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## Mental health Q&A with author Kerry Howard

By [Jack Campbell](#) | April 13, 2023 | 4 minute read

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**Kerry Howard, author of *How to Heal a Workplace*, discussed the importance of promoting healthy employee wellbeing with HR Leader.**

**HR Leader: “How can employers better support employee wellbeing?”**

Ms Howard: “Employers need to take a pragmatic approach to how they engage staff, from recruitment through to ongoing wellbeing checks. Providing clarity around the expectations that they have of their people through a clear and consistent framework of policies and procedures, supported with transparency around decisions, improves wellbeing in the workplace.”

“Supporting employees to develop more adaptive ways of working, building resilience, and improving their problem-solving skills will improve employee engagement and, ultimately, increase productivity,” said Ms Howard.

“By focusing on the key components of wellbeing and promoting psychological safety, employers create an exceptional workplace culture for their people, increasing profits and creating a level of positivity that will translate into widespread happiness at work.”

**HR Leader: “Why is discussion around mental health so important?”**

Ms Howard: “The ability to maintain a separation between life and work is impossible to achieve. We spend so much of our time engaged with our work, even if we spend less time in the actual physical workplace post-pandemic, the working environment will affect our personal life and vice versa.”

She said: “Our mental health challenges are the highest in our recorded history. We have increased our mental health literacy and we validate negative experiences. However, the combination of changes that have resulted from the industrialisation of our planet has led to the creation of a society that validates learned helplessness.”

“If the pandemic taught us anything, it is that illness is temporary ... Until you put the word ‘mental’ in front of it. It’s the unseen challenge that affects all of us.”

**HR Leader: “How can education in the workplace help staff?”**

Ms Howard: “As human beings, we have many complex feelings and emotional experiences that impact our mood; we are not robots. We cannot merely switch ourselves into ‘work mode’ and switch off the fact that we are having relationship problems, or our parents or child are sick. There are many occupations where it can feel like we readily switch into ‘work mode’. We see this in occupations that require uniforms; we put on the uniform and our behaviour changes, but it doesn’t mean that the stress of our home life stops affecting us.”

Ms Howard continued: “The same is true in reverse: our experiences at work can spill over into our mood and behaviour at home. When we are unhappy at work, it places pressure on our home life. Whether it’s financial pressure, time pressure or other excessive work expectations, it is impossible to separate the impact of our working and home lives — and unreasonable of us to expect that they can be separated!”

**HR Leader: “Who do these responsibilities fall on?”**

Ms Howard: “There is a dual responsibility, shared between the staff member and their supervisor. Both have to be proactive in communicating about their observations.”

“The one constant reflection that I hear from staff who have had a difficult time, but managed to work through it, is that they had a supportive supervisor. The perception of ‘support’ changes depending on the workplace, but it is essentially where the staff member felt that their challenges in life were seen by their supervisor to be a temporary glitch in their work performance, and they were provided the space to get through the challenge and get on with life, without it affecting their working life,” explained Ms Howard.

“In essence, their situation was appropriately viewed as ‘temporary’, and they were trusted to get back to full capacity as soon as practicable. The important element here is ‘trust’.”