



STARTUP ADVICE



A focus on mental health in the workplace is both good management, and good business sense

KAREN GATELY / Wednesday, June 26, 2019



Corporate Dojo founder Karen Gately. Source: Supplied.

One thing the martial arts taught me is our ability to survive, let alone thrive, depends greatly on the strength of our mind.

Contemplate for a moment what would happen if I were to freeze with fear or anxiety when confronted by an attacker. The simple truth is if our mind gives in, the value of our capabilities is dramatically undermined.

The same is unquestionably true in the world of business. When people are anxious, stressed or simply overwhelmed by the challenges of their role, their ability to effectively apply what they know is eroded.

Having a healthy mind is just the first step toward ensuring we are able to cope with reasonable pressure and get our job done in a demanding world.

Having a strong mind is what enables people to be at their best.

Anxiety is the most common mental health condition in Australia.

According to the Black Dog Institute “up to one third of women and one fifth of men will experience anxiety at some point in their lives”.

Depression isn't far behind. The World Health Organisation estimates that depression will be the number one health concern in both the developed and developing nations by 2030.

We have a long way to go in the world of business to support people to be mentally well, strong and thriving. Research by Gartner reveals poor leadership, 24/7 workplace connectivity and low rates of wage growth are placing Australian workers at risk, and contributing to the growing mental health crisis in Australia.

Not only are some workplaces contributing to the problem, the lack of understanding and support provided when people are struggling mentally continues to be a big issue. The stigma around mental illness is very real in this country. People battling mental illness hold reasonable fears of being judged harshly by those who lack awareness and compassion.

Perhaps the most commonly-held false belief is that people with mental illnesses cause their own problems, and could simply change their reality if they had the will to do so.

For many years, I've periodically battled depression and anxiety and can attest to the falsehood of this belief.

What I know from experience is that, irrespective of the depth of passion I feel for my work, there are days when I simply don't have the strength to get out of bed. The world and its harsh attitude and consequences, suddenly become overwhelming.

At times, there aren't thoughts fuelling my emotions that I can directly challenge or 'push aside'. My body is simply reacting to the threats my brain unconsciously perceives.

Racing heart rate, despite simply sitting at our desks; nerves in the pit of our stomach, despite nothing particularly confronting in our diary today; and a depth of lethargy unexplainable by the amount of rest we've just had, are just some of the symptoms of the mental illness some people are battling every day.

When their employer responds by telling them in action or words, that the battles they face make them a flawed person with diminished value, it really doesn't help.

Helping people to maintain mental health and combat mental illness makes commercial sense. According to a 2014 PwC report, for every \$1 spent on effective initiatives targeting mental health in the workplace, an employer gains an average of \$2.30 in benefits.

Improved productivity due to lower rates of both absenteeism and presenteeism, were the primary drivers of these results.

Prevention is always better than cure. Employers are wise to invest in creating healthy workplace cultures based on trust and respect. Taking a zero-tolerance stance against bullying, discrimination and harassment is an essential place to start.

Education programs aimed at helping people to recognise the early warning signs of mental illness in themselves and others can also go a long way toward ensuring people get the help they need.

When organisations make good mental health a priority, people become less afraid to talk about mental illness.

When people aren't afraid to talk about mental illness, they put their hand up for help sooner. They are also entirely more likely to work openly with their manager to address any impact their health could have on their ability to work in the ways you need them to.

When anxiety starts to bite, or depression starts to weigh heavily, I, for example, immerse myself in being creative.

Writing articles, developing concepts and designing programs are my 'go-to' place. The influence turning my mind to these activities has, not only on my ability to recover quickly, but also on my ability to continue to add value to my business, is profound.

Working with people battling mental illness to find ways in which they can look after themselves and continue to contribute to an acceptable standard, is both the respectful and smart thing to do.



Karen Gately

Karen is the founder of [Corporate Dojo](#) and the author of *The People Manager's Toolkit: A Practical guide to getting the best from people* and *The Corporate Dojo: Driving extraordinary results through spirited people*.

