

Case Study: Major mental illness in the workplace

Jacob is 37 years old. He has worked for the public sector for 12 years and performs his tasks well. He is quiet at work, but is pleasant and unassuming. He lives with his wife in a rented house and has one daughter who is 8 years old. The family usually walks their dog before Jacob goes to work of a morning. On the weekend they enjoy indoor bowling. Jacob has a bookshelf full of bowling trophies.

However, while Jacob generally lives this normal life, sometimes he believes ASIO has planted a listening device in his skull, just behind his right ear. When he believes this strongly enough, he talks to himself, bangs himself in the back of the head with his fist and becomes aggressive at work.

Jacob has schizophrenia, and while his illness is generally managed very well with the use of medication, he has psychotic episodes every now and then. His employer put in place a strategy for managing these episodes:

- Increase management's awareness of the signs and symptoms of acute schizophrenia to help them respond quickly to Jacob's episodes.

- Foster open communication between management and Jacob so that he feels comfortable confiding in them when his symptoms become acute.

- If management is concerned regarding an oncoming episode, they refer to Psychology Consultants to conduct an assessment of Jacob's mental state.

- Jacob may receive assistance managing stress and problem solving. If required he may be given sick leave to seek appropriate psychiatric assessment and treatment.

- Other staff members are educated regarding Jacob's condition (with his consent) and asked to deal with him in a considerate manner.

Above all, the employer's strategy is to see Jacob's condition as they would any other chronic, recurring medical condition, like asthma or epilepsy. Thus they retain a valuable worker and give him a rightful opportunity to contribute fully to society and lead a full life.