MOUNTAIN CLIMBING
A resource for tertiary graduates with lived experience of mental illness making the transition to employment
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Proviso: To the best of our knowledge all details and facts included in this resource were accurate at the time of publication.
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FOREWORD

These days I am employed full-time in community mental health, but I still clearly remember the painful years when I thought that it was impossible for me to work due to episodes of anxiety, depression and psychosis. Consequently, I am delighted that this valuable resource has been produced to assist graduates with a lived experience of mental illness in their transition to employment.

‘Mountain climbing’ is an excellent metaphor for such a resource. The metaphor also resonates with my own personal experience. Shortly after I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, I foolishly ignored words of caution and pushed myself far too hard in an unrealistic attempt to rapidly reclaim elements of my life. It was equivalent to trying to sprint up the steepest side of a mountain. Not surprisingly, I experienced psychosis, lost my grip on the world and tumbled all the way down to the bottom.

Learning to maintain one’s mental health – to climb the mountain – is not a task that can be mastered overnight. It is a time-consuming process requiring the acquisition of insight, skills, knowledge and the right equipment. It’s also wise to assemble a good team.

First and foremost, it is essential to remember that safety is always the top priority in such pursuits, and that it is possible to choose a different path at any time to reach a summit, or to change the destination altogether.

If you have a lived experience of mental illness and are searching for employment, one issue for careful consideration is disclosure. My own policy of disclosing to employers has served me extremely well, but there is no universal recipe available in this complex area. Accordingly, material has been included in this resource to help you determine what course of action is best suited to your individual circumstances.

In any event, congratulations on completing your studies. I hope that your transition to employment is a rewarding process; one which ultimately leads to a fulfilling career. The view is worth all the effort.

Keith Mahar
ACE National Network Inc. Ambassador and founder of www.mentalympians.org
1. THE LAY OF THE LAND
Finding your place in the mental health landscape

The conventional wisdom in the field of university counselling is that the severity of mental health problems on campus has been steadily increasing.

In their landmark study, S. A. Benton et al. (2003), found that over the course of 13 years, there has been a marked increase in the percentage of students seeking counselling for problems related to developmental and situational problems, depression, academic skills, grief and medication use.

The authors concluded that university counsellors are seeing students with more complex problems, which may reflect changes in the prevalence of mental distress at large within the population, changes in the university environment, and increasing psychiatric medication use by students before entering college (S. A. Benton, Benton, Newton, Benton, & Robertson, 2004; Rudd, 2004; Sharkin, 2004).

A number of useful resources have been put together to help students with a mental illness succeed at TAFE and University. You might be familiar with the “Towards Success” series and the “Staying Sane on Campus” kit produced by the University of Melbourne.

But what options are open to you once you’ve graduated? You’ve done so much hard work and probably endured a lot of stress. You’ve met deadlines and passed exams. Surely you deserve some time to rest and reflect.

**Myth**
A person with mental illness who thinks that he/she is not ready to enter the world of work is obviously not ready.

**MYTH BUSTED**
It’s common for mental illness to cause a reduction in confidence but people with mental illness can still find work when they aren’t feeling well. Working and looking for work keep you engaged and can actually speed up the recovery process.
We certainly think you do! Work Mountain is looming up ahead but you may need to think carefully about how you want to attempt the climb. If you charge straight up without a strategy you could get sick or get stuck halfway up. If possible, you really need to avoid taking the wrong track and wasting your valuable mental resources in having to go back down and start again.

An American study showed recently that only 32 per cent of young adults with a severe mental illness continue on to tertiary studies compared to 51 per cent of young adults without lived experience of mental illness. You haven’t just continued your studies, you’ve completed them.

The resilience and perseverance that you’ve already demonstrated will stand you in good stead as you transition from study to work. Even so, you might benefit from some assistance getting through this tricky process.

You might have heard the term ‘transitioning’ in your reading on mental health. When you first got sick, you and your support network can be said to have transitioned into a new kind of life.

All of a sudden you had some new things to think about, you might have started to think a bit differently about yourself and felt pressure to change some of your expectations. Getting medical support was, and is, one aspect of this transition. The transition from study to work provides another opportunity for you to embark on another key life journey. Transitioning into the mental health system may have given you a chance to learn and grow. So does the shift into employment, with the added bonus that you’ll have a new chance to earn a graduate wage or salary after all your study.

This resource is designed to give you some of the equipment you might need to make a smooth transition into work. It’s also designed to help you get through the first week of work and to stay employed once you find a job.

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Peter’s Story

Peter went to a high school in Sydney from 1989 to 1994 and managed to do well enough in the HSC examinations to have the option of either law or journalism at university. He began to develop paranoia when he was about 17 and was prescribed anti-depressants by his doctor. He chose law and in his second year his paranoia got so bad that he needed some time in hospital. The doctors diagnosed him with bipolar disorder and prescribed him lithium and olanzapine. Even though he had to take time out from studying, he was able to get good marks and graduate with a law degree after six years of study. Because of his good marks he was optimistic about getting a job with a large Sydney firm. He had successfully completed a clerkship during the Uni break between his fifth and sixth years of study.

He hoped to get a job with the same firm but when he applied and told them about his mental health issue, he sensed that they were wary about hiring him. After a few weeks the firm contacted him to tell him that they were keen to give him a position but that he needed to talk with them more frankly about how his mental illness would affect his work. At the second interview, he said that his illness was very episodic and that he functioned well 90 per cent of the time. He told them that in the worst case scenario he would need a couple of weeks off. They seemed understanding but ultimately told him that they thought his illness would require them to make changes to the position that would cause them unreasonable hardship. As such they weren’t prepared to take a risk by hiring him.

Peter was really hit hard by this and didn’t know how to proceed. He contacted a mental health support group and was told that he didn’t have to disclose his illness at job interviews unless he thought it would definitely affect his work. At his next interview, Peter didn’t tell the panel about his mental health issue and was subsequently offered a position. After six months working at the firm, he decided that he had proven his worth and felt confident about telling his boss about his condition. His boss was very understanding and when he got sick later that year, he was given plenty of time to recover and then return to work.
After six months working at the farm, he had decided that he had seen his wealth eroded by his wealth eroded by his wealth.

Peter's Story
We’ve tried hard to ensure that this resource speaks to your lived experience of mental illness. We hope that it will enable you to confront some of the challenges that can come with a mental health issue and turn some of the negatives into positives.

It does its best to provide up-to-date information in a useful and user-friendly form that should start to demystify a range of work-related challenges. We know that your search for employment is a personal one and we don’t want to try and take over your project. We hope that you’ll make use of the material here that speaks to you and quickly move through the areas that you already have under control. This booklet is a kind of GPS system to which you can refer to make sure that you’re headed in the right direction. It might even make some suggestions on when to make a turn to the left or the right. It certainly won’t tell you where you should be going.

The tips and case studies included here are designed to reinforce your belief that you can find a job and hold on to it once you get it. We’re confident that you can build a rewarding career in spite, or even because, of your experience of mental illness. We’re also pretty sure that you’ll need to make use of the help that’s out there. You’ll probably have moments when you need some assistance to work through the problems and opportunities that come with bringing a mental illness to the employment process.

Some of these resources are included in this booklet, but we don’t have the space to discuss all the stages that might constitute your journey. You’ll probably still need to do some more thinking of your own when you come across unfamiliar obstacles. You might need reserves of courage, resilience and persistence to land a job and keep it, but you might also find that getting a job is a breeze.

Either way, we’ve tried to take account of the different tracks that can lead to the top of Work Mountain. And this mountain doesn’t have to be Mt Everest. Mountains come in different shapes and sizes and some of them don’t take a massive effort to climb.

Once again, the precise nature of your journey is unknown to us. We can only offer you some general tips and moral support. One thing we do know, though, is that the views from the top of Work Mountain are worth the effort and every step you take – and this counts especially for the little ones – will take you closer to the summit.

**WELL, WE GUESS YOU ALREADY KNOW A FAIR BIT ABOUT MENTAL ILLNESS BUT...**

A severe mental health issue can be recognised and classified as a disability, but most people’s experience of mental illness is neither drastic nor long-lasting. Even so, minor depression can still disrupt your wellness. Anxiety can make it hard for you to do what you want to do. Some mental health problems can reduce your capacity to reach your potential in the workplace. We hope that this resource is relevant for every kind of mental health issue, not just severe mental illnesses like schizophrenia or bipolar affective disorder. We hope that it will be helpful to you
THE LAY OF THE LAND: Finding your place in the mental health landscape

if you’ve been temporarily prescribed anti-depressants or had a mild mental health issue. If you’ve spent any time in a psychiatric ward, on the other hand, you’ve probably seen a wide range of mental health ailments. You might have concluded that the people in hospital are as friendly and caring as everyone else. Even if your mental health issue is not debilitating, you might know someone whose is. You might also have seen a movie or read a book based around a character who suffers from depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, anxiety disorder or borderline personality disorder. They can seem like mysterious illnesses but they’re actually quite common, 45 per cent of Australians will have a mental health issue at some point in their lives.²

If you haven’t got a diagnosis, but feel overly anxious, down, manic or scattered, you should probably talk to a doctor about how you’re feeling. Once you get a diagnosis, you should be able to access the appropriate treatment. Therapy and medication can really help. You don’t have to be really sick to seek out help.

You might just be feeling a bit teary or having trouble concentrating. This can still be a problem because your transition to work is likely to be easier the better you’re feeling. Your GP will be able to provide you with a full list of mental health conditions and treatment options; or you can look them up on the web.

There’s a good chance that if you’re reading this you’ve already been given a diagnosis. But for more general information about mental health conditions, we’ve included a resource list at the end of the booklet.

A lived experience of mental illness can bring scars and emotional baggage. It might make you feel discouraged about your chances of finding and keeping a job. Equally though, you might have got through your mental health issue without too much lasting trouble and even feel stronger and more self-aware for the experience.

If you still feel like you’re struggling with your illness, the upside is that treatment has come a long way in recent years and there are lots of tools available for managing ongoing mental health issues. These days, a mental health issue doesn’t have to stop you from reaching your goals, especially if one of those goals is getting work. Perhaps the most important thing is to seek help if you start to falter.

You can find support and guidance in current research, psycho-therapy, peer support groups and/or medication. We hope that this booklet will help as well.

THE LAY OF THE LAND: Finding your place in the mental health landscape
Marie’s Story

Marie had a happy childhood with a supportive family in Hobart. She really wanted to find work with lots of human contact, so after finishing Year 12, she enrolled in a hospitality course at TAFE.

At first, she loved the course, but after a year or so, she started to worry about mucking up her assignments and looking clumsy when she waited tables.

Soon, she started having trouble sleeping and her worries got worse. She came to believe that one of her teachers didn’t like her and started avoiding the class taken by that teacher.

Eventually she told her mother about her problem and they both did some research into anxiety. Marie and her mother discovered the idea of mindfulness and Marie started using some of the breathing and relaxation techniques that she read about.

After a couple of weeks, she realised that the teacher didn’t have a problem with her and she went on to get good marks and finally her Certificate IV in Hospitality.

Marie started looking for work as an assistant manager in the tourism sector in Hobart.

She didn’t have a lot of success at first and her anxiety returned. When she started having trouble sleeping and cancelled interviews because of her nerves, she realised she needed more help.

Her GP referred her to a psychologist who reinforced the mindfulness training she had done before and gave her a number of other strategies to cope with her anxiety.

She resumed job-seeking and after three months found a part-time job working for a local ferry cruise business. After a further six months, she started working full-time and has been with the same company now for two years.

Her anxiety is always in the background, but with the help of her support network, she knows how to deal with it.
WHAT MENTAL ILLNESS MIGHT MEAN TO YOU

There’s a good chance that your mental health will play a role in shaping the way you look for a job and approach your working life. At this stage, you might like to do an audit of what mental illness means to you personally. You can list what you perceive to be your strengths and maybe your weaknesses, your triumphs and defeats and your positive and less positive characteristics.

You might also like to think about what you want from work given the negative and positive aspects of your lived experience of mental illness. Lots of research shows that working can really help people recover and manage their mental illness. Almost everyone agrees that satisfying employment is an important part of human life. As two British psychiatrists who have worked in the USA and the UK write in a recent book:

‘Work is a fundamentally important part of everyone’s life, no less the lives of people with a mental illness. As such, it is seen by many, including people with mental illness, their carers and their treatment providers, as an essential measure of recovery...At the individual level...recent research shows that working can lead to less frequent admission to hospital, lower symptoms of psychosis, lower treatment costs, improved quality of life, improved social functioning and enlarged social networks.’

What work can mean to someone with a lived experience of mental illness:

- Contribution to society
- Increased self-respect
- Better quality of life
- Contact and friendship with others
- Achievement
- Financial independence
- Recognition
- Recovery and personal growth.

WORK AND SELF-ESTEEM

Sitting at home, working on your car or writing a novel might sound appealing when you’re stressed out and low on confidence. It’s hard to find a substitute, though, for the rewards that come from succeeding in the open job market. You probably wouldn’t have stuck at your studies if you didn’t know this. But it’s worth reminding yourself why you want to get a job. You can make friends and have the money to travel or get stuck into a hobby. You might be able to provide for your family or move out on your own. Climbing Work Mountain is no mean feat for anyone. Hopefully, once you start the journey, you’ll get right into it; notching up interviews and honing your application writing skills. Then, when you land some work, you’ll have more capacity to do some of the extra things you want to do with your life.

You might have bad stretches while you’re looking for work. If you do, you should consider taking a break and recharging. We suggest that you get your bearings, work out exactly where you stand and consolidate your position. Then you can start thinking again about your goals and your approach to getting work or keeping it. As soon as you’re feeling well enough, you might want to start sending out resumes and searching the job sites again. Diego’s story is an example of how work can make you feel when you’ve been through some tough mental health battles.

3 J. Leff & R. Wagner, Social Inclusion of People with Mental Illness, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006, p. 113
Diego’s Story

My horizons have broadened. I’m gaining confidence daily, some financial security... I took my first pay cheque – it was my first in seven years – and I framed it. I photocopied it because I had to cash it, but I put the copy in a frame in my home. Then I wrote a personal cheque and put it in a smaller frame. I feel plugged in to society because I’m working. I’m gaining friendships so my isolation is limited. I may self-isolate for a weekend but that’s more or less like downtime to recoup.4

4 Ibid., p. 113
THE LAY OF THE LAND: Finding your place in the mental health landscape

As you read this booklet you’ll come across statements like the one in the box at left. The first statement in each box is a myth. These myths aren’t based on facts. They reflect social stigma, stereotypes and prejudice. We believe that you can succeed in work to the same level as anyone else. But in order to do it, you might have to look after yourself a little bit more than the average, and do your research and get support when you need it. We’ve busted the myths to help you see how challenges can be turned into opportunities.

BUILDING SUPPORT NETWORKS

One of the hardest things about having a mental health issue is self-stigma. This happens when you start to label yourself as less important than others. You might start to assume that other people look down on you or think you’re weird because of your mental illness. Building a support network is one of the best ways to combat self-stigma. The members of a sympathetic and encouraging support network can let you know if your behaviour is getting a bit erratic. They can be frank with you about your illness and let you know if you’re drawing false conclusions about what other people think of you. You’ll probably have a good idea already of when your symptoms are playing up. An informed support network can help you identify exactly where you’re going wrong. You might start to think employers are holding your mental illness against you if you get a few rejection letters. Your support network should be able to tell you that the real problem is really something else, like the way you’re writing your applications or organising your time. They might also help you make better choices about which jobs to apply for.

More information on self-stigma:
Medscape CME: http://cme.medscape.com (free membership is available on the site)
Eurekalert: www.eurekalert.org
Psych central: http://psychcentral.com

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**Myth**

If someone’s mental illness is not under control, they are not job-ready.

**MYTH BUSTED**

Getting work can be a really good way of controlling your illness. But if you are seriously unwell, you should probably focus on getting better before you start looking for work. Even if you have some symptoms of a mental illness, there’s a good chance you’ll still be able to work especially if you focus on making small, incremental steps toward your goals.
Laura’s Story

Laura turned 20 in 2010. Five years before, she was hit by a bout of depression that interrupted her schooling. Her GP prescribed her anti-depressants but the side-effects were intense. She put on weight and suffered regular headaches.

After six months she went off the anti-depressants and sought help from a psychologist. The psychologist told her about cognitive behavioural therapy and Laura had a lot of success with the treatment.

She finished Year 10 without missing any more school and started a Certificate II in Retail Operations. Her depression came back but with the help of her psychologist and her broader support network she got through her studies.

When she finished her Certificate, she decided to do more study and started a Certificate III in Beauty. Once she graduated, she sought help from the careers service at TAFE in finding some part-time work. Because her depression was under control she decided not to disclose her illness when she applied for jobs.

She was sure she could conceal her mental health condition and, as it turned out, she was right. She found an interesting job in an inner-city beauty salon and is now undertaking her Certificate IV qualification in Beauty. She still sees her psychologist and keeps a close eye on her moods.
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Your support network can be really important in helping you choose the right kind of job. It can help you succeed at interviews, cope and even thrive at work. Your support network can include family, friends, doctors, therapists, members of your church group, internet forums, team mates at your football club and your employment service. When you get a job it can even include your workmates.

Some of you might not be happy with the support you’re getting and some people can succeed in the journey up Work Mountain largely on their own. If you don’t need a support network, that’s fine. If you feel like you need more support and you just aren’t getting it, you can get in touch with the various groups that operate around the country. Your GP should be able to help here and your psychologist or psychotherapist should also be prepared to give you support and help you find community organisations that specialise in this kind of thing. If you’re reading this and feeling isolated and alone, we feel for you. We wish you luck making what can be the difficult steps toward reaching out to the larger world for guidance or support.

If you do have a functioning support network, you might need their help if things start to go wrong and you’re stressing out too much or even having an episode. You can bounce ideas off them and absorb their praise when things are going well. You can see them regularly, for therapy, for example, or just when you need to share some ideas around.

We think it’s really important that you don’t feel silly, weak or afraid to ask for help if you need it. Your support network might want to keep a close eye on how you’re going. This can be annoying but it seems to come with the territory. If everything’s running to plan, don’t feel as if you have to share your innermost thoughts or worries. You’re entitled to privacy just like everyone else.

You don’t have to stick with a support network if it doesn’t seem to be helping. The way you use your support network can change over time just like friendship groups change. If you’ve been helped out by someone in the past, it doesn’t mean you’re obliged to ask them for help all the time. You should pick and choose according to the help you need. Sometimes you might get more from people who challenge you – people who remind you of what a great achievement it’ll be to climb Work Mountain and urge you on to greater efforts. Sometimes you’ll need a more nurturing, supportive kind of response – people who tell you you’re doing well already wherever you are on the journey. A supportive network will probably remind you of the importance of pacing yourself and taking it easy as you make more of those crucial small steps toward your goal.

Here are some links to useful support network information:

Mental illness fellowship of South Australia: www.mifa.org.au
Bipolar: www.bipolar.com.au
Health Insite: www.healthinsite.gov.au
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We think it’s really important that you don’t feel weak or afraid to ask for help if you need it.
2. SO MANY MOUNTAINS IN THE RANGE
What kind of work is right for you?

**Myth**
If a person with mental illness is really motivated to work he/she should be willing to try out any job.

**MYTH BUSTED**
People with a mental illness have the same right as anyone else to choose the kinds of work they do.

In Norway, the employment rate of people with disabilities with tertiary education is 30 per cent higher than the employment rate of those without tertiary education.

In Ireland, employment opportunities of people with a disability with a tertiary education diploma are five per cent higher than the employment opportunities of the general population with a tertiary education diploma.

**Jamie’s Story**

Jamie is 19 and has lived experience of depression and anxiety. He’s even had a depressive psychosis that led to a suicide attempt and a three-week stay in hospital. In 2009, he completed a Certificate II in Conservation and Land Management and found some work building tracks in the Hartz Mountains south of Hobart.

His health deteriorated though. His depression hit him hard and he overdosed on prescription medicine just trying to dull the pain and escape from life. With help from a psychotherapist, he sorted out a lot of his issues and regained a fair amount of self-worth and self-respect.

His psychotherapist suggested that he wasn’t getting enough support from the friends he was hanging around with who smoked a bit of pot and were mostly on the dole. Jamie decided that he wanted more positive energy in his life so that he wouldn’t fall back into patterns of self-hatred.

This is still something he works on when life seems meaningless and he feels guilty and ashamed of himself. He’s made new friends who are all studying or working and together they get into fixing up old Holdens (never Fords!).

Because he struggled to find more work building tracks, Jamie decided to go back to TAFE to do a mechanical course. He’s now looking for work in an automotive workshop, seeing his psychotherapist and saving up for a new carbie so he can finish the engine of his green EJ.
2. SO MANY MOUNTAINS IN THE RANGE

What kind of work is right for you?
CONGRATULATIONS,
YOU’RE A GRADUATE!

We think it’s important to celebrate your success so far. You’ve just finished a diploma or a certificate or a degree in a specialised field and hopefully learned lots of new skills. You’ve acquired tradeable knowledge and shown that you can stick at something over a long period of time. Your course should have gone a long way to making you job-ready even though your illness might still be an issue and you might struggle from time to time. You’ve already done a lot of the hard yards towards securing and keeping a job.

If you’re in the middle of an episode or feeling extra fragile, you should probably focus on your recovery before you start thinking seriously about work. If your treatment plan is sound and you’re on top of things, now could be a good time to map out a route. Your degree or certificate or diploma is freshly minted and your knowledge and skills are right up to speed.

If you’ve completed a vocational course, you’ve probably already narrowed your field to an area like IT or hospitality, for example. If you’ve got a specialised degree in nursing or engineering, you’ve probably also already made a lot of the hard decisions about what you want to achieve in your career. If you have a generalist degree in science or arts, you still have a wide range of options open to you. Of course, if you’re a graduate of a vocational course, you also still have choices about what you end up doing. There’s a good chance your qualifications will enable you to move sideways into another trade if you aren’t happy where you are. You probably won’t have to start out right at the beginning again if you want to choose a different Work Mountain to climb!

One good way to structure and refine your thinking about your transition to work can be to do a career-related values audit. You might like to remember again that if you’re currently unwell you probably shouldn’t push yourself too hard to complete this audit. Your judgement could be off at the moment. If you’re depressed, for example, you might be unduly pessimistic about your abilities and you probably won’t get full value from the process. If you’re in this situation, it’s probably a good idea to wait until you feel good about things, then sit down and follow the prompts.

The audit over the page is sourced from an American site but it’s still valid in Australia. Values are basically universal and everyone has them.
Identifying your personal values is an important part of a successful career-related values audit. In this context, the word ‘value’ refers to how you feel about the work itself and the contribution it makes to society. Most people who pursue work that lines up with their values feel satisfied and successful in their careers.

Work values can be divided into two functional categories. Intrinsic values are those that relate to a specific interest in the activities of the work itself, or to the benefits that the work contributes to society. Extrinsic values relate to the favourable conditions that accompany an occupational choice, such as physical setting, earning potential, and other external features. Most people, in order to feel truly satisfied with their work, must find some personal intrinsic value in it.

The following is a list of personal values that many people have identified as being important to them in their careers. To begin exploring your own personal work values, rate each value listed with the following scale and add other values you consider essential to your list.
1 – Things I value VERY MUCH

☐ Help Society
   Do something which contributes to improving the world we live in

☐ Help Others
   Be directly included in helping other people, either individually or in small groups

☐ Public Contact
   Have a lot of day-to-day contact with the public

☐ Work with Others
   Work as a team member toward common goals

☐ Work Alone
   Do projects by myself, with limited contact with others

☐ Competition
   Engage in activities which pit my abilities against others

☐ Make Decisions
   Have the power to decide courses of action and policies

☐ Work Under Pressure
   Work in situations where time pressure is prevalent

☐ Influence People
   Be in a position to influence the attitudes or opinions of other people

☐ Knowledge
   Engage in the pursuit of knowledge and understanding

☐ Work Mastery
   Become an expert in whatever work I do

☐ Artistic Creativity
   Engage in creative artistic expression

☐ General Creativity
   Have the opportunity to create new programs, materials, or organisational structures

☐ Aesthetics
   Participate in studying or appreciating the beauty of things, ideas, etc

☐ Supervision
   Have a job in which I am directly responsible for the work of others

☐ Change and Variety
   Have work activities which frequently change

☐ Precision Work
   Work in situations where attention to detail and accuracy are very important

☐ Stability
   Have a work routine and job duties that are largely predictable

☐ Security
   Be assured of keeping my job and receiving satisfactory compensation

2 – Things I VALUE

3 – Things I DON’T VALUE very much
Security
Be assured of keeping my job and receiving satisfactory compensation

Recognition
Be publicly recognised for the high quality of my work

Fast Pace
Work in circumstances where work must be done rapidly

Excitement
Experience a high degree of (or frequent) excitement in the course of my work

Adventure
Have work duties which require frequent risk-taking

Financial Gain
Have a high likelihood of achieving very great monetary rewards for my work

Physical Challenge
Do activities that use my physical capabilities

Independence
Be able to determine the nature of my work without significant direction from others

Moral Fulfilment
Feel that my work contributes to a set of moral standards which I feel are very important

Community
Live where I can participate in community affairs

Time Freedom
Be able to work according to my own schedule

WORK VALUES AUDIT

Add others which are important to you.

My five most essential values:

1. ____________________________
2. ____________________________
3. ____________________________
4. ____________________________
5. ____________________________

Source: www.presbyteriansamaritan.org

Once you’ve done this audit, you might be in a better position to narrow down your work targets.
You’ll probably need to think about the kinds of employment that fit with your values. If financial rewards are at the top of your list, applying for work in an aid agency might not be a great idea. Working as a gardener might not suit you if you like a fast-paced environment.

You’ve already acted on your values in choosing and completing your certificate, degree or diploma.

If you already know what you want to do, please don’t feel obliged to use the values tool. Like everything else in this resource, it’s strictly optional.

Ryan’s Story

Ryan turned 51 in August. When he was a little kid something bad happened to him that he doesn’t like talking about. The doctors called it trauma and now they say he suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder.

Ryan’s had mental health issues all his life. He can count on one hand the years when his health has been plain sailing. But Ryan never gave in to his condition.

Over the years he built a strong support network made up of friends, family and counsellors. He spent time in hospitals in Tasmania and interstate.

He worked more jobs than he can count but never got a qualification. Finally this year, he completed a Certificate IV in Counselling and landed a job at a Job Network straight away.

Even though he was really excited to be offered a role so quickly, Ryan found his anxiety build as the start date for the job drew nearer.

When his first day arrived, Ryan was a wreck. His hands were shaking and his thoughts were racing. He knew he couldn’t go to work in that state so he contacted his own Disability Employment Services provider and asked for help. His case manager helped him calm down and asked if he’d disclosed his mental health issues when he applied for the job. Ryan said he had disclosed so his case manager simply called the workplace and told them what had happened. Ryan went to see his psychiatrist who changed his medication. Two weeks later he started at the job.
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THE LAY OF THE LAND: Finding your place in the mental health landscape
Bobby-Jean’s Story

I’m thrilled to have found work at the University library. It’s work that I find has a stimulating and supportive environment and which I believe complements and enhances my recovery.

Recently my manager has said she’s very happy with my work and as they’re short staffed she’d like me to work longer hours.

The extra income would be very welcome of course, and I would feel awkward about refusing my manager; however my support worker and I had talked about not taking on too much work until I feel comfortable.

I decided to go back to my manager and discuss her proposal in light of my Wellness Recovery Plan.

We talked about how confident I felt in the job so far, what it would mean if I worked another five hours a week, would I have the time and energy to cook myself healthy meals, get enough sleep, have time to relax and have a social life.

I felt I could manage the extra hours, however, and decided to ask my manager if I could work the extra for a trial period only and review the commitment on a regular basis to monitor my health.

My manager was pleased for me to have a probationary period. If she wasn’t, I wonder if I would have been prepared to put my health before work commitments.
PART-TIME, CASUAL OR FULL-TIME WORK

It’s important for everyone to look after their health and this is especially true for people who’ve had a mental health issue. Even if you’re fully recovered, working part-time or casually is one way to give yourself a good work-life balance.

There’s been a lot of research done recently on the idea of wellness. Wellness means keeping your body and mind in good shape so you can function at as close to an optimum level as is realistic and thus have a better chance of reaching your potential.

Mental health is a physical condition as well as a mental one. Your brain is an organ like your heart or your lungs and it’s a good idea to keep it in good working order. Reaching your potential doesn’t mean going so hard that you burn out. It’s all about balance.

Getting exercise, taking time off for recreation and staying on good terms with your friends and family can all be important parts of the picture. If you have a more solitary life, you might have some other techniques like exercise or meditation for staying reasonably calm and happy about things.

For lots of people, optimum performance can mean part-time work and lots of time for rest and recuperation. Choosing part-time or casual work can help you enjoy your work more.

Staying well is important for everyone who has a lived experience of mental illness and working in a flexible or part-time capacity should give you more time to work on your wellness.

You can spend time doing things like exercising, going fishing, helping out your friends and family and doing more cooking, repairs and gardening at home. If you do more around the house and spend your free time doing a budget and looking for bargains, you’ll probably save money too.

These days, the workplace is pretty open to flexible working arrangements and you’ll probably find plenty of opportunities to choose part-time employment.

But this does depend a bit on the sector in which you hope to be employed. From what we’ve heard, building sites, for instance, are still pretty closed to the idea of part-time work.

This comes down to values as well: if you aren’t all that materialistic and don’t need a lot of disposable income, you could be happier in a part-time role. You’ll also have more time then to act out some of your values in volunteer work or art or sport.
You might have your mind set on making a big splash in the world of work. You and other people with a mental illness can climb the corporate ladder and do super-demanding, full-on tasks just like anyone else, if you have the skills, dedication and focus.

If you’re determined to make employment your number one goal then, sure, go for that full-time position. You’ll probably need a good support network to make a go of it and you might also need to focus on your wellness while you’re at it. But if staying healthy means that part-time work would suit you better, you should consider going down that path.

You can always negotiate to take on more work once you get settled in a position. Climbing a smaller mountain is still an achievement and once you’re at the top, you’ll be able to get a better sense of the scale of the bigger peaks and a different view of your own goals and ambitions.

Isobel’s Story

When I began to recover from mental illness I wanted to find work. I’m a creative person and enjoying cooking. My friends tell me they love the food I’ve cooked so I thought I’d like to look for work as a chef. I know it’s important to find something I enjoy otherwise I won’t be motivated to go to work.

When I went to my support worker we talked about the types of work that would be beneficial to my recovery and those that wouldn’t. If I’m to stay well, I need part-time work initially, that isn’t as stressful and allows me regular daytime work. The more we talked, the more I realised that work as a chef would be likely to trigger anxiety due to the high pressure that chefs are constantly placed under.

In addition, the odd hours they are required to work, often into the night, would mean it would be almost impossible for me to maintain a regular sleeping pattern. I could see a career of this type was likely to be detrimental to my health and increase the chances of a relapse of my illness.
THE LAY OF THE LAND: Finding your place in the mental health landscape

Isobel's Story
WORK EXPERIENCE AND VOLUNTEERING

It’s worth considering work experience and volunteering as a means of getting valuable experience and even a job. If you do well and you make a good fit with the business, you might be able to land some work there. Volunteering and work experience can both be good ways of testing the waters to see if an organisation is right for you.

You could disclose your mental health issue when you approach an employer and see how they treat you. If they support you and show a willingness to adapt to your condition, you could try and get hired as a paid employee. Equally, you could keep your condition private and see how that approach works out in a work setting.

Employers have been known to move mountains to get the people they really want for their organisation. You could be a sought-after member of staff if you impress an employer with your skills and positive attitude during work experience or a voluntary placement.

STRESSORS AND TRIGGERS: CHOOSING A JOB THAT WON’T MAKE YOU SICK

Stress can be divided into good stress, neutral stress and bad stress. Some experts call bad stress, ‘distress’. Bad stress or distress can be a real killer, literally. Over time, distress can cause physiological problems like high blood pressure and obesity and lead to unhealthy habits like smoking or excessive drinking. One stress expert, Walt Shafer, defines stress as “the arousal of mind and body in response to demands made on them.” Life itself can be inherently stressful. It might be helpful to work out how much stress you can handle before you start to get stressed out. Some people get stressed when they are too busy, others when they aren’t busy enough. Now’s a good time to get a sense of your stress zone – high, low, moderate – and try to find a job that suits you. As Shafer goes on to write:

“A particularly challenging aspect of career choice is assuring that it is fully one’s own, reflecting one’s deepest interests and values. Often, of course, students concern themselves with pleasing parents or with expediency, material gain, and short-run opportunity rather than with the more important issues of values, ethics, personality-career fit and lifestyle options. Attentiveness to these broad concerns is vital, beginning from arrival at [Uni or TAFE] all the way through to choice of major, job interviews and job choice.”

We hope that if you take account of these considerations you’ll be more likely to avoid work stress that turns into distress.

Opposite is a chart of how stress can affect you and how you can deal with it.

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5 W. Shafer, Stress Management for Wellness, Wadsworth, Belmont, 2000, p.6.
6 Ibid., p. 42.
A person with a mental illness should only work at low stress jobs that require no interpersonal contact.

MYTH BUSTED
People with a mental illness can perform high stress jobs if they have a high stress tolerance, learn effective coping mechanisms and manage their illness well. Interpersonal contact at work can have restorative effects for people with a lived experience of mental illness.

SO MANY MOUNTAINS IN THE RANGE: What kind of work is right for you?

APPROACH
- Relaxation
- Adopting a constructive mental pattern
- Structured problem solving
- Restoring a normal pattern of sleep
- Reducing alcohol and caffeine consumption
- Making healthy choices

TECHNIQUE
- Progressive muscle relaxation
- Becoming aware, censoring and modifying thoughts
- Identifying, thinking clearly, taking stock and building a sound basis for important decision making
- Better sleep guidelines: day, evening, bed-time, night
- Strategies for moderating alcohol use
- Regular daily exercise, strengthen your relationships, find a positive way of letting off steam, make room for difference, learn to say no, find a retreat where you can clear your head and reflect on what you most value

MYTH
A person with a mental illness should only work at low stress jobs that require no interpersonal contact.

MYTH BUSTED
People with a mental illness can perform high stress jobs if they have a high stress tolerance, learn effective coping mechanisms and manage their illness well. Interpersonal contact at work can have restorative effects for people with a lived experience of mental illness.
THE LAY OF THE LAND: Finding your place in the mental health landscape
Owen’s Story

Everyone knows that Owen’s a smart guy. He can cook the best curries and fix guitar amps and play the piano. They also know he has schizophrenia. When he was 30, Owen had a major psychotic episode that lasted a couple of weeks. He ended up sleeping under a railway bridge in Brisbane, before finally being admitted to hospital.

Since then, his illness has been pretty much under control but he still can’t find a job. His family is pretty supportive and he has some good friends. He knows he drinks too much but at least he’s off the pot. He knows he shouldn’t gamble but sometimes he really wins big.

About two years after his episode, Owen started a science degree. He liked the course, especially botany and ended up doing honours. He came second in his honours class and won a scholarship to do a PhD. His family were so excited and he was too. He still wasn’t thirsting for a career in academia but the scholarship paid his rent and he was interested in finding out some more about the mating habits of crocodiles.

Owen never finished his PhD and he’s back living with mates in a pokey flat. It wasn’t his mental health that got in the way. He just lost interest in science and started playing the piano again. His supervisor tried to lure him back but Owen just couldn’t be bothered.

A job came up picking fruit in Victoria and Owen skipped a big presentation to go and make a few extra dollars. He didn’t have a lot of motivation to succeed but he was stubborn about his right to live his life as he chose. He refused to see counsellors and therapists and couldn’t see anything wrong with being on the dole.

Now ten years later, Owen works now and then, cooks his curries and plays the piano. He’s unmarried, has no children, owns no property and has never had a job that really challenged or satisfied him.

Every now and then he thinks about going back to finish his PhD. But he just doesn’t have the motivation to do it.
3. STARTING THE CLIMB
Looking for work

ACTIVE/PASSIVE JOB-SEEKING

You’ve probably already worked hard in your studies and had a fair bit of success. There’s a good chance that you’re well equipped to keep up the momentum and move quickly into paid employment. A key here can be to make sure that you remain an active job-seeker. We suggest that you don’t give up the journey until you get up Work Mountain, if getting work is what you really want to do. This can mean understanding your illness and how it affects your job-seeking. It can mean thinking hard about the kinds of jobs that suit you and reward you. You may have to be creative and look outside the confines of your discipline or trade. For example, you might have studied automotive at TAFE but you really enjoy working with people. You could look for work in a parts supply shop or as a roadside assistance officer or even as a driving instructor. You don’t necessarily have to spend the next 30 years with a filter wrench in your hand.

Basically you’re in the same boat as graduate job-seekers without lived experience of mental illness. This process is taxing for almost everyone! One thing you’ll probably need to do is keep your stress levels within your stress zone. If you can handle a lot of stress, you might want to push yourself to find a job by contacting lots of employers, door knocking and making contacts. If you don’t handle stress well, it might be better to go a bit easier on yourself and set a goal of applying for a few jobs a week. If you apply for Newstart Allowance, you’ll be required to do a certain amount of job-seeking in exchange for being paid. If you don’t respond well to stress, it’s a good idea to just do the bare minimum you’ve been asked to do. You’ll still be in the mix and when you feel up to it, you can ramp up your efforts. You can follow this link for some helpful tips on job search stress:


Myth

Employment settings are limited in their ability to handle people who are perceived as too ‘different’.

MYTH BUSTED

Employment settings are becoming more and more flexible in their treatment of people with a range of health and behaviour issues. Tolerance and respect for difference are now common features of the workplace.
Once you’ve ceased full-time study and your exams and final assessments are out of the way, you can apply for income support. You could be eligible for Newstart Allowance or the Disability Support Pension (DSP).

Newstart Allowance is paid to people who are looking for work and applying for this is easy enough. You’ll need to go to Centrelink, contact them by phone or apply online. They’ll fix you up with an application kit where you spell out your financial situation. You’ll have to declare your assets and your housing situation. If you’re renting you may be eligible to receive Rent Assistance. Centrelink will book you an appointment and you take in all the completed paperwork (make sure you bring enough ID too). After that, your application will be processed. If you’re eligible for Newstart Allowance, your payment will be backdated to the day you first contacted Centrelink.

If you’re on Newstart Allowance and you get really sick, you can ask for a Centrelink medical certificate from your doctor. This will give you time to get back on your feet without the pressure of job-seeking or work.

If you think that your illness may affect your capacity to work full-time or continuously then it is important to talk to Centrelink about this. You will need to provide them with medical evidence to support this. You may then be eligible for reductions in job-seeking requirements or eligible for the DSP. Many people with a mental health issue avoid the DSP because they feel like they’d be giving in to their illness if they apply for it. However you can still get lots of support to look for work.

For more information see:

EMLOYMENT SERVICE PROVIDERS

Government responsibility for helping people with mental illness to enter and remain in employment rests with the Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations. But really it’s you, and you alone, who are leading your expedition up Work Mountain even if you have a fair bit of support around you. The government can only do so much to help you.

You may be referred for a Job Capacity Assessment. This is when Centrelink works out how much work you are able to do and if you need specialised help to get work. If you’re unwell, they’ll reduce the amount of hours you’re expected to work. You’ll then be assigned to a provider organisation from Disability Employment Services or a Job Services Australia provider depending on the kind of help that the Job Capacity Assessor thinks will offer the most benefit to you.

Job Services Australia and Disability Employment Services providers can help you with resumes, application letters and interview techniques, and let you know when jobs are advertised. They are required to be accepting, encouraging and offer individualised service. Employers often get in touch with the providers directly, so you should be able to get preferential access to some jobs when they become available.

If your mental health issue doesn’t affect your capacity to look for work too drastically, you’ll be referred to a Job Services Australia provider. Make sure you register for the Australian Job Search Service here as soon as you are in the employment market: http://jobsearch.gov.au/default.aspx

If your mental health issue does affect your capacity to look for work you may be referred to a Disability Employment Services Provider. They offer specialised service and support in seeking, gaining and maintaining employment. They will have a good understanding of your illness and the challenges you face and should be able to provide lots of moral support. For more information see: www.centrelink.gov.au/internet/internet.nsf/services/disability_emp_services.htm

MAKING USE OF THE CAREERS SERVICE AT YOUR UNIVERSITY OR TAFE

You probably already know about the careers services provided by your tertiary institution. Well, now might be a good time to really make use of them. You might like to get in touch

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with your local support and equity or student services staff and give them the chance to use their skills and contacts to smooth out your transition to work.

If you use your careers services wisely, you’re more likely to land a suitable job and hold it down over the long term.

THE STANDARD JOB SEARCH

When you’re looking for work, we think it’s important that you try not to think of yourself as automatically disadvantaged. You should probably recognise any limitations you might have but it’s better to focus on your strengths.

You may have a mental illness or a mental health issue but you’ve also just completed studies that challenge many people. It’s a good idea to go about things in a systematic way.

You could start off by looking online and in the newspaper. You might also like to get in touch with labour hire firms who can keep you on their books.

Putting your name on temporary employment registers kept by larger companies and public sector agencies can also be a good move. Other options include making use of any contacts you already have, reminding yourself that lots of jobs are gained through word of mouth and going out door knocking if you think your health is up to it.

Self-employment can be a good way to have more control of your work and avoiding getting lost in a big bureaucracy. Setting up a tutoring service or a home computer maintenance business, for instance, are low-cost ways of staying busy, getting real workplace skills and making some money.

Or if you have an idea for a new type of self-employment venture, the Australian Government’s New Enterprise Incentive Scheme may help you with training, income and business support for 12 months.

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Myth

A person with a mental illness always needs specialised disability resources to get a job.

MYTH BUSTED

Most people with a mental illness get jobs on their own or with standard job search assistance.
Nick’s Story

I find things are looking bright these days. I’ve finished my Social Work degree and have my mind set on one day working in social research. But it’s been a challenging and scary ride at times. I have suffered a long-term battle with depression. I’ve seen periods of extreme highs and severe lows, which has made it hard for me to find a balance in life. During university, I struggled with a lot of social barriers.

I had abysmal self-esteem, which would set off the anxiety. I suffered some paranoia and would over-analyse interactions with people, thinking they were making fun of me or didn’t like me. Eventually I just isolated myself from any social setting that made me feel like that.

I have experienced dark hours, some of which are due to the difficulty finding the right medication. One of the scarier periods fresh in my mind was just after graduation. Leaving university and having to find work was stressful and frustrating, and I constantly questioned where I was heading. I had no purpose or self-esteem. I felt like I was stuck in a trench. I was disappointed in myself for not being able to cope with life’s challenges the way I expected I should.

The longer I was unemployed, the deeper my depression, which eventually led to suicidal thoughts. I felt like I was plummeting fast and was scared about what I might do, so I took myself down to the mental health services to get professional help.

This eventually led me to having a Job Capacity Assessment (JCA) to help determine the most appropriate employment assistance for me. Following the assessment, I was referred to CRS Australia for help.

It was here that I met my CRS Australia Vocational Rehabilitation Consultant, Helene, who worked with me to address my barriers to employment and set a goal to work towards. I participated in a vocational program to help me explore where my job interests lie.

Having a job goal has given me direction and a focus, something I have lacked in the past. I am actively searching for suitable jobs and doing volunteer work, which is helpful to put some of the skills I’m learning with Helene into practice.

CRS Australia has taught me how to focus and allowed me to find a purpose in life. I’m feeling as good as I’ve ever felt and I’m looking forward to what’s ahead.
THE LAY OF THE LAND: Finding your place in the mental health landscape

Nick's Story
Diep’s Story

When Diep’s father died, the family decided to shut down the family restaurant they’d been running in Richmond. Diep had done well at school but didn’t really know what she wanted to do with her life. She decided to work at the family restaurant and soon became a proficient chef. She spent long hours working in the kitchen and had a good time. She couldn’t quite understand it, but at the same time she began to feel uncomfortable out in public, shopping or watching the Tigers play at the MCG. She started having panic attacks and went to see her doctor. Her doctor asked her some questions and prescribed her anti-anxiety medication. Now the restaurant was closing down and Diep had to make a new plan. Her anxiety was under control so she decided to go to University and get back into academic studies.

She’d always loved poetry, so she decided to study English with the intention of becoming a high school teacher or an academic. She studied hard, coped with her panic when it reared its head and even published a couple of poems in national magazines. When she graduated, she was faced with a range of possible job options. She could go on to honours, try and find work in the publishing industry, apply for arts grants and focus on her writing, look into journalism, teach overseas (she also spoke Vietnamese) or enrol in a graduate teaching course. She did her research and went to speak to people in the different fields, but the more she thought about it the more anxious she felt. She started drinking in the afternoon to reduce the anxiety but became disgusted with herself and felt even worse than before.

She went back to her doctor to see if she could try a different medication. Her doctor listened to her story and had a think. “Diep,” she said. “I don’t think you need more medication. You just need help making a decision about what you want to do now you’ve graduated. You’ve got so many options that you’ve tied yourself up in knots.”

Her doctor advised her to talk to her University careers service and to get in touch with an employment services provider. After getting some more advice, Diep decided to apply for a grant to write poetry and was successful first time round.
THE LAY OF THE LAND: Finding your place in the mental health landscape
4. THE SUMMIT IS IN SIGHT
Applications and interviews

WRITING TO AN EMPLOYER

There are lots of sites that provide advice on how best to write a job application and there are links to some of them below. You can find the rest yourself by typing ‘writing job applications’ into your preferred search engine. This part of the job-seeking process puts you in pretty much the same boat as everybody else. It’s a good idea to play to your strengths and give yourself plenty of time to proofread and revise your applications before you submit them. You’ll almost certainly need to make sure that your resume is up to date and well laid-out.

Most applications will include selection criteria and a statement of duties. You’ll need to address all of the selection criteria by showing how you’ll be able to perform the duties that come with the position.

These other links will take you to some helpful sites that should get your application writing skills up to speed.

http://www.write101.com/businessletter.htm
http://au.answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20091217014557AAFEQso
http://jobs.lovetoknow.com/Career_Counseling_for_Mentally_Ill

DISCLOSURE AND APPLICATIONS

You may want to make the decision to disclose your mental illness in a written application. This is totally fine but don’t feel that you have to be so frank. Employers are not allowed to ask if you have any mental health issues unless those issues could get in the way of you fulfilling an ‘inherent requirement’ of the position.

Another thing to think about is contacting the employer to find out if they are ‘disability confident’. A disability confident employer is more equipped to understand how disability affects every area of their business. They are more likely to provide an inclusive, supportive and flexible workplace and can be more willing to make adjustments which are designed to enable every individual to make a contribution. More and more businesses in Australia are becoming disability confident. You don’t have to disclose your condition when you ask a prospective employer if they work in this way.

The link below will give you more information about what it means for an employer to be disability confident:
http://www.realising-potential.org/disability-confidence/
THE INTERVIEW

It’s important to try not to get too stressed out before interviews.

A little bit of anxiety is normal for most people and can help you focus your energies, but if you start to panic you should probably take some preventative steps: you could talk to someone in your support network, do some mindfulness exercises or regulate your breathing.

It might be an idea here to remind yourself of your achievements so far. You could remind yourself of your strengths and your skills and your knowledge and tell yourself, I have a right to apply for this job and a right to get it too.

Mindfulness is a stress reduction technique that has its roots in Buddhist meditation practices.

The evidence so far is that it can really reduce anxiety and stress at a moderate level. If you’re having panic attacks or experiencing more serious turbulence you should probably see your GP, psychologist or psychiatrist for help. For an introduction to mindfulness you can follow this link:


MYTH

Only employers who are Good Samaritans will hire someone with mental illness.

MYTH BUSTED

People with a mental illness can be just as productive as anyone else and add good value to the workplaces in which they operate. Employers hire people with mental illness because they earn their keep.
Before your interview, you might want to make a decision about whether you intend to disclose – this might be the last chance you’ll get before you start work if you’ve decided that you intend to ‘come out’. If you do decide to disclose, we think it’s a good idea to work out what you’re going to say before you approach your employer so you’re not caught out when the time comes to describe your situation. But remember employers are not allowed to take your condition into account unless it stops you from performing the ‘inherent requirements’ of the job (more about that later...).

Further information is available here:
www.thesite.org/healthandwellbeing/askthesiteqandas/mentalandemotionalhealthqandas/interviewpanicattack
www.hope-health-recovery.org.uk/documents/Work_and_Mental_Illness.pdf
http://socialanxietydisorder.about.com/od/copingwithsad/a/jobinterviewtips.htm

Myth
The stress of working is likely to cause relapses for someone with severe mental illness.

MYTH BUSTED
Stress is an issue for people with a mental illness but it can be managed through techniques like mindfulness, meditation, exercise, medication and therapy.
Ahmad’s Story

I recently completed my course and decided to begin applying for positions advertised in the paper. When I began to put together an application, I found it very difficult to know what to put in my resume, given my long absences from employment, and how to address the required selection criteria. The longer I tried working on it, the more anxious I became until I began avoiding the applications altogether.

I decided to visit my rehab worker at Aspire to discuss my plight. They advised me about resume writing courses. I signed up to one and began attending. The teacher suggested students select a job advertisement from the paper to practise writing an application during class.

She outlined a structure we could use and provided examples of covering letters, advice on expanding one’s resume and how to address the selection criteria. She provided an outline of the content and format of each section.

At the end of the course I had developed a portfolio with an updated resume and a number of example selection criteria, and felt confident about writing others. I found undertaking the class had reduced my anxiety and provided strategies about how to deal with writer’s block and avoid the stress I had started to experience.
HOW TO COPE WHEN YOU DON’T HEAR BACK FROM AN EMPLOYER OR, EVEN WORSE, YOU DON’T GET THE JOB YOU WANTED

We don’t think you need to be discouraged if you get some knockbacks. We recommend that you do a few different things to deal with rejection letters.

You could get in touch with the organisation that decided not to hire you and ask them what you could do differently next time. You could take some time out from job-seeking. You could renew your connections with your friends and family. You could talk to your psychologist or therapist or your informal support network (family, friends, support groups). It’s not a bad idea here to let the key people supporting you do some more supporting. Whatever happens, now’s probably a good time to recharge your batteries and try again when you feel up to it.

If you’re registered with Newstart as having a disability or are restricted by a health condition, you won’t have to look for as many jobs as you otherwise would. If you’re on the DSP you’ll also be given the opportunity and the encouragement to manage your job-seeking pretty much on your own terms.

If you’re receiving support from a Disability Employment Service, you’ll be able to ask for post-application counselling. It’s also important at this stage to conduct regular self-assessments of your mental health to make sure you’re feeling solid, grounded and under control.

Keeping a journal where you write about yourself in the third person (John attended an interview, Simone was struggling with her application) is a method that has sometimes been used to good effect by people in the same boat as you.

If you get continual knockbacks for a certain type of job, you could also re-do the values audit to make sure you’re looking in the right area for your skills and expectations. It could be that the employers are making a more accurate assessment of the kinds of work that would best suit you.

Finally, if you suspect that you have been discriminated against by an employer who is not hiring you because you’ve disclosed your mental health condition, you can consider contacting the Australian Human Rights Commission or Legal Aid.
The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) ensures that a person with a disability has a right to the same employment opportunities as a person without a disability.

The DDA makes it illegal for an employer to discriminate against someone on the grounds of disability. So if you disclose at an interview or in a written application, you can’t just be crossed off the list because of your mental illness.

Employers must offer equal employment opportunities to everyone. This means that if a person with a disability can do the essential activities or ‘inherent requirements’ of a job, he or she should have just as much chance to do that job as anyone else.

For example, an essential activity or ‘inherent requirement’ for a clerical job is to follow detailed instructions. But it is not an ‘inherent requirement’ to take these instructions orally. If your mental illness means you are more comfortable receiving written instructions, the employer might be required to make this ‘workplace adjustment’.

They may also have to make ‘training adjustments’ to help you perform the role.

It’s important to remember that you are legally required to disclose your condition if you think it will impact on your capacity to perform the inherent requirements of the job. If you don’t disclose your condition, the employer won’t be able to make the necessary changes to your role and there could be other legal implications.

However the DDA does not require workplace changes to be made if this will cause major difficulties or unreasonable costs to a person or organisation. This is called ‘unjustifiable hardship’. If your mental illness could only be accommodated by major changes to the role or the workplace, your employer may be entitled to refuse you the position.

If you feel that you have been discriminated against because of your mental health issue, you should seek advice from the Australian Human Rights Commission. You may also decide to contact Legal Aid, your local community legal service or a private lawyer.
“The most important thing to remember is that you are in control of how much you tell; do not let anyone manipulate you into sharing more than you feel comfortable sharing.”

– Sean Bennick, Webmaster of Mental Health Matters. 8

The decision to disclose your mental health condition is totally up to you. There are pros and cons for choosing to disclose and choosing to keep your condition private.

We think that it’s very important that you understand some of the possible consequences of taking either course of action. We also think it’s important to remember that your personal actions are part of a larger social process that plays a part in determining how people with lived experience of mental illness are treated.

New research shows that contact and interaction between the ‘well’ and the ‘unwell’ is one of the best ways of breaking down negative stereotypes and increasing tolerance and understanding. The decision to self-disclose – that is to show your ‘self’ and to do it ‘yourself’ – can be a key part of opening up that contact between people with a mental health issue and the rest of the community.

This is a very tricky area because you need to think of your own needs as well as how you fit into a broader social picture. Nobody is going to force you to become a mental health activist, but lots of people have reported that ‘coming out’ as mentally ill can be very liberating.

There are lots of tricks to self-disclosing successfully and we’ve tried to cover them below. You need to decide who to tell, when to tell and what exactly you’re going to say. If you decide to disclose, you might want to plan it or you might want to be spontaneous.

In recent years, even psychiatrists and psychologists have started to admit that they have had mental health issues to their patients. Research suggests that patients have found this honesty very helpful, particularly because it helps to break down the walls between doctors and patients.

It can be particularly helpful to ‘come out’ as having a lived experience of mental health if your recovery is proceeding well and you have had success in some area of your life where you were operating on the same terms as people without a mental health condition.

This booklet is designed for graduates, so each and every one of you has managed to cope with mental health issues and achieve something impressive in the ‘open’ education market. If you choose to disclose, you might like to keep in mind that you are not saying that your mental health issue defines you or is

your essence or your basic self. We all have different aspects to our personalities and, in a way, by completing your studies while also having a mental health issue, you’ve proven that you can be both ‘unwell’ and ‘well’ at the same time.

If you frame your disclosure appropriately, there’s a better chance that whoever you’re telling will be understanding. Self-disclosure can take bravery, courage and determination. It can have great potential benefits but, unfortunately, it can also set you up for stigma and prejudice.

We hope that the following material will give you sufficient guidance to make up your mind about this complicated issue.

“Gina has completed her training course in information technology and has seen a position seeking someone with her skills, but she is concerned that she will be discriminated against if she asks for some accommodations in the workplace, if she is the successful applicant.”

DISCLOSURE: PROS AND CONS

PROS
• You don’t have to pretend to be well all the time.
• Your employer can make workplace modifications and reasonable adjustments to your workload.
• You further the cause of equal rights and show how ‘well’ people with a mental health condition can be. It’s not your fault that you have a mental illness.
• You might be able to access support from your workplace counselling or support services.

CONS
• You could be discriminated against.
• You could be stigmatised and subjected to too much focus on your behaviour.
• Workmates could be constantly ‘looking out’ for signs of illness and respond negatively to any out of character behaviour.
• You might feel patronised and never feel that you are working on a ‘level playing field’ with everyone else.

BAD EXPERIENCES OF DISCLOSURE

Unfortunately some graduates have had unpleasant experiences of disclosure. Your workplace might not be as accepting or flexible as it should be in this regard. A report from the United Kingdom describes some of the less successful instances where a graduate has disclosed their condition. This quote comes from a student in this situation: “I would advise any student to NEVER EVER disclose. The UK (and maybe Australia) is not ready for doctoral students with mental disabilities. There is zero support, zero defence against discrimination and zero understanding of bright mentally disabled people.” 10

The following example has been included because we think it looks like a worst case scenario.

Mark is a young man receiving treatment for a mental illness. With the help of his support worker, Mark applied for and gained a position of employment at a packing plant. He saw the offer of employment as a real step forward in his recovery. On his first day on the job he was given a ‘Health Assessment Form’ by the company and told to bring it back later that week. One of the questions was, ‘Have you ever suffered from a mental illness?’ The form also warned him that he could lose his position of employment if it was found that he had not truthfully answered all the above questions. After much discussion the young man decided to disclose. He had worked successfully and happily for a week but upon handing in the completed health form, his position was immediately terminated without explanation. 11

Mark’s case study appears to be a clear case of discrimination against a mentally ill person in the workforce. Remember that the Disability Discrimination Act almost certainly makes it illegal for an employer to treat a person in this way and Mark would certainly benefit from seeking legal advice and/or taking his case to the Australian Human Rights Commission.

GOOD EXPERIENCES

Many workplaces in Australia have well-informed, supportive approaches to mental illness. A great resource called Mental Health Works has been put together by the Queensland Alliance (www.qldalliance.org.au). Mental Health Works shows that many employers in the public sector, the private sector and the community sector can be extremely supportive and understanding of the mental health issues experienced by their employees. This second case study shows the positive results of a decision to disclose.

“I decided to disclose my condition and I received help finding my feet in the workplace. Since then, I have made no secret of my condition. My colleagues...had no problem with my condition, although the occasional person I have worked with outside the mental health field has initially appeared to be ‘uncomfortable’, but this has usually passed.”

Employers need to know that a person has a mental illness.

MYTH BUSTED
Your illness is your business. Unless there’s a safety issue or a problem with the ‘inherent requirements’ of the job, it’s up to you if you want to tell your employer about your condition.

DISCRIMINATION AND DISCLOSURE

There are generally both pros and cons to disclosing your mental health issue from a discrimination perspective.

Some people are discriminated against because they have a lived experience of mental illness. The employer might not say straight out that a person can’t have a job because they have a mental illness but they can always claim to base their argument on some other criteria like education or experience.

This is very hard to police. Even if you do get a job after disclosing you might have trouble getting a promotion or getting a more demanding role within your organisation.

STIGMA

For a long time, the community has stigmatised people with a lived experience of mental illness. These days, this stigma is waning but it still exists in various forms. Stigma can be expressed through clear discrimination; through refusing to employ; or more subtly through wariness, suspicion or exclusion.

Sadly, dealing with stigma is probably one of the harder things you’ll need to deal with as you live with a mental health issue or recover from one or carry one round from the past.

If you don’t disclose, you might not be exposed to this stigma. But if your behaviour deviates from the norm too obviously you might be kept at arm’s length even more if you haven’t let your workmates know that you have a mental illness.

Increasingly, workplaces pride themselves on being accommodating to people with a mental illness and the stigma attached to mental health issues is far less overwhelming than it once was. Some organisations have put in place measures to encourage and support employees who have lived experience of a mental illness.

Organisations that are doing their best to make room for employees with a lived experience of mental illness are now known as ‘disability confident employers’.

You can find out more about these forward thinking organisations at: http://jobaccess.gov.au/Employers/Being_a_disability_confident_organisation/Pages/home.aspx
Darren’s Story

Darren was referred to Angel Employment from Anglicare. He has lived experience of both depression and ADHD. Along with this he has difficulty concentrating, low self-esteem, difficulty focusing and completing tasks, anger management issues and difficulty interacting with other people. His teachers reported that it appeared that he was deliberately getting himself into trouble at school. Darren reported that he had no motivation to do anything. Eventually his doctors diagnosed him with borderline personality disorder.

An Angel Case Manager has had regular meetings with Darren to discuss areas of employment that would suit him. They discussed what skills he had and what barriers he had to finding employment. One of the strategies to engage Darren’s interest and assistance in finding work was to find what areas in his life he did have interest in. It was discovered that Darren really enjoyed working with computers and had a passion to work in that area. It was felt that if a position was found in an area of interest it would help improve his self-esteem and motivation issues as he would want to be more focused and more likely to succeed.

Regular weekly to fortnightly contact was provided to Darren for the first two months to build up his trust and interest in looking for work. Darren met with Angel Marketers who reverse marketed him in the IT industry. Angel found an employer that was willing to create a position for Darren in his workplace. This was an entry level position where he would be helping in the workshop and getting an introduction to the industry. Angel provided the employer with a wage subsidy and arranged a support worker to initially assist him with training to learn his new role in the workplace.

Darren and his case manager talked at length about whether they should tell his employer about his mental illness. A lot of people think that bosses in the trades are not as understanding as bosses in the public service or other white collar areas. Darren could see both sides of the argument but in the end he decided that he couldn’t handle the pressure of trying to hide his personality disorder. “They’ll know there’s something wrong with me as soon as I get there. At least this way they’ll know what it is and that it’s under control.”

Darren’s case manager wasn’t going to push him to disclose but he could see Darren’s point. As it turned out, the boss at the computer maintenance firm had a nephew with bipolar and he was adamant that mental illness was just a condition like any other. If it didn’t get in the way of the work, he didn’t have a problem with it.

Angel Employment helped Darren complete a Certificate IV in IT while he was employed. With the support of his boss and his case manager, he did well in the course. The hard part of Darren’s transition was completed before he had graduated. Once he had his ticket, his illness became less intrusive and he settled in to work.
WORKING WITH OTHERS

If you do disclose you could find yourself being patronised by well-meaning employers and workmates. They might try to help you feel at home by being particularly ‘understanding’ and ‘compassionate’. This kind of response is normally well-intentioned but it might make you feel as if you’re being given extra support that you don’t need.

You might feel like you want to work on a level playing field and not be patronised. If you disclose, your behaviour could also be subjected to extra scrutiny. The people around you might be tempted to focus unnecessarily on your health.

They might claim that they ‘need’ to know if you’re well or pre-episodic or starting to fray at the edges; this is called micro-management and it can get in the way of your work and make you feel like you’re not an equal member of the team.

The sad fact is that when people with a disclosed mental illness say or do something unusual it can attract a lot of attention.

The same behaviour on the part of a worker who doesn’t have a declared mental health issue might not even be noticed.

On the positive side, disclosing your illness can give you the chance to turn the stigma around and show that even though you have a mental health issue, you are still competent, creative and capable. Stigma is reduced just a tiny little bit for everyone whenever a non-marginalised person sees a stigmatised ‘other’ doing well.

You should also remember that ‘well’ people are ‘discriminated’ against, judged, criticised or even bullied in lots of minor ways. You can’t expect everyone at your new workplace to be your instant best friend.

...If anything goes wrong, my workmates need to know who to contact...
ACCESS TO ADDITIONAL SERVICES

If you choose to disclose, you may be eligible for targeted support from psychologists, counsellors or occupational health and safety officers employed by the organisation or contracted in from outside. You may be given greater freedom to take time off when you fall ill. You might be able to negotiate working hours and part-time employment. Equally, employers may be eligible for support in paying your wages under government subsidy schemes through Disability Employment Services.

Within the public sector, flexible return-to-work arrangements are often in place to assist you to return to work after a major episode or hospitalisation. It’s important to note, too, that if you’re registered with a Disability Employment Services Provider, they can help you work out the best way to disclose your condition. They can help you minimise stigma or awkwardness and get the best outcome for you if you decide to go down the disclosure path (it may well be the fastest and smoothest path to the top of Work Mountain!).

Perhaps the most important advantage you will have if you do choose to disclose is not having to pretend to be well all of the time. You’ll be able to be more open with your workmates when you become episodic. Studies show that people who willingly disclose are often happier in their job than people who are forced to disclose. Keeping a mental health condition a secret from employers and workmates can also be tiring and stressful.

“...I’d rather be open...”

“...I think it’s a way to help people understand mental illness...”
USEFUL TIPS ON DISCLOSING

Remember, if and when to disclose is totally up to you. For example, you may decide to do it once you have been offered the job, or after you start work. If you do decide to disclose here are some useful tips about how to go about it:

- Rehearse and prepare your disclosure statement
- Think carefully about who you want to disclose to
- Be clear and specific in explaining your mental illness and any adjustments needed for your working environment
- Emphasise your skills, capacities and strengths
- Think about the skills you have developed as a result of living with and managing your condition
- Remember that your employer should only discuss your mental illness in the context of your job

- Go over what you might say with your employment service provider, careers adviser or someone from your support network.13

For more information you can check out these websites:

Choosing your path. Disclosure: It’s a Personal Decision: http://pubsites.uws.edu.au/ndco/disclosure/

Australian Network on Disability: www.and.org.au/content/view/22/16/

DISCLOSING

DEEWR has released a literature review of the latest research on employment assistance for people with mental illness. The literature review identifies and describes models of employment assistance for people with mental illness and discusses good practice in relation to assisting people with mental illness into employment.


For information on Disability Employment Services see: www.centrelink.gov.au/internet/internet.nsf/services/disability_emp_services.htm
Your first week at work can be challenging even if you don’t have a mental health issue. It’s challenging for almost everyone for a range of reasons.

You’ll probably have a whole team of new people to meet. You’ll be joining an established work culture that might have some kind of pecking order in place and will share a store of stories and jokes based around the job.

You’ll probably need to get used to a specific workplace culture and environment and you might find a real mix of co-workers. Some of them might a bit distant to start off with. Others might be super friendly. Whatever happens, you’ll probably be on a steep learning curve.

You’ll start to get a sense of exactly what you’ll be doing after the first few days. You’ll be able to see how the practical skills you’ve learned in your tertiary studies apply to the demands of the job. You might find out that sometimes theory doesn’t fit completely with practice.

But if you focus on staying well, we’re confident that you’ll be able to apply all your knowledge and abilities to the task at hand. You can think of this as setting up camp and settling in on top of Work Mountain.

5. PEAK PERFORMANCE

Your first week at work

Myth

If a person with a mental illness gets a job and it does not work out, it means that that person is less likely to succeed in another job.

MYTH BUSTED

If you struggle in one position it doesn’t mean you won’t go well doing something else. If a job doesn’t work out, you can have another think about your goals and try again...when you feel up to it. Every step you take up Work Mountain brings you closer to the top even if you have to go back down and take another path from time to time.

Source:
www.onestops.info/article.php?article_id=62
It might be useful to think about the first week of work in light of your decision to disclose your illness or keep it to yourself. If you haven’t disclosed, you’ll start work through whatever induction process is in place.

You won’t be given special treatment or assistance from occupational health and safety staff. You might be a bit on edge here because you could need a cover story for your condition.

If you have a history of missing work or a patchy work record you might need an explanation for the time you’ve had out. If you’ve never had your progress interrupted by your illness – if you’ve gone straight through tertiary studies, for instance, without missing semesters or years – this might not be too big of a challenge. If you have disclosed, you may be wary of people making comments about your illness and you might get told that your role has been modified or can be modified to suit your strengths. Remember, you have landed that job because of your skills and strengths – we think you should focus on them.

Perhaps the most important thing to do in your first week is to stay well. All the stimulation and new contacts and tasks are probably going to be taxing on your system. We suggest that you remember the stress relief tips from pages 34–35 of this resource. We suggest that you make good use of your support network and try to get on friendly terms with other staff members who seem understanding or have a lot in common with you.

Your manager will probably go easy on you in the first couple of days but this could vary across trades and professions. If you get stressed out or symptomatic, we think you should do your best to stay at work. Try your best not to miss a day in your first week. If it all gets too much, go outside for a walk or tell your manager that you’re getting a bit overloaded with new information. They’ll probably be understanding if they see you doing your best to stay on task. Remember that it’s okay to muddle through and make
small mistakes. It’s probably better to admit that you are uncertain about a task than to make a mistake. You probably won’t be penalised for wanting to understand the details of your job. Feel free to ask lots of questions. A lot of people without a mental health issue struggle with their first week too.

If you do start to fall apart or fray at the edges, you could talk to the person at work that you disclosed to. It’s not a bad idea to be up front and tell them that you’re struggling. Most workplaces are friendly and want to keep the staff they’ve hired after the application process. They might suggest you take the afternoon off or give you some lighter duties.

If you’ve got your job through a Disability Employment Services Provider, you might like to get in touch with them and tell them that things aren’t going well. They are required to provide you with support to KEEP a job, not just help you GET a job. You can also contact your doctor or therapist and see what help they can give you.

If you haven’t disclosed, you’ll probably need to see a doctor and ask for a certificate that states that you are unwell but doesn’t give the details of your illness.
Gino’s Story

Gino was diagnosed with bipolar while he was studying arts with a major in political science at the University of Western Australia. His bipolar presented as high anxiety levels and he experienced regular delusional episodes causing him to require extended periods of time off study.

After dragging his degree out for five years, he realised that he just wasn’t ever going to get it. Once he sat for six hours in front of the computer trying to write an essay about democracy. He must have written 5000 words that day but when he came back to it the next morning, the words were all garbled. No matter how much he read or tried to write clearly, he just didn’t seem to have the kind of mind needed for putting a good essay together.

Gino knew that he was an intelligent person and a hard worker. But nobody is going to win a gold medal at the Olympics by training alone. To do anything to a high standard, people need a lot of natural talent too. It was hard to accept, but Gino had finally realised that academic study was never going to work for him.

He kept up his interest in politics and read the papers every day, and after a year that was pretty much the only thing he did. After he stopped studying he fell into a hole, health-wise. He had limited motivation and his confidence plummeted.

He got so hard to be around that his wife suggested a trial separation and took the kids away to a suburb on the other side of the city. Now he was alone and jobless. It was one thing to accept his limitations but he didn’t have to feel good about it did he?

His lack of motivation was crippling. He just had no energy or else he was manic and all over the place, spending money he didn’t have and hassling his wife. Gino was on Newstart Incapacitated now and finding it hard to pursue his personal and vocational goals.

He had a lot of trouble with attention and concentration and even when he summoned the energy to write a job application, he’d be transported back to that awful day back at Uni when he was trying to write his essay on democracy.

Soon he realised he wasn’t going to be able to get ahead on his own. Gino had been seeing Horizons Employment but wasn’t taking the process very seriously. He still thought he could get a job without professional help. Now he was at rock bottom and knew he needed some help.

A Horizons Case Manager, Mathilde, worked with Gino by developing a relationship of open communication and making regular initial weekly meetings. She helped with the monitoring of his medication (Webster pack) and provided encouragement of social activities as part of a Mental Health Management Plan.

Gino had skills previously in the cleaning industry and to assist him back into the workplace it was decided that he do Certificate III at TAFE. Mathilde monitored Gino’s progress and he completed the course without much drama.
6. AT THE TOP OF YOUR GAME
Staying well in work; changing jobs

Congratulations, you might be starting to feel established in your job at this stage and getting used to your regular wage or salary.

You may lose benefits if you’re on a payment from Centrelink. If you work full-time, you’ll almost certainly receive no income support from the Australian Government.

If you work part-time, you might still qualify for a part payment. If you’re on the Disability Support Payment, this part payment can be pretty generous. It might feel like you’re not getting much of a financial benefit from working when your payments are cut.

Social security is an essential part of the Australian social contract but we still think you’ve got good reason to be proud that every dollar you get is a dollar you’ve earned. Sane Australia has estimated the cost of depression alone at $3.5 billion a year.14

If things aren’t going well, you might start to wonder why you’re bothering with all the stress and hassle and effort of work. If you’re having second thoughts about the benefits of work, we’ve included this list of pluses that can come from paid employment.

Work can aid your wellness by:
• increasing your income;
• increasing your self-confidence and self-esteem;
• using your skills, talents and abilities to live a more independent life;
• increasing your skills and abilities through training;
• giving you the chance to meet new people;
• having the opportunity to make new friends and socialise;
• improving your standard of living;
• creating better linkages within your community.15

If you’re on Newstart and you get work, make sure you keep reporting your earnings because you’ll have working credits that entitle you to keep some of your payment. You start off with one thousand of these credits and they are reduced by every dollar you earn above a certain threshold.

You can contact Centrelink for all the details or check out this website: www.centrelink.gov.au/internet/internet.nsf/publications/workingcredit.htm


Disability Employment Services can assist customers who are at risk of losing their employment in the immediate future as a result of their illness, injury or disability through Jobs in Jeopardy assistance. Jobs in Jeopardy services are not designed to assist with finding new employment but are intended to assist customers to maintain their current employment.

Jobs in Jeopardy participants will receive face-to-face support, as well as assistance such as:

- advice about job redesign;
- workplace assessments;
- workplace modifications;
- specialised equipment to help you perform the requirements of the job.

Thanas’s Story

When she was 20, Thana was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. The condition occurred as a result of trauma she suffered as a refugee in Sudan. After her diagnosis she spent some time in hospital due to extreme paranoia and auditory hallucinations. For the next few years, she continued to experience occasional auditory hallucinations which sometimes affected her concentration.

Initially she battled with a lot of stigma amongst her friends from Africa, but eventually they came to accept her illness and what she had to do to get on top of it. She hadn’t worked since her diagnosis in 2004 and prior to that was only able to maintain employment and study for short periods of time due to the episodic nature of her disability.

Thana had taken a few knocks in her life but she was basically a persistent and resilient person. With the help of her psychotherapist she began to accept that her illness was not her fault and stopped feeling guilty for needing support. She decided that a lot of people needed to change the way they thought about mental illness and she was going to show them that you could lead a successful life with a mental health condition.

Thana came to New Directions Employment wanting help to get back into study. She wanted to do an arts degree and learn more about feminism and African history. She had always been good with words at school and was a fast reader. She’d just completed an English language course and was confident that she could succeed at University as long as she looked after her health.

New Directions helped Thana to enrol and introduced her to the Support and Equity team at her local university. Carol, a counsellor with the Support and Equity Unit, suggested to Thana that she go along to a discussion group that had been set up by former refugees who were now studying at the University.

Thanas found the group to be really helpful. They showed her around the campus and debated all the events that were still causing problems back in their countries of birth. Two of the members of the group had been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder as well.

Thanas graduated in three years and was awarded a prize for an essay she wrote on the conflict in Darfur. Gradually, over the course of her degree, the symptoms of her illness went away even though she was still on anti-psychotic medication. By the time she had finished her degree, she felt confident enough in her abilities to move away from the Disability Employment Network to the mainstream Job Services Australia. She used her University skills to approach the task of job-seeking systematically and applied for a minimum of five jobs a week. After two months she landed a job working as an interpreter at a nearby Centrelink Office.

Thanas is going back to Sudan this winter to work on an aid project in a village just a few kilometres from the place where she was born.
SOME FACTS ABOUT MENTAL ILLNESS AND EMPLOYMENT

- Currently in Australia, more people are in receipt of disability support payments than unemployment benefits.
- There are many people with mental health issues that would like to work and that are not currently in employment.
- Employment is a major contributor to positive mental health outcomes.
- Success factors for people with a mental illness in employment do not necessarily relate to their skill levels or their type of mental illness but their work history and experience, their motivation to work, their social skills and the quality and duration of the employment and mental health supports they receive.

She decided that a lot of people needed to change the way they thought about mental illness and going to show them that you could lead a successful life with a mental health condition.
Once you’ve been in work for a while and you’re going well, you’ll probably be able to relax a bit and get into the swing of things. Depending on the severity of your mental health issue though, work might not be all plain sailing. You might get sick while you’re employed and need to navigate through a range of issues.

A lot of people with lived experience of mental illness stop taking their medication when things are going well. If you want to change your medication, you need to talk to your doctor first and ask them about the options you have. You might want to remember that even though you’ve finally found a job and started forming friendships at work and even taken on an exciting new financial responsibility like a new car, your mental health issue is unlikely to just vanish into thin air.

If you stop taking your medication without consulting your doctor, there’s a chance that all your good work will start to unravel.

If you do get sick – and it could happen even if you stay on your meds – your situation will probably be different depending on whether you’ve disclosed your condition to your employer. If you have, you’ll need to let your boss know and see if changes can be made to make your job more manageable. You might need some time off and you can ask your GP or psychiatrist to write a letter explaining the situation.

If you’re with a Disability Employment Services Provider, they can help as well. It may be worth letting them know what’s happening. If you haven’t disclosed, this might be the time to do it. You’ve probably already proved that you are a good worker. If you’re an asset, the boss is likely to be keen to keep you on even if you need some time off. You can still keep your condition private and not disclose your reasons for needing sick leave.

If you do take time off to get better, you might like to think about how you want to organise your return to work. Lots of organisations offer flexible return to work programs where you start back for a day or two a week.

They might even assign you lighter duties to start with. You might also be able to secure counselling support from your business as you get back in the swing of things. Your organisation might keep this psychological help in place for quite a while after you resume working. This should increase the likelihood of you staying well and keeping on making a valuable and valued contribution.
Some people with a mental health issue have had bad experiences returning to work. The stigma that still exists about mental health can kick in at this stage. If it does, you might experience some wariness on the part of other staff members.

Workplaces are often sites of excellence and productivity. People focused on achievement are sometimes uncertain about how to respond to ‘weakness’ or ‘vulnerability’ in a co-worker, even though none of us are perfect. They might be patronising or too eager to dismiss the problem as a passing phase. You might like to remember though that strength is not always what you can dish out, it can also be measured by what you can put up with.

Try and be strong and aim for slow and steady progress. Your pride may have taken a hit but we’re confident that you can fight back. If you find yourself in this neck of the woods, you might want to take some deep breaths and remind yourself that it’s not your fault you got sick and then reclaim your right to a place on top of Work Mountain.

If you haven’t disclosed, this might be less of an issue. Your workmates probably won’t know that you took time off for a mental health issue. If you’ve chosen to disclose, this is when you might find out that you’ve decided to be a campaigner for the rights of people with a mental illness.

Remember, you’ve already proved yourself in the job and your illness is now under control. You’re in pretty much the same situation as someone who’s recovered from a broken leg!

For more information you can visit these sites:
www.and.org.au/content/view/33/16/
www.mentalhealthworks.ca/articles/returning_to_work.asp

Jobs in Jeopardy is another program that could be useful if you’ve started at work but things are getting tough and you’re feeling really crook. If you’ve started taking too much time off work or your work performance is starting to suffer, you could get involved with this program. It’s really just another way of getting on top of things before they get really difficult.

For more information on this program, visit:
“All journeys have secret destinations of which the traveller is unaware.”
– Martin Buber

We hope you’ve had a good look at this resource and that it’s been helpful for you, no matter where you are on the journey up Work Mountain.

We hope your trek so far has been a rewarding one and we hope you’re enjoying the views from wherever you are. You might still be finding your way, deciding on a career path or trying to secure an interview. That’s okay. We’re pretty sure you’ll get where you want to go in time. Wherever you are on the journey, all we ask is that you feel free to come back to this resource whenever you need some more hints or tips.

This resource has been designed for people with a range of mental health issues and lived experiences of mental illness. One last thing we’ll ask you to remember is that mental illness can be one of the hardest things a human being can go through.

It can shake you up and change the very essence of your identity and challenge your most basic assumptions and beliefs. Some writers have compared manic, depressive and psychotic episodes to losing a loved one (in a way you can lose yourself during and after a severe mental health event) or to fighting in war.

The big difference between lived experience of mental illness, death and war is that the community still doesn’t really know how to respond to a psychotic episode or a serious bout of anxiety. People with a mental health issue are often left struggling on their own to make sense of their suffering and to find a way of drawing meaning from it and moving on.

Pulling yourself together, finishing your studies and beginning the climb toward work are significant achievements that we think you should be proud of. Equally, you shouldn’t feel bad if you need a break or some time out or you just aren’t sure of how to proceed. You may not want to think of yourself as disabled, but a mental health issue – especially if it’s ongoing – usually does add a degree of difficulty to life that just isn’t normally there. It may sound a bit clichéd, but we believe that there’s a good chance that your experience of mental illness has put you in emotional and psychological places that are hard to forget or leave behind. Because you’ve been there and because you probably don’t want to go back, we believe that you are struggling on against adversity and doing brave and courageous things by engaging in the transition from study to work.

For some of you, this whole process might not be such a big deal and that’s great. But if your lived experience of mental illness has left you rattled and altered and raw or any combination of those three, we think you’re doing a great job just by trying to find a way up Work Mountain.

So once again, no matter where you are on the climb toward sustainable work, we wish you luck and want you to know that we have faith that you’ll make it to the top, no matter how hard or long the trip may be.
RESOURCES


Beyond Blue Website: http://www.beyondblue.org.au/

SANE wellness group: http://www.sane.org/


See Me (Anti-stigma website): http://www.seemescotland.org.uk/

Australian Network on Disability: http://www.and.org.au/

Employability: Opportunities for disabled and dyslexic students & graduates: http://www.employ-ability.org.uk/

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