

## Skilled up and lifting the stigma on mental illness

Alan Shakir has been teased at work. He's felt incredibly lonely. He's kept his OCD to himself, fearing the stigma that all too often accompanies a mental illness.

Sadly, Alan's story is not uncommon. In fact, one in five Australian workers is affected by a mental health condition each year. Yet, mental illness is often overlooked as a barrier to workplace participation.

But Alan found a boss who listened, who helped him to see that his mental illness was actually an asset.

"In my previous workplace the pace was very fast and I always got teased for being so slow because I was constantly trying to make sure I satisfied my internal craving for neatness," Alan explains.

"Work was getting very difficult because I didn't tell anyone about my obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). One day my manager sat me down and had a chat with me. I told her everything. We then discussed strategies that could help improve my productivity for the business while making it a comparable work environment for me".

"My OCD means I'm very stringent when I'm checking scripts. I believe this is the reason I make minimal mistakes," he adds proudly.

Alan is speaking out about his mental health experiences in the workplace

as an ambassador for the new Mental Skillness campaign.

He's hoping to peel away the stigma associated with mental illness so more people can embrace their neural differences, celebrate their diverse abilities and be empowered to showcase their unique skills at work.

"This campaign is important to me because it aims to take away the stigma associated with mental illness. The stigma being that having a mental illness is a negative characteristic for someone. I hope this campaign can show the opposite," he says.

Work is more than a money earner; it is a critical activity to create social inclusion and research proves that social connection promotes good mental health and wellbeing. Mental Skillness was created to foster awareness and help break down the barriers to inclusion that prevent a safe working environment for people living with mental illness.

An initiative of The Living Well in Northern Sydney partnership, Mental Skillness is funded in part by NSW Health's Mental Health Innovation Fund. The NSW Government introduced the Mental Health Innovation Fund in 2016 to improve collaboration among government agencies and non-

government organisations (NGOs) in the delivery of person-centred care for people with mental illness, their families and carers in NSW. The six partners behind the initiative are: Primary and Community Care Services (PCCS); Northern Sydney Local Health District (NSLHD); Family and Community Services (FaCS); icare (Insurance and Care for the People of NSW); University of Technology Sydney (UTS); and Sydney North Primary Health Network (SNPHN).

In addition to the awareness that sharing stories like Alan's can bring, the partnership is also running the free business breakfast series, *Have a Go Hornsby* - a professional learning and development hub dedicated to the topic of mental health for business success.

Mental health is relevant to us all. If workplaces are conducive to mental health and wellbeing (and, indeed, actively promote it), then problems may be addressed before they surface in a material way. By focusing on health and not illness, we are better positioned to both prevent and address problems. And, we are better placed to create better and more successful businesses.

The benefits of mentally healthy workplaces are many; all-round individual resilience is enhanced, team cohesion is

often stronger, and individuals perform at a higher level when the myths of mental illness are dispelled, and practical support processes are established. In addition, the financial health of a business benefits with a reduction in absenteeism, faster return to work following illness, a reduction in staff turnover and greater employee engagement. And, as *Have a Go Hornsby* has explored, new and greater market opportunities can arise for local businesses through customer service models and modes of delivery that are more inclusive.

"We recognise that local business leaders need the confidence that comes with a good knowledge of the facts regarding mental health and inclusiveness," says PCCS CEO, Dr. JR Baker.

"The *Have a Go Hornsby* business series provides a safe space for leaders to learn, talk openly, question and develop concrete ways forward toward more inclusiveness - wherever and however it suits them."

*For further information on Mental Skillness - including resources for individuals and businesses, upcoming dates and topics for the breakfast series and how you can be a Skillness business - visit [www.skillness.com.au](http://www.skillness.com.au).*



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Precise  
Caring  
Awesome

**Alan Shakir**  
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living with OCD  
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