

Would you hire someone with a mental illness?

June 14, 2013

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**Enterprise***Valerie Khoo is a journalist, author and entrepreneur, offering insights into the minds of other small- to medium-sized business entrepreneurs.*[View more entries from Enterprise](#)[Email article](#) [Print](#) [Reprints & permissions](#)

Mental illness remains a controversial topic - especially at work. *Photo: Gabriele Charotte*

Bernie Mitchell is a small business owner and real estate agent. He says he would have no problem hiring someone with a mental illness in his business [Focus Property Management](#) in Sydney.

That's largely because he knows what it's like to be in their shoes. Mitchell, 38, suffers from bipolar disorder. He is also author of *Bipolar: a path to acceptance*, about his diagnosis of bipolar disorder, and how he learned to manage his illness. As a father of four, Mitchell wanted to show it's possible to balance running a business with raising a family, all while managing his condition.

He says he would hire someone with a mental illness "as long as it is managed responsibly". Mitchell believes: "It's important for everyone to know that you can get there in the end and triumph over your mental illness."

When he has previously hired someone with a mental illness, he was proactive in supporting them. "On becoming aware of their illness I mentored them so that they could empower themselves to take the necessary action and ownership of their recovery plan," he says. "Given that I had suffered from mental illness, I supported them rather like a coach offering encouragement. We would meet up regularly to check in on progress and any issues that presented in the workplace. In one instance, the role was modified to accommodate the sufferer."

However, is this the responsibility of small business owners?

Melissa Jenkins (not her real name) doesn't think so. Jenkins, 40, runs a fashion store in Melbourne. "Life as a small business owner already has so many challenges," she says. "I know it's not politically correct to say this but I really don't think I would hire someone with a mental illness. I wouldn't even put them on a short list of applicants. I don't have the skills to help someone through their mental illness. I need highly functioning people who aren't going to give me problems with absenteeism and who can perform their jobs well.

"Of course, I understand that life isn't always easy. My staff go through difficult times and I try to support them because I care about them. But I don't want to invite potential issues into the workplace if I don't have to. I'm already working myself to the bone. I don't have the bandwidth to deal with more challenges. So if there's a choice between hiring a quality candidate with a mental illness and a quality candidate who doesn't, I'm going to pick the latter for sure."

Susan Bower, 41, owns [Dressed for Success](#), a Brisbane-based property styling business. Like Mitchell, she would hire someone with a mental illness. "As a business owner that suffers from depression myself, I know that with treatment, people with mental illnesses can function just as well as anybody else.

"Mental illness is now emerging as a more common illness, so the likelihood of employing someone with a mental illness is much higher whether they disclose it or not."

If you're applying for a job, should you disclose that you have a mental illness?

Careers counsellor Jane Lowder from [Max Coaching](#) says the decision for job candidates regarding whether or not they will disclose a mental illness to a potential employer is one that needs to be carefully considered. "If the mental health condition will not affect their ability to do the role then the candidate is not legally required to disclose it. In this instance, the matter of self-care should come into consideration. A close read of the potential employer's workplace diversity policy might reveal that support structures and workplace adjustments are available, and therefore an open discussion of any mental health matters upfront may see a new employee receive valued assistance in their role."

However, this frank discussion does carry some inherent risks. "This potential benefit would need to be weighed against the risk of negative stereotyping or being overlooked for either the role or development opportunities down the track. The ultimate decision about disclosing, when not obligated to do so, will be unique to each individual and role, and so discussing it with a trusted GP, psychologist or career counsellor may help in weighing the options."

The Fair Work Ombudsman declined to comment on this issue. However, [its website](#) states: "Under the *Fair Work Act 2009*, discrimination is disadvantaging someone in the workplace because of their... physical or mental disability." It then provides the example of this as "being rejected from a job during the hiring process."

However, it's fair to say it would be hard to prove if an employer did not shortlist a candidate during the hiring process because of their mental illness.

Meanwhile, small business owners remain divided on the issue. Some are empathetic. But others, like Jenkins, say it's not a wise decision. "I know I'm not supposed to feel this way. But I have enough on my plate as it is. It's already a challenge to manage my existing staff. And I know there are enough people in the world without a mental illness who can fill the roles I need. Why would I hire someone who has one?"

Would you hire someone with a mental illness? Has this had a positive or negative impact on your business?

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»The fact of the matter is that most of us will experience some form of mental illness at some stage in our lives. To greater or lesser degrees, someone close to you, if not you right now, are trying to cope with one or more of its myriad expressions, be it depression, anxiety, bipolar or other, including post natal depression. No one is immune & it is not a reflection on the character, strength or intelligence of the person effected. «

»The support of family, friends and/or an understanding, caring employer can be all the difference between coping and coming out from it stronger or spiralling into deeper, more damaging and life impacting illness.«

»Importantly, it is better for an employer to be prepared and willing to support & manage employees with mental illness than to pretend they can avoid employing anyone with one, for that is simply playing the ostrich. As with many, if not most illnesses, they can strike without warning and, as one cannot simply discard an employee as a broken piece of equipment, one must be prepared, to at least some degree, to understand the short and medium term impacts on the business and the unwell employee. This way both employer and employee can benefit materially/financially, whilst upholding or supporting the dignity and self worth of a person who may well be ones family member or friend.«

»Ultimately, it takes courage, support and time to overcome, or at least cope, with mental illnesses and the more considered and kind the support the better all are for the simple acts of decency that is inherent in not being discriminatory because of ignorance and prejudice.«

»

Warwick | June 14, 2013, 4:40AM

“ »«

»A fantastic response Warwick - all I wanted to say and more!«

»The fact is 1 in 5 Australians will experience a mental illness in any given year, and 45% of us in our lifetime. Not to mention the people acting as carers and supporters.«

»There are lots of new workplace training solutions for managers and small business owners (from SANE Australia and BeyondBlue to name a few) to help them understand the symptoms and the small steps (usually just a change in attitude and some understanding) to make a workplace 'mindful'.«

»If an owner/manager carries a negative attitude then it's more likely to cause someone to hide their situation, potentially creating a larger issue down the line.«

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Jeremy | June 14, 2013, 7:00AM

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»I can see how it's in an employers interest to support someone who they already employ who suffers a mental illness, why would they want to hire someone new who has a problem which will affect their ability to carry out the role though if there are other candidates who are just as qualified and don't have a mental illness? Please note I'm talking here about illnesses which affect the person's ability to do the job rather than ones which don't.«

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Hurrow | June 14, 2013, 7:46AM

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»Exactly - I challenge anyone to find me a really successful person who isn't managing one mental disorder or another - or at the very least hasn't suffered from (or is on the verge of) a nervous breakdown. I think most people have a few quirks, but its how well we manage them that defines a large part of our character.«

»«

Disgruntled Goat | June 14, 2013, 8:09AM

“ »«

»Thank you Warwick for an intelligent, informed and enlightened view. Now, if we could clone someone like you.....«

»«

FlickBishop | June 14, 2013, 8:54AM

“ »«

»This raises a very glaring question.«

»What is mentally ill?

If our medical industry continues on the path it is going we will all be on some form of medication in ten years time for a plethora of mental conditions once considered - living.«

»In a decade it will be impossible to get hired if you have ever walked into a GP and discussed any form of behavioural or psychiatric issue.«

»I wouldn't say a word if I had issues, especially if the government gets its federal health database up and running and allows corporations access to your medical records (which we all know they will). Risk Assessment, Risk Assessment, Risk Assessment. that is all it is.«

»Mum's the word. :-)«

»PS - I don't know anyone without some issue. So it is the people that act like they don't have bad days that you need to watch out for.«

»«

Mark C | Melbourne June 14, 2013, 11:41AM

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»I had a mental illness as a teenager, and lost several jobs as a result of being truthful on my job application forms.«

»I have since learned that because I can manage my illness well, the illness has no relevance to my abilities to do my job, and since then have not mentioned it on my job applications.«

»Back then (late 1960's) prejudice about a mental illness was rife, and 1 of the large companies that dismissed me was IBM! (I presume that they have improved their outlook now).«

»«

Jos | Lilydale June 14, 2013, 5:05AM

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»Whilst I strongly dislike the use of the term 'mental illness' (bipolar disorder and depression are mental disorders, not illnesses, despite the popularity of this term) sprinkled liberally throughout this article by the author and contributors, I do find it hilarious that Melissa Jenkins thinks she doesn't have any employees that have mental disorders - how would you know if an employee had depression, or anxiety, or OCD, or ADHD, or PTSD, or any other recognised mental disorder unless they told you?? I guarantee that a 'fashion store owner' is unlikely to notice the subtler signs of these disorders, the employee would have to be absent a significant amount of the time or behaving in a very unusual way for an employer to know.«

»Melissa however seems to think she can look at a person or their resume (they wouldn't make the short list of applicants??) and tell which ones have a mental disorder and which ones don't - big call for a fashion shop owner - I sincerely hope none of her employees ever feel they can talk to her about their personal lives, they clearly can't or they will risk being illegally sacked.«

»«

Nac | Sydney June 14, 2013, 5:35AM

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»It depends on what you mean by mental illness.«

»If someone has genuine mental illness, e.g. they're floridly psychotic on a regular basis, or are at the nastier end of the personality disorder spectrum, then no, I wouldn't especially want to hire them.«

»If on the other hand they're the worried well and are suffering ordinary everyday mild/moderate anxiety and depression - then yes I would hire them.«

»«

John | Sydney June 14, 2013, 10:36AM

“»«

»I agree. There are degrees of mental illness and some suffer the problem rarely or sporadically. With some cases, it's manageable to a level where the onset of the illness or condition may not even be noticeable beyond 'he/she's in one of those moods again'. A person with that level of psychiatric disorder would be wise not to disclose it to prospective employers, and most probably don't. «

»If, as a prospective employer, was told that a candidate had a disorder that manifested regularly and caused severe impairment to the candidate's ability to work, I probably would discount that candidate.«

»«

alto | June 14, 2013, 10:59AM

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