

Mental Health and Work Capacity

Mental health conditions can affect a person's ability to work in different ways and to different degrees. This leaflet explains how work capacity is considered in psychiatric care and what patients can expect.

What Is Work Capacity?

Work capacity refers to a person's ability to:

- Perform work-related tasks
- Sustain attendance and productivity
- Manage workplace demands
- Function safely in a work environment

Capacity may be **full, partial, or temporarily reduced**, and can change over time.

Mental Health and Functioning at Work

Mental health symptoms can affect:

- Concentration and decision-making
- Emotional regulation
- Stress tolerance
- Sleep and energy levels
- Interactions with colleagues and supervisors

The impact varies between individuals and depends on:

- Symptom severity
 - Job demands
 - Work environment
 - Supports in place
-

Assessment of Work Capacity

Assessment of work capacity is based on:

- Clinical assessment

- Reported symptoms
- Observed functioning
- Information over time

Work capacity is **not determined by diagnosis alone**.

Two people with the same diagnosis may have very different levels of functioning.

Work Capacity Can Change

Work capacity is **dynamic**, not fixed.

It may:

- Improve with treatment and time
- Fluctuate with stress or health changes
- Require adjustment of duties or hours

Regular review helps ensure recommendations remain appropriate.

Role of the Psychiatrist

In clinical care, the psychiatrist's role is to:

- Assess mental health symptoms
- Provide treatment and review
- Comment on functional impact where appropriate

Work capacity opinions are provided based on **clinical information available at the time**.

Role of the Employer and Workplace

Employers are responsible for:

- Workplace adjustments
- Determining job requirements
- Managing return-to-work processes

Psychiatric recommendations may inform these processes but do not replace workplace decision-making.

Return to Work and Adjustments

Returning to work may involve:

- Gradual increase in hours
- Modified duties
- Reduced workload
- Supportive supervision

Such arrangements are often temporary and reviewed over time.

Work Capacity in Reports

When requested, work capacity may be addressed in:

- Clinical correspondence
- Certificates or reports
- WorkCover or insurer documentation

Reports are prepared based on clinical judgement and available information, and may have limitations.

Differences Between Treatment and Assessment Roles

Treating psychiatrists focus on **care and recovery**.

In some contexts, work capacity may also be assessed by:

- Independent Medical Examiners
- Occupational physicians

These roles differ from treating clinicians.

Managing Expectations

It is important to understand that:

- Psychiatric treatment does not automatically mean incapacity for work
- Work capacity decisions are not solely medical
- Capacity recommendations may change over time

Clear communication helps reduce misunderstanding and conflict.

Questions and Discussion

If you have concerns about work capacity:

- Discuss these during your appointment
- Clarify the purpose of any requested documentation

Open discussion supports appropriate and realistic planning.
