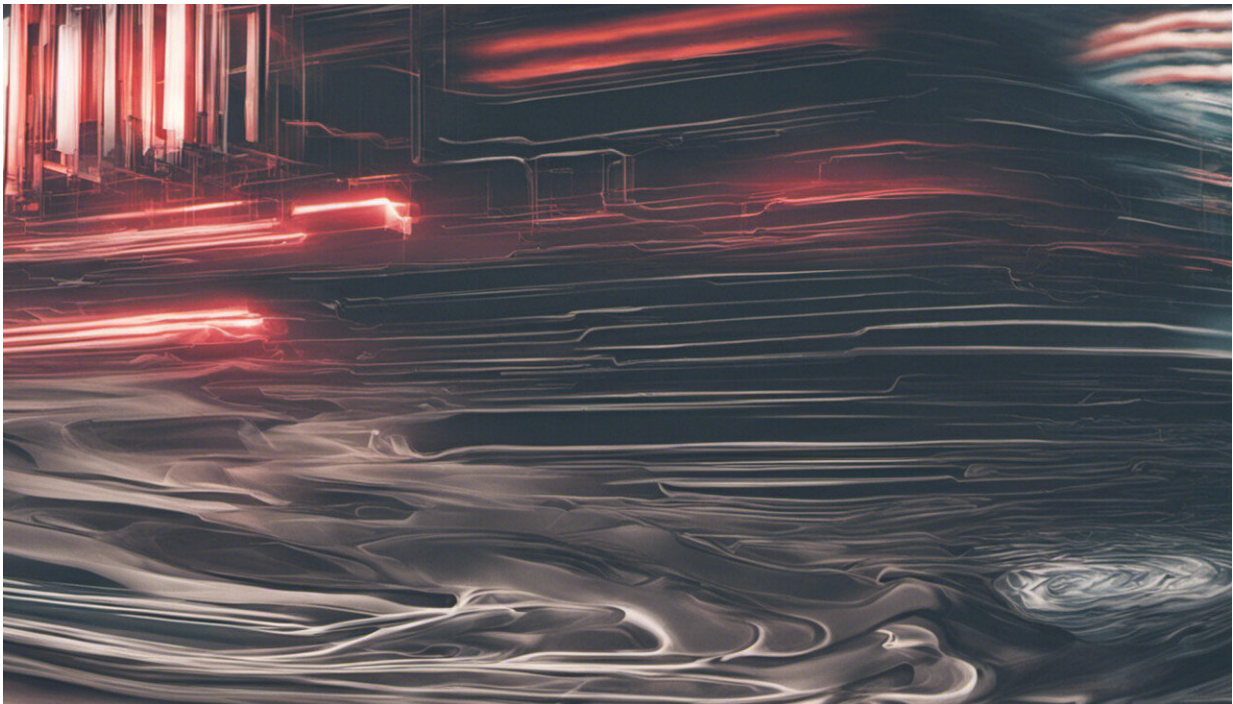# Should you tell your boss about your mental illness? Here's what to weigh up

May 18 2023, by Elizabeth Stratton and Nick Glozier

Credit: AI-generated image (disclaimer)

Whether you know about it or not, it's likely someone you work with or manage has a mental illness. One in five Australians have experienced a mental illness in the last 12 months.

Many people stay silent about their mental illness at work. Roughly 50%

–[70%](#) of employees choose not to disclose their condition. This may leave employees vulnerable, as employers can't provide individual support without [disclosure](#).

Over the years, many experts and commentators [have suggested](#) workers stay silent about mental illness, for fear of stigma and discrimination, and to protect their jobs.

But the evidence suggests there are often benefits to disclosing a [mental health condition](#) at work.

What does the research say?

The [largest Australian study of stigma](#), from 2018, found employees who disclosed their [mental health conditions](#) to their employers were well supported. They reported receiving accommodations such as flexible work arrangements and time off for appointments. They also felt supported by their colleagues and managers.

[Other research](#) shows disclosure can, for some people, lead to increased [social support](#) and better [mental health](#). Being open about a mental health condition [reduces](#) self-stigma (negative beliefs people develop about themselves due to societal stigma and discrimination), increases empowerment and facilitates a sense of power and control.

Our team conducted a [randomized controlled trial](#) involving 107 adults considering disclosing their mental health concerns at work. Participants used our newly developed [online decision aid](#) to make an [informed decision](#) about disclosing their mental health concerns to their employers. It includes seven modules to guide users to consider the potential outcomes, benefits and challenges of disclosing.

A review of the decision aid found the people who disclosed their mental

health condition at work reported a reduction in symptoms of depression and stress (from severe to moderate), on average, compared to those who chose to stay silent. This finding was based on self-reported clinical diagnostic scales for depression and validated measures of stress.

The [decision aid](link) is now [publicly available](link) and free to use through the New South Wales State Insurance Regulatory Authority.

Changing the culture

Many people with mental illnesses worry disclosing their condition will result in negative consequences, such as losing their job, being passed over for promotions, or being treated unfairly by colleagues.

These worries are [major barriers to disclosure](link)—and can become a reality for some people who disclose.

However, the world of work is changing. Employees are seeking jobs that prioritize mental health, with many [saying](link) they would take a pay cut for an organization that promotes and implements measures focused on employees mental health and happiness.

People who are open about their experiences with mental ill-health can [experience](link) increased self-acceptance and feelings of connectedness. Disclosure can help people feel more understood and supported by others, which in turn can lead to greater feelings of self-worth and belonging.

Sharing their experiences helps to break down the stigma surrounding [mental illness](link) and foster a culture of openness, understanding and empathy among peers. It can also help colleagues overcome the fear of stigma.

So how can employers create safe environments for disclosure?

Managers have a huge responsibility when it comes to their [employee](link)'s mental health. According to [recent research](link), managers have just as much impact on an employee's mental health as their partner, and significantly more than their doctor or therapist.

Managers need to ensure they provide a safe and supportive environment in which to disclose mental ill-health. This [requires](link) knowledge and confidence. Managers can emphasize the support and resources available to employees who choose to disclose, rather than dwelling on what the staff member might lose or the potential impact on the organization.

People who perceive their disclosure positively [tend to have](link) supportive managers. As "David" from our research told us:

"Five years ago, and at the very tail-end of my career, I thought I'd confide in a boss. His first words were, "What can we do to help you?" With those simple words, he instantly won my undying loyalty."

With an increasing focus on mental well-being at work, it's time our mental health advocates moved away from messages to stay silent. Instead, we need to ensure all staff with mental health conditions can access much-needed workplace support and accommodations.

By creating environments where employees feel safe and supported to share their experiences, we can begin to break down the barriers to disclosure and create workplace cultures that prioritize mental health and well-being. For many, disclosure can be positive and we have the tools to help.

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