

Employer's Guide

ADHD Safe Work

*An introductory guide for employers to
make workplaces safe, healthy and more
inclusive for neurodiverse workers*

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The Neurodiverse Safe Work Initiative ©

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Introduction

What is neurodiversity and why is it important at work?

If you are reading this eBook because you are an employer with neurodivergent workers, **CONGRATULATIONS!!** You may not realise it yet, but you have workers with extraordinary abilities and a strategic advantage over your competitors!

Your neurodivergent workers will very probably be highly energetic, hard working, logical thinkers who can quickly make connections. They may be creative and innovative, empathetic with a strong sense of social justice, spontaneous and capable of intense concentration...and much, much more!

The term “*neurodiversity*”, which was originally coined by an Australian sociologist Judy Singer in the late 1990s “*refers to the virtually infinite neurocognitive variability within Earth’s human population*”.

Neurodivergent means the less typical variations of cognitive functioning which are present in 30 – 40% of the population such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia etc.

Neurotypical means the more typical variation of cognitive functioning which is present in 60 – 70% of the population.

It is a mistake to think that the neurotypical experience is either the only one, or the only correct one because this stigmatizes those with neurodivergent traits as being “not normal” rather than different.

The term neurodivergent collectively includes neurodevelopmental differences such as:

- ✓ Attention-deficit/hyperactive disorder (ADHD)
- ✓ Autism spectrum disorder (ASD)
- ✓ Developmental coordination disorder (DCD)
- ✓ Development language disorder (DLD)
- ✓ Dyslexia
- ✓ Dysgraphia
- ✓ Dyscalculia
- ✓ Tourette syndrome

But if you apply the Singer definition in it’s purest form, we are all different! Just as we all have different fingerprints, we all have different brains!

Introduction

What is neurodiversity and why is it important at work?

Many companies have recognised the strategic advantages of promoting a neurodiverse workforce and actively set out to recruit candidates with neurodivergent traits.

Companies such as Microsoft, JPMorgan Chase and Hewlett Packard have adapted their recruitment and employment practices with neurodiversity in mind, to help even the playing field and create work environments in which neurodivergent workers can excel.

This is not something that these enlightened companies do for altruistic purposes or to tick the box to show they have achieved a diversity and inclusion key performance indicator.

No. These companies recognise that actively recruiting neurodivergent workers increases productivity, improves workplace culture and boosts employee retention rates.

JPMorgan Chase has grown its neurodivergent workforce from just 4 autistic individuals in 2015 to 150 in 8 countries and report a retention rate of 99% with their autistic workers being 48% faster and 92% more productive than their neurotypical peers.

But what is important to understand is that the neurodivergent traits that bring such benefits, can also bring challenges for the individual. Often the reasonable adjustments that employers make to help the worker perform, do not go far enough to ensure their safety and health at work.

When someone thinks, learns, communicates, regulates attention and emotions and perceives and responds to risk differently, the organisation's health and safety management systems need to adapt to the neurodivergent worker's unique cognitive functioning, to help them not just perform, but to perform safely.



Microsoft

JPMORGAN CHASE & CO.



Introduction

What is neurodiversity and why is it important at work?

Lethbridge Piper & Associates is an Australian Occupational Health and Safety Management Consultancy that works with Boards, Executive Leadership and Management Teams to support and advise them in managing their health and safety obligations.

We have established the **Neurodiverse Safe Work Initiative**® to make workplaces healthier, safer and more inclusive for neurodivergent workers.

In a series of eBooks, online training programs, webinars, and practical tools we will take employers on a journey of learning and development, to help you create a working environment and culture that is safe and healthy for your neurodiverse workforce. That means, everyone!

We also provide in-person strategic consulting services, in-house training, coaching and mentoring programs, workplace investigations and rehabilitation/return to work support for injured workers.

Each eBook in this series will focus on a different form of neurodiversity, because they each have their unique advantages and challenges.

Note – This eBook refers to Australian legislation but the principles are applicable in any jurisdiction. Please contact us to enquire about your specific circumstances.

Sign up **here** to be notified when the next eBook in this series is available, or to enquire about any of the services offered under the **Neurodiverse Safe Work Initiative**®.



CHAPTER ONE

Attention-deficit/hyperactive disorder (ADHD)

The Facts



ADHD - The Facts

Forget everything you thought you knew about ADHD

If you thought ADHD was a condition that only affected boys in childhood who eventually grew out of it, or that it is the result of bad parenting, too much TV or online gaming, laziness or a lack of intelligence, think again.

ADHD is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects both the structure and functioning of the brain. It is strongly hereditary and it is life-long.

It's also not a new condition. The first description of a disorder that has the key characteristics of the condition now known as ADHD was first recorded in 1775!

Whilst some children who are diagnosed learn to manage the condition to the extent that it no longer causes impairment in adulthood, about 65% of those diagnosed as children continue to experience the effects of the condition into adulthood.

Boys are three times more likely to be diagnosed in childhood than girls and are diagnosed an average of 5 years earlier. This is because the presentation in girls is often more subtle than in boys and less likely to be picked up by parents or teachers during childhood.

There are three distinct types of ADHD as classified by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders – 5th Edition*:

- ✓ Predominantly **hyperactive-impulsive**;
- ✓ Predominantly **inattentive**; and
- ✓ **Combined** type (both hyperactive-impulsive and inattentive)

Whilst the literature supports a higher prevalence in of ADHD in boys, girls are more likely to be diagnosed with the predominantly inattentive type.

ADHD - The Facts

Forget everything you thought you knew about ADHD

ADHD belongs to the neurodivergent group conditions and it is common for a person to have more than one type. For example, a person may have ADHD and ASD or ADHD and Dyslexia.

Half of those with adult ADHD also have at least one comorbid mental health condition such as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder or substance abuse disorder and the diagnosis of ADHD in adults can be missed or mistaken for one of these common mental health conditions.

The negative health and socioeconomic effects of untreated ADHD can be profound.

Research has found that people with untreated ADHD:

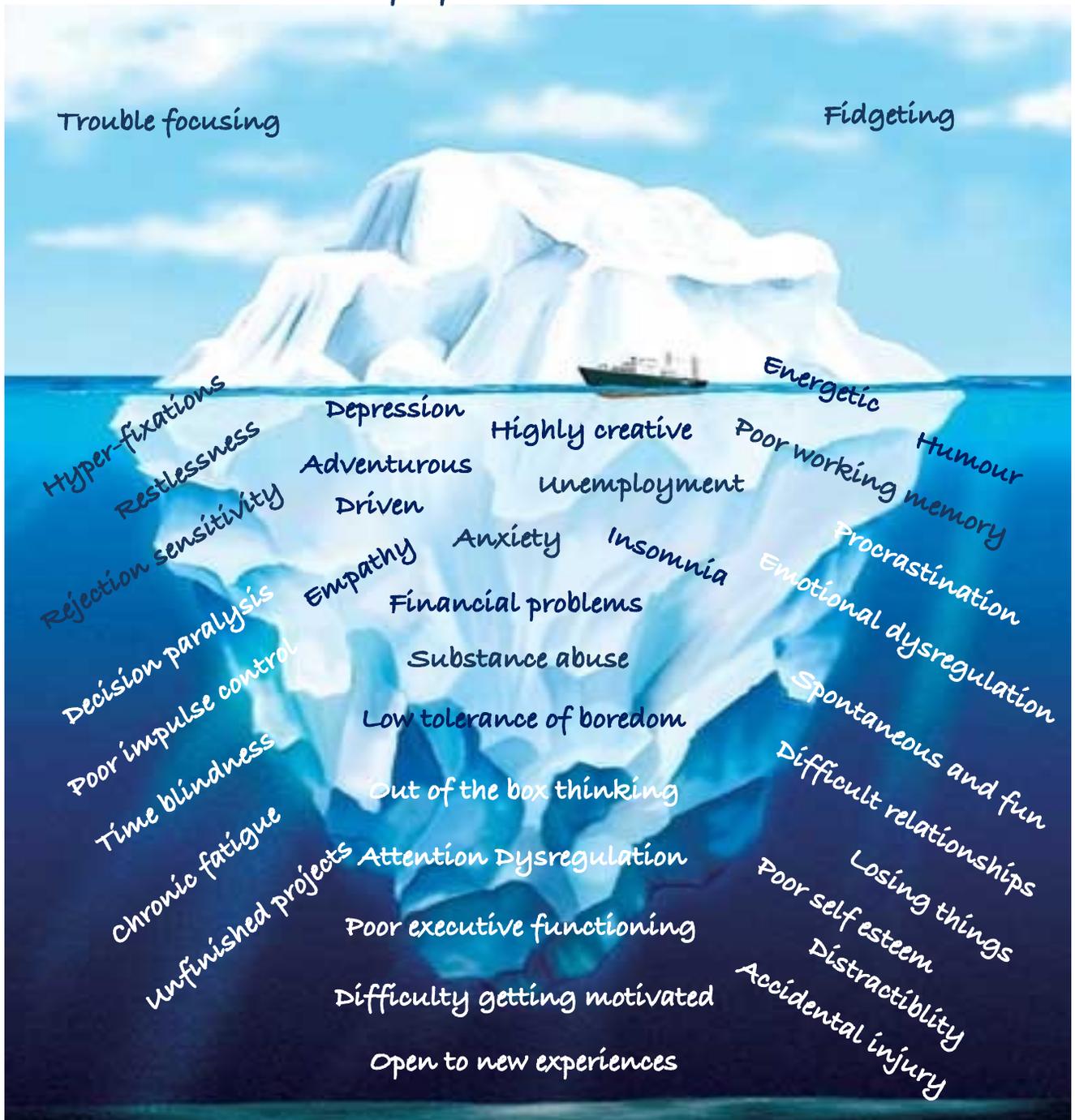
- ✓ Experience mortality rates four times higher than the general population
- ✓ Live an average of 13 years less than the general population
- ✓ Are more likely to suffer accidental injuries, including from motor vehicle and pedestrian accidents
- ✓ Have higher rates of substance abuse including alcohol, tobacco and drugs
- ✓ Have higher rates of type 2 diabetes and heart disease; and
- ✓ Are more likely to suicide

Additionally, women with ADHD are at a higher risk of intimate partner violence than the general female population.

ADHD - The Facts

Forget everything you thought you knew about ADHD

What people think ADHD is...



What ADHD actually is for many...

ADHD - The Facts

Forget everything you thought you knew about ADHD

Far from being over diagnosed, ADHD is more prevalent in society than previously thought. In 2018 a large international study found that it is present in between 2.3 and 5% of the world's population.

This same study found that in Australia the condition is under diagnosed and that for every one person diagnosed there are approximately nine others who are not.

Deloitte Access Economics estimated that there about 814,000 people in Australia with ADHD and this places and economic burden on the Australian economy of about \$20.4billion, which is comprised of \$12.8 billion in financial costs and \$7.6 billion in wellbeing costs.

Productivity costs resulting from reduced workforce participation, absences from work and reduced productivity while at work make up 81% of total financial costs.

The remaining financial costs include deadweight losses (11%), health system costs (6%) and other costs (e.g. justice system costs or education costs).

In Australia, ADHD in adults is exclusively treated within the private health system which may be out of reach for many and so the condition goes undiagnosed and untreated or misdiagnosed and incorrectly treated.





CHAPTER TWO

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR EMPLOYERS?



What does this mean for employers?

The Vicious Cycle of Non-Disclosure

As an employer, your responsibilities for ADHD workers reaches beyond an obligation to make reasonable adjustment to comply with the Disability Discrimination Act 1992.

As an employer you have the primary duty of care under the Work Health and Safety Act in your State to keep your workers safe. This means ALL your workers, including those with ADHD, and other neurodivergent traits.

But how do you do that when ADHD may cause a person to think differently, learn differently, communicate differently, regulate attention and emotions differently and perceive and respond to risk differently?

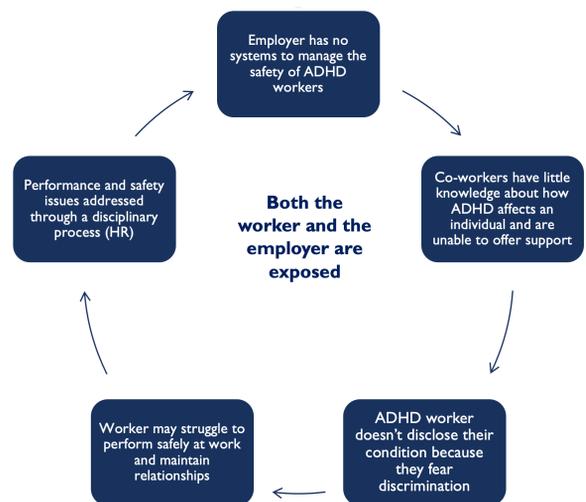
Knowing that a worker has ADHD and understanding how it may affect their ability to perform their duties safely will help you better manage risk, but a worker will not disclose their condition if they fear discrimination and do not see any evidence that their employer has systems in place to protect them.

So the worker does their best to manage their challenges at work, without support and without asking for adjustments. When they struggle, they're alone with it.

If inattention causes them to make errors, or impulsivity results in risk-taking behaviour they may be labelled as “difficult” and attempts will be made to formally manage their performance or discipline them.

This is a futile exercise if you do not understand what is at the root of the worker's difficulties. Anxiety about their situation makes the symptoms worse and eventually the worker may be “managed out” of the organisation. No-one is any the wiser.

The Vicious Cycle of Non-Disclosure



What does this mean for employers?

The Vicious Cycle of Non-Disclosure

Adults with ADHD can experience and respond to risk differently from neurotypical co-workers. Whilst every person is different and every workplace is different the following examples are broad but will give you some things to think about.

- ✓ **Distractibility** – Workers with ADHD may have difficulty focussing when there are distractions such as noise and movement in the external environment. They may also be prone to internal distractions such as daydreaming, zoning-out or rumination. These can impact their ability to concentrate, manage time, pay attention to detail and observe hazards.
- ✓ **Impulsivity** – Workers with ADHD may act or speak impulsively, before thinking about the consequences or risks or the impact on co-workers. This may manifest in interrupting others or increased risk taking behaviour.
- ✓ **Hyperactivity.** Workers who have the hyperactive-impulsive presentation will struggle to perform in sedentary tasks where they are required to stay in one place for too long.
- ✓ **Difficulty managing long-term or complex projects.** Managing complex or long-term projects can be challenging because these require executive functioning skills including planning, organising, time management, monitoring progress and adjusting requirements, and communicating, all of which can be compromised by ADHD.
- ✓ **Boredom.** Adults with ADHD can have a very low threshold for boredom and need high levels of stimulation. This creates particular challenges if their role requires them to carry out routine tasks, like reading policies and procedures, completing training or managing paperwork, that they may not find interesting.
- ✓ **Poor working memory.** This is a very common challenge for adults with ADHD. In the occupational setting this can result in work tasks or critical steps in a process being missed or duplicated and the need for verbal instructions to be repeated. ADHD workers may repeat conversations, which can create interpersonal tension and frustration for others.

What does this mean for employers?

The Vicious Cycle of Non-Disclosure

- ✓ **Procrastination.** ADHD can impact a person's motivation. When combined with poor working memory, distractibility and boredom, procrastinating results in tasks or projects not being completed and can create problems for co-workers if they can't complete their part of the project until the ADHD worker has completed theirs.
- ✓ **Hyper-focus** – Contrary to the belief that people with ADHD are unable to focus on anything, it is more accurate to say that they are unable to regulate their attention. They are capable of intense focus on a task that is stimulating for them, which can be beneficial. But when combined with time-blindness, hyper-focus can result in workers obsessively working long hours on one thing and doing this exceptionally well, while failing to complete other tasks.
- ✓ **Time blindness.** ADHD can affect a person's perception of time, which is controlled in the pre-frontal cortex. For the worker with ADHD this can create problems with getting to or leaving work on time, taking breaks when required, sticking to a schedule, and completing work tasks on time.
- ✓ **Interpersonal/social skills.** Where a person with ADHD has a poor working memory and impulsivity, they often find it difficult to interact with others and they can inadvertently cause offence by impulsively blurting out a thought or idea that came into their head, or interrupting others before they forget what they want to say.
- ✓ **Fatigue.** Around 80% of adults with ADHD experience a delayed circadian rhythm and other sleep disorders. When combined with hyperactivity and the stimulating effects of some ADHD medications, sleep can be elusive. Add shift work into the mix and the fatigue-related risk for the ADHD worker is significantly higher than their neurotypical peers.

What does this mean for employers?

The Vicious Cycle of Non-Disclosure

A word about treatment

There are two types of medication that are very effective in treating ADHD, stimulant and non-stimulant medications. These can have a positive effect on work performance and safety but there may be an adjustment period that needs to be carefully managed, and these medications are not without side-effects which can also impact a person's performance.

If a person has a comorbid mental health condition such as anxiety or depression, having a diagnosis of ADHD and receiving medication for this can have a positive effect on the symptoms of the comorbid condition.

Knowing that a worker is adjusting to medication while at work, can help the employer manage any risks to the worker's safety and so asking the worker to bring in some advice from their doctor, to let you know how they might be affected can be very helpful.

Medication will only take an individual so far in managing their condition, and where challenges remain they still need to be supported.

Other treatments such as cognitive behavioural therapy and specialist ADHD coaching can be enormously beneficial.

Adopting healthy lifestyle practices such as exercise, meditation and mindfulness, and a diet that is good for brain health, avoidance of caffeine, alcohol and other stimulants are also beneficial.

Knowing that your ADHD worker may be experiencing challenges, how can you break the vicious cycle of non-disclosure and create an environment and culture in which they feel safe to disclose?

In the next two chapters we will look at two approaches:

- ✓ The OHS Management Systems Approach; and
- ✓ The Person-Centred Approach.

Both are important in breaking the vicious cycle of non-disclosure and reducing the risk of injury to the worker.



CHAPTER Three

The OHS Management Systems Approach



The OHS Management System Approach

Do you have an ADHD blind spot in your OHSMS?

Breaking the vicious cycle of non-disclosure and creating a culture in which a worker with ADHD is safe to share their true, neurodivergent self, knowing they will be supported and protected starts with you, their employer.

You already know about your duty of care to ensure the health and safety of your workers and you probably already have policies and procedures, training and competency assessment, risk assessments and controls in place. You will also have a workers' compensation insurance policy and systems that support the early and safe return to work of injured or ill workers.

The effectiveness of your systems will depend on how well planned and organized they are, whether you have the resources you need to implement them, whether you have consulted with your workers to get their input into assessing risks and deciding on controls and how well you have communicated the requirements.

But just as important is the organizational culture. Do your actions as a leader reflect the standard you have set in your policies? How do you deal with people when mistakes are made? How do your team members get along with each other and how do you manage with disagreements.

If you want your systems to be truly effective, they need to be visibly inclusive of your neurodivergent workers. This means looking at the work tasks, environment, risks, systems and culture through a neurodiverse lens.

Not only do your neurodivergent workers think, learn, communicate, regulate attention and emotions differently and perceive and respond to risk differently, they also bring their creativity, big picture thinking and energy to your safety and health planning and implementation which will create a safer and more inclusive workplace culture.

By expanding the scope of your OHS Management System to clearly articulate and demonstrate a commitment to ensuring the safety of all your workers you will your systems will be more accessible to a greater proportion of your workforce.

The OHS Management System Approach

Do you have an ADHD blind spot in your OHSMS?

*Management
Commitment*

Make a visible commitment to providing a safe, healthy, flexible and inclusive work experience for neurodivergent workers. Educate yourself, your management teams and staff and allocate the human, financial and technical resources to deliver on your commitment.

*Consultation &
Communication*

Actively encourage neurodivergent workers to engage in the consultation process and welcome their contributions to policy development and implementation and risk management.

Managing risk

During the risk management process, identify and assess hazards as they are seen through a neurodivergent lens. Not everyone perceives or responds risk in the same way. Involving neurodivergent workers in risk management will result in a more complete system.

*Training &
Supervision*

Neurodivergent workers learn differently. Open and honest communication is key. Don't presume you know what a person needs in order to learn and perform safely. Ask them. Be flexible in the way you deliver training and assess competency.

*Incident
Reporting &
Investigation*

Neurodivergent workers may perceive incidents differently. Reporting procedures need to be accessible and flexible and neurodivergent workers may need help expressing what they witnessed or experienced.

*Workers'
compensation &
return to work*

Neurodivergent workers are entitled to the same workers' compensation benefits and return to work as others. If a worker's neurodiversity was a contributing factor to an incident, make sure you understand what went wrong. Not to apportion blame but to review your systems so the worker can be safe in future.



CHAPTER FOUR

The Person-Centered Approach



The Person-Centered Approach

If you've met one person with ADHD, you've met one person with ADHD.....

The person-centered approach places the individual at the heart of the intervention, and accepts them as a whole person. It was originally developed as methodology for planning care for people with disabilities and is now used extensively across the mental health, aged care, health care and criminal justice systems.

The person-centered approach relies upon four key principles:

1. to enable facilitate them to The person at the centre of the care is treated with dignity, respect and compassion;
2. Care, support and treatment are provided in a planned and co-ordinated way;
3. Care, support and treatment are personalized to the needs of the person and with their active input in decision-making; and
4. The focus is on the person's strengths and abilities, whilst supporting their challenges live, work and function independently.

Adopting this approach when supporting an ADHD worker recognizes their unique experience, respects and promotes their strengths and scaffolds their difficulties.

Given the significant health and socioeconomic disadvantages adults with ADHD often experience (refer back to Chapter 1) as an employer, you play a critically important role in your ADHD worker's life.

Knowing that a worker has ADHD and applying a person-centered approach to ensuring their safety is an excellent way to demonstrate your commitment to promoting neurodiversity in your business.

But how do you manage risk when the worker does not know they are neurodiverse? A person may struggle to perform safely in their role and behave in ways that concerns or upsets others (refer back to the *Iceberg Illustration*).

Before jumping to the conclusion that they are difficult or careless, take the time to open a supportive conversation with them about their challenges.

The Person-Centered Approach

If you've met one person with ADHD, you've met one person with ADHD.....

Whilst it's never appropriate for an employer to suggest a diagnosis, knowing the signs that may suggest the worker has neurodivergent traits and being able to discuss these in a reassuring way, encouraging them to seek advice from their own doctor, can change a person's life for the better.

There are also a number of self-assessment tools that you can direct the worker to. These do not provide a diagnosis but are designed to give the person some insight into whether the way their brain works is suggestive of neurodivergent traits. They are intended to be completed by the individual (not the employer) and if the outcome is suggested of neurodivergent traits, they can take this along to their treating doctor for further assessment and referral, if they are keen to pursue a formal diagnosis and treatment.

There is a list of Resources at the end of this eBook that you can refer to.

Red Flag Indicators that a worker may have ADHD

- ✓ They have a child or children with ADHD/neurodivergent diagnosis.
- ✓ They may disclose other mental health conditions.
- ✓ They report feeling fatigued and complain of poor sleep/insomnia.
- ✓ Frequently losing things, forgetting to complete tasks, attend meetings, easily distracted, repeating themselves, messy work area.
- ✓ Frequent accidents both at work and outside work (e.g. driving)
- ✓ Fidgeting, restlessness, excessive talking, doing too much at once and feeling overwhelmed or stressed.
- ✓ Interrupting others, making impulsive decisions, recklessness and not considering consequences of actions, interpersonal conflict.
- ✓ Difficulty prioritising work tasks, disorganisation, procrastination.
- ✓ Overreacting, emotional outbursts, hypersensitivity to criticism.
- ✓ Losing track of time, missing breaks, being late to work or meetings.

On the next page, we have summarized how you can implement a person-centered approach to develop a ND Safe Work Plan with your worker.

The Person Centered Approach

If you've met one person with ADHD, you've met one person with ADHD.....

Initiate a supportive conversation, keep an open mind, ask questions to help you understand their experience and work with them develop the ND Safe Worker Plan.

Partner with the person - focus on goals

- *What are the challenges and how do they affect you?*
- *What are the most important goals for you in working here?*
- *What is important for me to understand so that we can keep you healthy and safe at work?*
- *How can I support you in achieving your goals?*
- *What does success look like for you?*

Identify strengths, abilities & skills

- *What are the things you love to do?*
- *How do you feel when you do those things?*
- *What are you really good at?*
- *What are the things you most love about your work?*
- *What can you always be relied upon to do well every time?*

Identify challenges & impact on work performance and safety

- *What are the tasks that you struggle with most?*
- *How does that affect you?*
- *Do you struggle with these tasks all the time, or only sometimes?*
- *What do you do to make those tasks easier?*
- *How can I support you with these tasks?*

Together, work out a plan to promote strengths & support their challenges

- *What are the most important goals that we need to achieve first?*
- *What resources do we need to help us achieve those priorities?*
- *How will we know when we've achieved those goals?*
- *What are we each responsible for?*

Check in regularly & review the plan as things change

- *What are the big wins since we met last?*
- *Is anything still outstanding?*
- *What can I do to help you achieve that goal?*
- *Are there any new issues we need to talk about?*
- *What are your new goals?*
- *How can I support you?*

Conclusion

Make workplaces safe, healthy and more inclusive for neurodiverse workers

ADHD is perhaps one of the most misunderstood, misdiagnosed and stigmatized conditions in both the general and mental health fields and for many, without treatment and support, it can be debilitating.

The health and socioeconomic impacts of untreated ADHD can be profound and in Australia the economic impact of both treated and untreated ADHD is estimated to be more than \$20 billion! But it doesn't have to be this way.

ADHD can be very effectively treated with medication, cognitive behavioural and other therapeutic approaches and specialist ADHD coaching.

Effective treatment brings positive benefits on the person's whole life including their general and mental health, relationships, finances and work. Many people diagnosed as adults report profound relief from finally understanding why they think and feel they way they do, why the struggle to do the things that others find simple and that they are not unintelligent or lazy. To receive treatment that helps them is life changing for many.

As an employer you have an important role to play and an opportunity to harness the very significant strategic advantages that embracing neurodiversity can bring to your business.

But in doing so, you must recognize the challenges the individual experiences and by designing an OHS Management System that integrates the needs of your neurodivergent workers, and a person-centered approach to designing a personalized ND Safe Work Plan, you can demonstrate your commitment to promoting neurodiversity and break the vicious cycle of non-disclosure to discharge your duty of care to ensure the safety of ALL your workers, even those who think differently.



Perhaps the single most powerful treatment for ADHD is understanding ADHD in the first place.



You need to understand what a positive attribute it can be.

Resources

Where to find more information and resources

We will be posting more information and resources on our website regularly so sign up [here](#) to receive updates.

Resources

ADHD Australia - <https://www.adhdaustralia.org.au/>

ADHD Support Australia - <https://www.adhdsupportaustralia.com.au/>

Australian ADHD Professionals Association - <https://aadpa.com.au/>

Health Direct - <https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/attention-deficit-disorder-add-or-adhd>

ADDitude Inside the ADHD Mind (online magazine) - <https://www.additudemag.com/>

Centre for ADHD Awareness, Canada - <https://www.caddra.ca/public-information/adults/resources-and-links/>

Children and Adults with ADHD (CHADD) - <https://chadd.org/>

ADHD Institute - <https://adhd-institute.com/>

ADHD Foundation (UK) <https://adhdfoundation.org.uk/>

Extensive works of Dr Russell A. Barkley PhD
<http://www.russellbarkley.org/index.html>

Extensive works of Dr Ned Hallowell <https://drhallowell.com/>

Adult ADHD Self Assessment checklists

[Psychology Tools](#)

[Centre for ADHD Awareness, Canada self assessment checklist](#)



Make a difference

*Make workplaces safe, healthy and more
inclusive for neurodiverse workers*

[LEARN MORE](#)