

# Annual professions survey

RESEARCH SUMMARY

April 2007



## OPENING OUR EYES TO DEPRESSION AMONG AUSTRALIAN PROFESSIONALS

### Executive Summary

Results from a survey of over 7,500 Australian professionals indicated higher than average levels of depressive symptoms when compared with the general Australian population. These higher rates of depression were consistently found across all age groups. A significant proportion of survey respondents also indicated that they used alcohol or other (non-prescription) drugs to manage symptoms of depression. Moreover, the current findings expose the apparent lack of understanding about depression and its management by many professionals.

These preliminary findings highlight an urgent need for senior leaders in professional service firms to acknowledge and respond promptly to the high incidence of depression. This involves taking a proactive approach to educate their workforce and provide appropriate access to services to reduce the personal cost to their employees, the financial cost to their organisations and ultimately, the wider community.

### Background

The high prevalence of mental health problems in Australia is not only of significant personal cost to individuals with problems and their family members, but also of great financial cost to the organisations in which they work and the wider community.

Surveys across the Australian community reveal that each year more than a million people in Australia will experience depression, anxiety and/or related drug and alcohol problems, with over six million working days being lost as a result of untreated depression alone<sup>1</sup>. Given that every employee with untreated depression is estimated to cost their organisation an average of \$9,660 per year due to lost productivity and absenteeism<sup>2</sup>, the financial cost to industry cannot be underestimated.

As part of an annual survey of professionals<sup>3</sup> across Australia conducted by Beaton Consulting, *beyondblue* was invited to include a series of questions designed to assess mental health issues in over 7,500 professionals. With limited research currently available for this population, this provided a unique opportunity to assess the prevalence of mental health problems, together with current knowledge and attitudes surrounding mental health among a range of professional groups across Australia.

This summary provides key findings from this research, highlights implications for organisations and areas for future research.

### Research Results

#### Research Sample

The survey was conducted in November 2006. There were 17,183 responses to the *beyondblue* section of the survey, of which 7551 were professionals<sup>3</sup>. The sample also contained a significant proportion of tertiary students (N=431), who at the time of the survey were members of professional associations.



1 Andrews G, Hall W, Teeson M, and Henderson S (1999). The Mental Health of Australians. Mental Health Branch, Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, Canberra.

2 Hilton M (2006). Assessing the financial return on investment of good management strategies and the WORC project. Psychological Injury and Stress in the Workplace Conference Presentation, Sydney, April.

3 'Professionals' are defined as individuals who work for professional services firms.

As could be expected, these two sub-samples (working professionals and students) differed significantly from one another on a range of dimensions including education level, employment experience, age and income level. Consequently, it was considered more meaningful to evaluate the outcomes of the two groups separately. This report focuses specifically on the survey results from professionals.

## Working Professionals

Not surprisingly given the sample group, there was a higher proportion of male respondents (70 per cent) than female respondents (30 per cent). Three quarters of the sample were distributed fairly evenly across age groups from 25-54 years with a further 16 per cent aged between 55-64 years. Only 6 per cent of respondents were aged below 24 years and 3 per cent were over 65. Most people (68 per cent) reported earning between \$50,000-\$149,000 per annum, with around 20 per cent earning over \$150,000 and only 3 per cent earning less than \$30,000.

## Mental Health Status: Reporting of Depressive Symptoms

To evaluate mental health status, respondents were asked to complete a series of questions from a standardised mental health survey<sup>4</sup> which enabled comparison with the general Australian population. Analysis of depression responses<sup>5</sup> specifically, indicated the **sample of professionals had higher than average depression scores when compared with the general population.**

**Table 1** Average score on the depression scale by sex for professionals and the general Australian population

| Gender  | Professionals (N=7551) | General population (N=2914) |
|---------|------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Males   | 9.28*                  | 6.55                        |
| Females | 9.69*                  | 6.14                        |
| Overall | 9.40*                  | 6.34                        |

\* There were statistically significant differences when compared to the normative sample.

These **higher than average depression scores were consistently found across each of the age categories.** Furthermore, **depression scores decreased with age**, that is, younger age groups showed progressively higher depression scores.

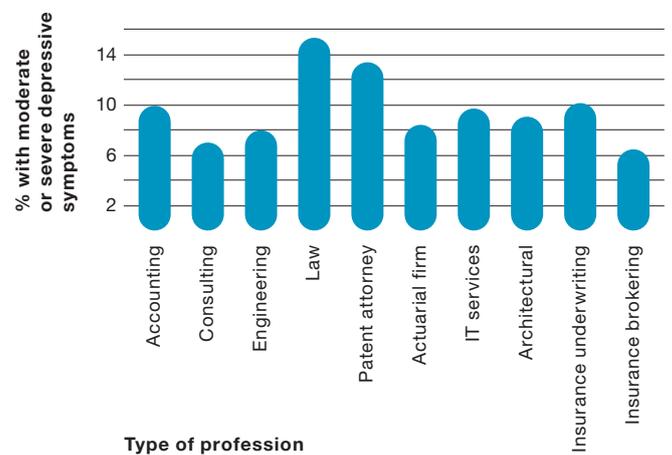
**Table 2** Averages for the depression scale by age for the Annual Professions Survey and the general population sample

| Age   | Professionals  | General population sample |
|-------|----------------|---------------------------|
| 20-29 | 9.88* (n=1550) | 6.35 (n=729)              |
| 30-39 | 9.48* (n=1843) | 5.44 (n=273)              |
| 40-49 | 9.51* (n=1740) | 4.43 (n=155)              |
| 50-59 | 9.20* (n=1645) | 5.28 (n=150)              |

\* There were statistically significant differences when compared to the normative sample.

Analysis of depression scores across **industry types** was also evaluated. Figure 1 below identifies the proportion of respondents across the different professional groups who indicated moderate to severe symptoms of depression.

**Figure 1** Proportion of respondents experiencing moderate or severe depressive symptoms by type of profession.



As indicated above, the rates of depression were substantial across many of the groups, ranging from 6 per cent to almost 16 per cent of respondents indicating moderate or severe symptoms of depression.

Statistical analysis demonstrates that respondents from **legal professions** particularly, were more likely to report moderate to severe symptoms of depression when compared with the total sample.

4 Lovibond, SH & Lovibond, PF (1995). *Manual for the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales* (2nd. Ed.). Psychology Foundation, Sydney.

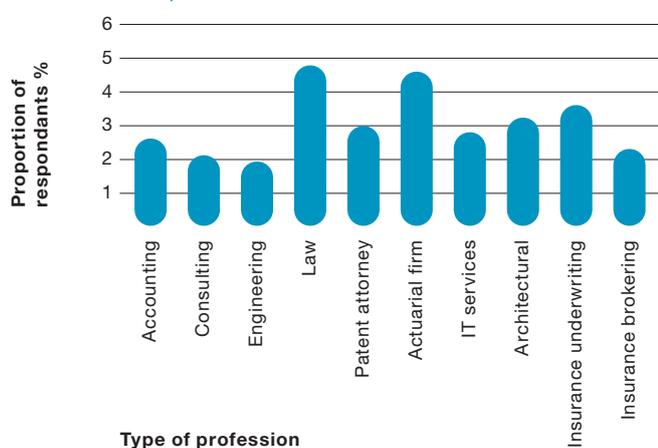
5 To enable comparisons to be made in the Annual Professions Survey, the scores on the depression scale have been interpreted in the form of severity ratings ranging from normal to moderate or severe. It is important to note that high scores on the depression scale (i.e. moderate or severe) would *not* alone indicate a clinical diagnosis of depression, further assessment would be required.

## Use of Drugs and Alcohol

The results from the current survey demonstrate the often high correlation between depression, anxiety and related drug and alcohol use, with a significant proportion of the sample openly reporting in the survey that they do in fact use alcohol and other (non prescription) drugs to manage feelings of sadness and depression.

The strength of this relationship was highlighted in the data derived from those in law firms. In addition to higher rates of depressive symptoms, legal professionals were also more likely to use alcohol and other drugs to reduce or manage feelings of sadness and depression when compared with the other professional groups – see Figure 2 below.

**Figure 2** Proportion of participants who used alcohol or other drugs (non-prescription) to reduce or manage feelings of sadness and depression



## Knowledge and Attitudes about Depression

Respondents were also asked a series of questions derived from *beyondblue* research<sup>6</sup>. Results from the professional sample revealed areas for improvement in knowledge about depression, which is likely to impact on current attitudes and potentially the management of depression in the workplace.

Firstly, there was seen to be a lack of understanding about the complex nature of depression, with over half the sample (58 per cent) indicating that “*people with depression should simply identify the cause of depression and remove the cause*”. This suggests a simplistic view of the illness, which in turn may impact on the way the illness and people potentially identified with depression are managed in a workplace setting.

There was also a lack of understanding about types of behaviour which may be helpful or unhelpful for someone with depression. For example, over half the sample indicated that “*it would be helpful to encourage someone with depression to take time off work or a holiday*”. Unfortunately, such a response is more likely to lead to further isolation for the individual who is depressed, making it harder for them to return to the workplace. Such perceptions are likely to contribute to higher rates of prolonged absenteeism and lead to a greater impact on the individual and the organisation.

Similarly, over 10 per cent of professionals suggested that it would be “*helpful to take someone with depression out to the pub for a few drinks to help them forget their worries*”. Such a response is only likely to compound the depression and make the situation worse.

Finally, there was also some lack of certainty about helpful strategies to assist someone who may be experiencing depression in the workplace. Less than half of the professionals (46 per cent) indicated that they thought it would be “*helpful to suggest that someone in their workplace try to get hold of some self-help materials*”, and 44 per cent indicated it was probably “*unhelpful to follow someone up and make sure that they got professional help*”.

## Conclusions

- Australian professionals report higher than average levels of depressive symptoms when compared with the general population. These higher-than-average rates of depressive symptoms extend across all ages.
- The younger professionals have higher rates of depressive symptoms than older professionals.
- Those working in law firms indicated higher rates of depressive symptoms when compared with other professional groups examined.
- A significant proportion of people identify themselves as using non-prescription drugs and alcohol to manage feelings of depression and sadness. This was greater among legal professionals.
- There is a lack of understanding about the nature of depression, and what action/responses may be helpful or unhelpful if someone in the workplace is experiencing depression.

<sup>6</sup> Hightet NJ, Hickie IB and Davenport TA (2002). Monitoring awareness of and attitudes to depression in Australia. *Medical Journal of Australia*, Vol 176 (Supp).



## Recommendations

Preliminary analysis highlights the need for senior leaders of professional services firms to recognise the potentially high rates of depression which exist across their organisations. There is an urgent need to educate employees about how to identify, assist others and take a proactive approach to managing mental health issues in order to reduce the personal and financial cost to their business.

As the leading, evidence-based program designed to address depression and related disorders in the workplace, the *beyondblue* National Workplace Program raises awareness about these conditions among staff and gives employees skills to recognise and manage these issues at work. Since 2001, the *beyondblue* National Workplace Program has trained over 15,000 employees in over 200 organisations around Australia, from a range of sectors and industries.

The program has been evaluated and shown to:

- increase awareness and knowledge about the high prevalence disorders of depression, anxiety and related drug and alcohol problems
- reduce stigma
- increase confidence to recognise, assist and manage depression and related disorders in the workplace
- increase willingness to assist and support colleagues to access appropriate healthcare.

These outcomes lead to:

- increased recovery
- reduced absenteeism
- increased productivity
- reduced costs to the organisation.

The program is delivered by *beyondblue*-accredited trainers located around Australia through a range of sessions tailored for staff and management and designed to fit in with the busy demands of today's professional workplace.

Further information about the *beyondblue* National Workplace Program can be obtained by contacting the *beyondblue* National Workplace Program Team on 03 9810 6100 or [workplace@beyondblue.org.au](mailto:workplace@beyondblue.org.au).



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