

Dole bludger. With the economy growing and unemployment tracking around record lows, there are few slurs more cutting.

Fairly or not, the assumption is easily made that some just aren't trying.

When jobs are apparently so plentiful, it's difficult to comprehend an unemployment rate as high as 78 per cent in one section of the community.

But that's the staggering statistic facing a group of Australians for whom a job can be a life saving experience.

And what's even more difficult for those job seekers to understand are some of the attitudes, even fears, keeping them from the work they want and need.

According to Bernette Redwood from job placement agency Vista Vocational Services, there is an underlying stigma that keeps the doors to employment shut for some of her clients.

She recalls a recent experience with one employer when she accompanied a client to an interview.

"During the interview the person doing the interview gradually took all the sharp objects off their desk. I don't know particularly what he thought was going to happen."

Ms Redwood's client was one of the millions of Australians living with a mental illness. For them, attitudes towards mental health are the biggest barrier to overcome when seeking employment.

Statistics also indicate that mentally ill people are much more likely to stay unemployed long-term than average. An Australian government survey of 134 disability employment providers showed people with a mental illness fared worse than any other disability category in both securing and retaining employment.

After 16 months of disability employment assistance, only 23 per cent of job seekers with psychiatric disabilities attained durable employment of more than eight hours per week.

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John Mendoza, the former chief government adviser on mental health, says Australia is trailing the rest of the developed world when it comes to employment of people with mental ill health.

"If we look at Holland for instance, a person with schizophrenia in Holland has more than three and a half times the likelihood that they will be in paid employment than they would be in Australia," Professor Mendoza says. "I think we've got to understand why that's a fact and what we can do about it in terms of public policy."

The House Education and Employment Committee is doing just

that, conducting an inquiry into the barriers faced by people with mental ill health in work or education, and looking at how they can be overcome.

Professor Mendoza says one of the key issues is universal access to affordable and comprehensive mental health services for people having mental health issues.

"Before we start talking about employment, people have to have their mental health conditions at least stabilised to the point that they can actually engage in workforce readiness programs, skills development programs, and have the confidence that they can go in to a new workplace and feel comfortable in that environment."

Headspace clinical project coordinator Carmen Garrett agrees, noting that often the mental illness itself operates as the main barrier to employment.

"Symptoms of different mental illnesses can be huge barriers, such as lack of motivation, feeling really negative about yourself and also feeling really anxious in different situations," Ms Garrett says. "So for example going to have an interview can be incredibly difficult."

The often cyclical nature of mental illness also means people with mental ill health need to find employers willing to take them on when they are feeling well, and be flexible when they are not.

Vista Vocational Services tries to fill the gap between treatment and employment by running two businesses

Safe choice

Fears and misunderstanding are keeping some Australians from the jobs they are seeking. Story: Jeremy Kennett

that specifically employ people with mental ill health.

Trainees with mental health issues are given a 12 month contract to work at either Cafe Pazzini or North South Contractors, and are given practical training in hospitality or horticulture.

Bernette Redwood says the goal is to provide trainees with the qualifications, skills and experience needed to find and keep work in the mainstream employment market.

“One of the things we find significant in employing people is that they do acquire their self-esteem and self-confidence back, because having struggled and feeling quite worthless they are back to an environment that is as far as possible a normal environment,” she says.

Trainee Michael Dickinson says the job with North South Contractors has given his life structure for the first time in many years.

Mr Dickinson now hopes to use the experience he has gained to start a career in horticulture.

“I’m doing a Certificate II in Conservation Land Management and I’m hoping to get a job in conservation, parks and gardens, or working with Landcare and doing regeneration work around the ACT,” Mr Dickinson says.

However as the experience of some Vista clients shows, making the jump into the mainstream workforce is made all the harder by the pervasive stigma still attached to having a mental illness.

Bernette Redwood sees the impact of stigma every day, both in the way employers respond to her clients and when she talks about her own mental health issues.

“If I said I had diabetes, no one would blink, but as soon as you say that you’ve got a mental illness it’s a different ballgame,” Ms Redwood says.

Vista runs its businesses with the specific purpose of providing a safe and supportive working environment for people with mental ill health, but not all employers provide such understanding workplaces.

John Mendoza says the real key to breaking down stigma in the workplace is to tackle it in the general community.

WILLING AND ABLE:
People with mental health issues need employers prepared to take them on

“Most people still say they are reluctant to work with people who have depression or some other mental health disorder,” Professor Mendoza says. “And that comes from largely not knowing, accepting or understanding what that means.”

Before joining *headspace* as a youth advisory representative, Terry Tierney worked in a number of jobs where mental health was a taboo topic.

Mr Tierney thinks including mental health awareness training in standard occupational health and safety training could help normalise mental health issues in the workplace.

“Say you might have an anxiety attack, you might have a breakdown, you don’t know what to do and that’s what I found in places that I’ve worked in,” Mr Tierney says. “It was never explained to me ‘if this happens you do this’, whereas say you trip and fall there are steps in place.”

Carmen Garrett says employers and employees need guidance on talking about mental health issues in the workplace.

“Unfortunately it’s a much more difficult conversation to have with your employer when you’ve experienced a panic attack and you need to leave than it is to say, ‘I’ve fallen over and I’ve broken my ankle,’” Ms Garrett says.

“But there are some really good guidelines and there are a lot of things employers can do, including training staff to reduce the stigma within a workplace so people are supported emotionally.”

Beyond stigma, people with mental health issues may also struggle to get work because of interrupted education.

Terry Tierney left school because the hierarchy and pressure of high school life were exacerbating his anxiety and associated drug issues.

“I think definitely the bullying is a big issue, and for a lot of kids with anxiety spending six or eight hours a day in a big classroom is a major issue as well,” he says.

However Mr Tierney didn’t find any more support when he first entered the workforce, leading him to become disengaged.

“I had no problem getting employment, it was staying employed and finding the motivation to get up at six in the morning and go to work, and do it day to day.”

Ms Garrett says disengagement with work is common among *headspace* clients who have left education early because of mental health issues.

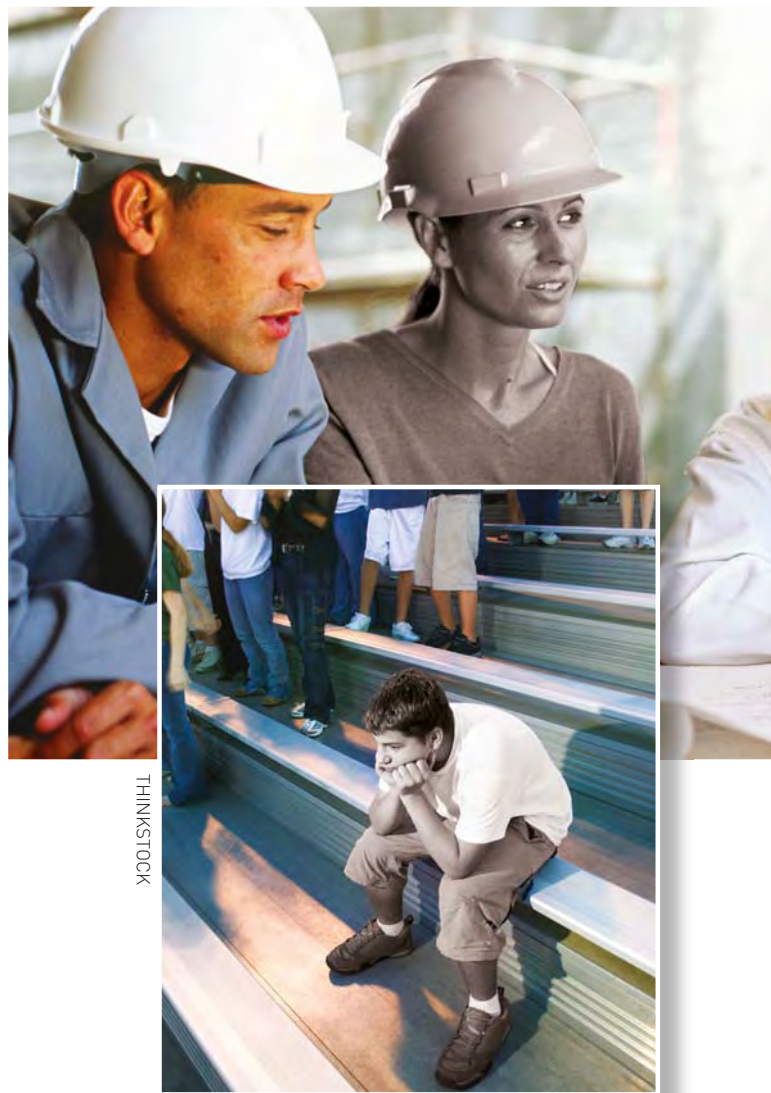
“A lot of young people with a mental illness want a job and it’s very difficult sometimes for them to get work but also stay in work because of those issues and also the symptoms of the mental illnesses themselves.”

John Mendoza says schools and universities need to be better equipped to help young people with mental ill health stay in education for as long as possible.

“Three out of four people that ever develop psychosis will develop it between the ages of 16 and 24,” Professor Mendoza says. “And we’ve got very weak mechanisms in our universities, in our TAFEs, in places where those folk are being trained and developed for work where they can be identified and linked in to effective services.”

Bernette Redwood says supporting people with a mental illness through education means they will be more likely to attain good quality, long-term employment.

“That’s one of the reasons I’ve managed to get government funding to allow people to go to the Canberra



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Institute of Technology so that not only do they move out with self-confidence but they are moving out at a better level with other prospective employers.”

Recent research suggests the quality of work available may be even more important than previously thought in terms of improving mental health.

Mental health researcher Professor Peter Butterworth found moving from unemployment into a poor quality job can actually be worse for your mental health than remaining unemployed.

“We certainly found that those who moved into a high quality job showed a significant improvement in mental health,” Professor Butterworth says. “But compared to those who remained unemployed, those who moved into the poorest quality work actually showed a significant decline in their mental health over that transition.



QUALITY WORK: *Worthwhile jobs help improve mental health*

“We saw increase in levels of depression and anxiety that would be deemed clinically significant, which was quite a surprise to us.”

This research calls into question the ‘work first’ approach to employment and mental health policy, where gaining any sort of employment is seen as preferable to being unemployed.

However Frank Quinlan, CEO of the Mental Health Council of Australia, says the benefits of employment for people with mental ill health in numerous areas of their lives is well established.

“One of the things we know is that people who are unemployed are likely to experience poorer mental health,” Mr Quinlan says. “We also know that by achieving employment and by improving their training we can prevent people from experiencing mental health problems. And we know that work and the regular routines around it are very therapeutic for people.

“So it’s really important that when people are experiencing mental health issues they get the right sort of assistance they need both to find work, to find the skills, but also to continue in employment for a long period of time.”

As people like Michael Dickinson attest, a chance to get started and a bit of understanding can be all the assistance that is needed.

“I’ve been just sitting on the lounge for about six to eight years and it’s really got me out of my comfort zone and into work,” Mr Dickinson says. “I’ve stuck with it, got fitter and more energy and it’s really helped me a lot.” •

FOR MORE INFORMATION on the inquiry by the House of Representatives Education and Employment Committee into mental health and workforce participation, visit www.aph.gov.au/ee or email ee.reps@aph.gov.au or phone (02) 6277 4573.



A promise kept

Five years ago, Ariel Kaufman (pictured left) made a promise to himself.

Despite extensive work experience in the hospitality industry, he was unemployed and living in public housing in Canberra’s suburbs.

“I set myself a goal that within two years I’m going to get out of ACT Housing and get myself a mortgage and get a house,” Ariel says.

Through hard work and dedication Ariel rebuilt his life, got his house and even found love.

However without the support of an understanding employer as he re-entered the workforce, he might never have been able to find the confidence to turn his life around.

Ariel had suffered a breakdown and was diagnosed with a mental illness while working and completing his chef’s qualifications.

He spent the next few years coming to terms with his illness and battling medication side effects which left him barely able to function, let alone work.

But once he made the commitment to start looking for work again, he found it hard to find an employer both willing and able to give him a chance and provide the support he needed.

Ariel was no stranger to struggle when it came to finding work, having left school in the early 1990s as Australia was sliding into recession.

“I went to 105 interviews before I got anywhere,” Ariel says. “Because of the recession everyone wanted experience, which I didn’t have at that time.”

But his confidence was failing by the time he got in touch with Vista Vocational Services.

Vista exists to provide paid training and work experience for people who have a mental illness in a supportive and supervised workplace environment.

Through Vista, Ariel was given a place as a trainee at Cafe Pazzini, where his hospitality nous quickly saw him rise to cafe manager.

“When I was back as a trainee, back then my self-esteem and confidence were shot to pieces.

“But the cafe brought that back, and now I can teach other trainees what I went through and say ‘look I’ve been there, I know what it’s like’ and we can move on from that and we can get you to this level so you can say ‘yes I can do that’.”