as necessary

Marcia also recommended that as organisations we should all consider what we can learn for the current situation and what we can keep doing following the pandemic.

To create more mentally healthy workplaces for staff and employers:

<https://www.headsup.org.au/>

Queensland Examples of great mental health initiatives in the workplace:

Energy Queensland was acknowledged as a great example of taking a preventative approach to mental health in the workplace.



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What we discussed

The following are question and answer discussions captured from throughout the virtual workshop.

Q: *Some essential services implemented support packages and offered deferred payments in response to COVID-19. However, there are concerns about the build-up of debt and how this may impact people's mental health. Is the current management of debt and mental health by essential services adequate?*

A: *Recognising the potential link between mental health and financial hardship Beyond Blue has:*

- *Partnered with FCA, for cross referrals between mental health services and financial counsellors*
- *There has been a lot of research overseas around the link between experiencing financial hardship and mental health. Beyond Blue has been exploring the possibility of doing some research to better understand the link between financial hardship and mental health.*

Marcia also recommends that the best way to reach people and better understand different cohorts and their needs is to go through peak bodies

Beyond Blue's focus cohorts include: the LGBTQI+ community, people in regional and remote locations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, CALD communities and people experiencing financial hardship.

Q: *There are concerns that staff aren't taking time away from work. What are the potential consequences of this from a mental health perspective?*

A: *This has definitely been an issue at Beyond Blue and something we're seeing. Many people have had to cancel their planned leave. People are fatigued but tend not to take time off as they are home already and restrictions mean they are unable to travel.*

It is important that businesses support their employees' wellbeing at this time. This could be encouraging flexible working or taking a long weekend where it is needed. Beyond Blue's suggestions for supporting customers, clients and employees (above) can assist in supporting staff wellbeing and mental health through this time.



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Q: How can we link processes and resources on the ground to things like the Townsville Mentally Healthy City?

A: This really comes back to what we can do in our individual organisations for our employees and our customers. You can also find information and resources for individuals and organisations on the [Townsville Mentally Healthy City website](#).

Q: What is the best way forward for organisations who are reviewing and adapting their mental health strategy?

A: Organisations should consider the following:

- Keeping the lines of communication open
- Being prepared to change
- Reviewing, adapting and updating mental health strategies regularly in response to staff and customer needs
- Setting up the right environment for staff to have their say (Beyond Blue conducted an anonymous survey to staff and adapted their strategy accordingly)
- Beyond Blue has implemented virtual sessions for parents supporting at-home learning during COVID-19
- Changing the organisational focus from hours to outcomes
- Strengthening teams throughout the pandemic and beyond so that everyone feels supported and knows where/how they can seek support

An offer of support from RACQ:

"Initially set up to support community groups impacted by natural disasters, the RACQ Foundation is now extending funding to support those impacted by COVID-19. Queensland community groups impacted by the COVID-19 crisis or natural disasters including drought can now apply for funding up to \$20,000 from the RACQ Foundation.

RACQ Foundation encourages Queensland community groups or charities to apply who meet the following criteria:

1. Queensland charities or community organisations that have been significantly affected by COVID-19;
2. Charities or community organisations with a charitable purpose that help Queenslanders who have been impacted by COVID-19; and
3. Queensland charities or community organisations whose activities and purpose aligns with the RACQ Foundation.

RACQ is owned by members, which means we can do more for our Queensland community, helping however we can in tough times. For more information, visit RACQ Foundation's [website](#). Round 2 closes on 19 July 2020."



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Further questions for reflection

We encourage organisations to continue conversations around mental health internally and collaboratively. The following questions may prompt reflection and discussion around mental health in relation to the Queensland context, and as we emerge from restrictions related to the current pandemic.

- What is happening in our own organisations?
- What does it mean for organisations in the next 6-12 months as restrictions ease?
- What are the implications for small business and how might we better support them?
- What are the implications for farmers and how might we better support them?
- How might this change service delivery?

Reflections and close

TCP Queensland's Chapter Lead Jane Pires reflected on the fact that people are experiencing life-changing events during this time and the long-term impact this may have on their mental health is something we need to recognise. Additionally, we need to be mindful of the fact that people are responding in different ways. Some are treating this like a sprint when it's a marathon. Practicing empathy and compassion is important more than ever at this time.

Marcia acknowledged that Beyond Blue is planning for and expecting a 'second wave' of people seeking mental health support as we emerge from the COVID-19 restrictions and risk encountering a second wave of the pandemic.

The Queensland Chapter recognised that there is a need to accept a different productivity level for now, as we all learn to work in new ways (navigating technology and remote working etc.). This is a time of change in which the 'old rules of business' no longer apply. It is an opportunity for organisations to change for the better and for individuals to learn and continue to be open to new ways of working. For example, there will likely be a need to facilitate virtual and face-to-face attendance to events ongoing in the future.

We also recognised that this is a one-in-a-hundred year event that we are experiencing globally. Individuals and society are not going to 'snap back' to normality, therefore we need to continue conversations around the emerging impacts of the pandemic on mental health as we move from crisis into recovery.



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Appendix

Attendees:

Sara Collins - Energy Queensland
Aaron McCann - Energy Queensland
Angela Stanley - Suncorp
Chris Woolcock - Uniting Kildonan
Alison Proctor - RACQ
Geoff Lambert - Unitywater
Hayley Taranto - NAB
Yvonne Searle - Energy Queensland
Teresa Nielson - Transurban
Natasha Laroo - NAB
Rose McGrath - QCOSS
Jess Oey - CUA
Karen Hughes - Urban Utilities
Sonia Cahill - EWOQ
Michelle Bagnal - RACQ
Narelle Fortescue - Powerlink Queensland
Kate Austin - Energy Queensland
Kenny Mizzi - Energy Queensland
Ciara Sterling - TCP
Tracy Collier - TPC
Jacinta Oakley - TCP
Jane Pires EWOQ
Marcia Harkins - Beyond Blue
Unknown Attendee - Unknown (4)



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Agenda:

The high-level agenda for this workshop is included below.

Time	Duration	Detail
3:00-3:10	<10 mins	Welcome and introduction by Jane Pires <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Acknowledgement of country• Introduce the session and its purpose
3:10-3:20	10 mins	Marcia from Beyond Blue spoke on: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What are the trends that Beyond Blue have been seeing emerge from COVID relevant for QLD?
3:20-3:25	5mins	Q&A and reflections with Marcia and participants on: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What does this mean for QLD?
3:25-3:35	10 mins	Marcia from Beyond Blue spoke on: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What are some of the strategies they are recommending to businesses to support staff and customers? Beyond Blue's advice to organisations is to focus on three key areas to support staff and customers during this time: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Promote good mental health• Prevent risks to workers' mental health• Support workers experiencing issues
3:35-3:57	10 mins	Q&A and reflections with Marcia and participants on: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is happening in our organisations now?• What does it mean for organisations in the next 6-12 months as restrictions ease?
3:57-4:00	3 mins	Reflections, summary and close by Jane Pires

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Key links and comments from workshop chat:

Here are some great resources from Beyond Blue that could be helpful

- Dedicated Coronavirus Mental Wellbeing Support Service website <https://coronavirus.beyondblue.org.au/> and phone line 1800 512 348
- To create more mentally healthy workplaces for staff and employers: <https://www.headsup.org.au/>

The drought is still a significant issue and will remain that way.

I think the COVID-19 crisis has pushed many Queenslanders to the brink as we are usually a resilient bunch but it feels like there is no relief or breathing space to recover between these events

Congratulations on a fantastic partnership with FCA

Debt accumulation is going to be a great concern - particularly in the September period when people start to realise the magnitude of debt they may have - at the same time as when current relief packages from the Govt, banks and others are due to end

I'm a Mate's Connector here at work and I'm interested to see how we can link with programs/initiatives like the Mentally Healthy City Townsville

<https://www.moneyandmentalhealth.org/>

My workload has increased and I have taken a couple of days off recently just to ensure I am looking after myself

Alcohol consumption has also increased during COVID-19 too

Question: Does anyone have any particular insights in terms of impacts of COVID mental health related impacts on some of our most vulnerable customers, particularly our culturally and linguistically diverse communities, who at this time may feel even more 'alone' or 'isolated' in terms of accessing information and services?

- Multlink in Logan said that lots of their clients do not use online resources. They were closed for a while but I think open again now. They have walk-in service for clients

That's a great idea to have an organisational wide 'time out'!

Yes love the idea of time out

Great advice, design with people not for people !

The COVID-19 crisis has certainly made some of my customers make remarks that they realise not to take the simple things for granted

