

Preventing secondary mental injury



Did you know that your employee who has a physical injury could be at risk of incurring a secondary mental injury? A secondary mental injury is a mental injury caused by the primary work-related physical injury and can be accepted under workers' compensation legislation.

It's important to identify signs of poor mental health early on and to encourage your employee to seek treatment as these symptoms can impact their ability to recover from the physical injury and return to work.

Secondary mental injury can develop in relation to:



Chronic pain



Workplace issues/ barriers that impact pain or functioning



Original workplace incident that caused the WorkCover claim (e.g. a traumatic event)



Longer than anticipated recovery timeframes



Unfavourable recovery outcomes (the worker hasn't been able to regain full function)



Physical functional limitations (the worker can't do what they used to)

Possible indicators of a secondary mental injury

Could look like	Could sound like
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased pain 	<p><i>"I can't look after my child like I used to."</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relationship strain/ anger 	<p><i>"I'm arguing more with my partner since being at home, they just don't understand."</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Worry about re-injury 	<p><i>"My shoulder feels better but I'm so scared of hurting it again, I can't be in that much pain again."</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anxiety around returning to work 	<p><i>"Everything has changed since I've been injured, I have a new manager and a new team. I don't know anyone."</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sleeplessness 	<p><i>"I'm not sleeping well and feel so tired."</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Loss of drive and motivation, low engagement 	<p><i>"I'm just not interested in the same things anymore. I've having trouble getting up and I just can't bring myself to get on with my usual routine."</i></p>

There are also risk factors that can make an employee more vulnerable to incurring a secondary mental injury such as a pre-existing condition, financial troubles, lack of support network and personal relationship issues.

Why is **early identification** important?

The sooner any psychological barriers and another mental health symptoms are addressed and treated, the sooner your injured employee will make a recovery and be able to return to work.

Research has shown that early intervention can assist to:



Improve recovery outcomes



Improve a worker's view of their workplace



Reduce length of time away from work



Increase the likelihood of a return to work

Supporting your employee throughout the claims process has been shown to be beneficial to their mental health and increase the likelihood of returning to work sooner.



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At Grampians Health we have found that providing support and compassion to our employees as soon as we are aware of an injury, leads to better outcomes for all parties and gives the employee the confidence that they will be able to return to work and recover in a supported environment.

Rachel Nunn

Injury Management Advisor Ballarat Health Services

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How can you **help your employee?**

The key to a successful recovery and return to work is through open and regular communication with the injured employee, showing empathy and care.

This is true for all types of injury – both physical and mental injuries. In fact, communication breakdown between the injured employee and their employer is a major reason that return to work is delayed or doesn't happen at all.

Here are some tips for how you can help your employee:

- ✓ Communicate regularly – this involves actively listening and offering the supports that you have available. Ask them what they need from you and let them know you want to know how best to support them.
- ✓ Ask them if they would appreciate a regular check-in – if so, how often and when is a good day/time to call? Would they like their colleagues to get in touch for a chat? Do they want to receive updates from the workplace so they feel connected?
- ✓ Always communicate with your worker in a manner that makes them feel like a valued employee
- ✓ Have resources available for your employees to receive early support such as an Employee Assistance Program (if in place).
- ✓ Provide suitable duties that are meaningful, which helps your employee to feel valued. Plus, evidence shows that returning to work aids recovery.
- ✓ Put a plan in place to resolve any grievances – services are available through an independent occupational rehabilitation provider to assist with this (talk to us for help)

How can EML help?

In Victoria, all injured workers can access up to 13 weeks of psychological support to assist with mental injury prevention, recovery and transition back into the workplace. Some of these supports could be:



Counselling with a psychologist/social worker/counsellor/occupational therapist



A gym membership



Exercise programs for mental health



Home help assistance

EML can also refer your employee for additional support to progress their recovery or to build work-readiness.

This includes:

- Facilitated discussion (i.e mediation focus to resolve any workplace issues)
 - Support services to build capacity and aid recovery (i.e vocational coaching via occupational rehabilitation providers)
 - Treating health practitioner case conferences (taking a collaborative approach)
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Everyone's personal circumstances and experiences relating to their injury differ, so it's helpful to consider someone's specific needs as an individual. EML can assist in gathering advice from the treating health provider about how you can best support your employee. **Your EML case manager can:**

- Provide advice and assistance to ensure you are providing the right support to your injured employee
 - Assist to determine if there is sufficient information to accept the secondary or consequential mental health condition, or if further investigation is required
 - Organise a treating health practitioner case conference with an EML mental injury specialist
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