

Disability, employment, and mental health in Australia

Employment is a fundamental social determinant of health. Achieving positive employment outcomes is a key way to promote the mental health and wellbeing of people with disability. However, there are large inequalities in employment for people with disability in Australia. These inequalities have significant impacts on the lifetime mental health of people with disability.

This fact sheet is the first in a series of five reporting on a research review of the Centre of Research Excellence in Disability and Health (CRE-DH) research program on employment and mental health among people with disability.

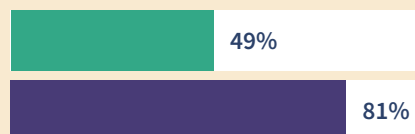
This review summarised the findings of our research program and generated a series of policy recommendations. A range of research methods including qualitative methods, quantitative methods, and reviews were used to conduct our research and a variety of Australian data sources were used in analyses. We recognise that not all people with disability are represented.

This review and accompanying factsheets use person-first language when referring to people and groups with disability. We recognise that language preferences are individual and that many people with disability also use identity-first language.

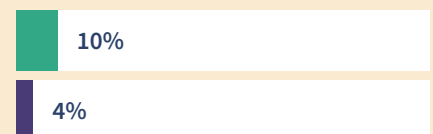
Legend

- with disability
- without disability

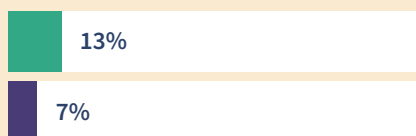
Working-aged people with disability (15-64 years) are employed



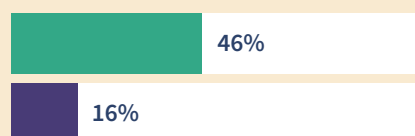
Working-aged people with disability are unemployed



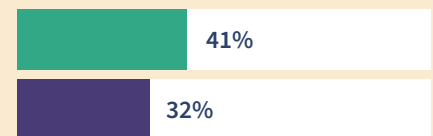
Employed working-aged people with disability are underemployed (not receiving as many hours as they want)



Working-aged people with disability are out of the labour force (not employed or seeking work)



Employed working-aged people with disability work part-time (<35 hours per week)



Case study

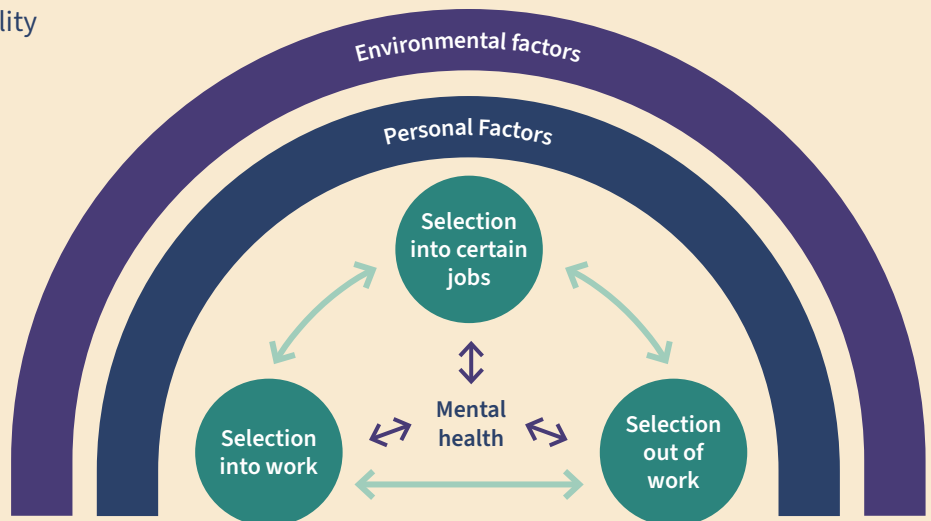


Rosie lives with mental illness. A few years ago, Rosie was hospitalised at short notice due to her disability. Despite performing well at her retail job, Rosie was fired for being unreliable. Being fired led to a significant deterioration in

Rosie's health and she was hospitalised again. Rosie then began working as a pharmacy assistant at a chemist, a position she has held for several years. While the job can be challenging, Rosie loves helping customers.

Her supervisor is supportive and gives Rosie the authority to manage her health needs, promoting a workplace culture that has enabled Rosie to not only maintain her job, but to flourish in it.

The experiences people with disability have when looking for work, when in employment, and when leaving employment have impacts on their mental health, and these are influenced by personal and environmental factors. One way to think about all these components together is through the **Disabling Working Environments** framework. These components are influenced by **personal** and **environmental** factors.



- **Selection into work:** People with disability may encounter barriers to finding work due to attitudes of employers or availability of jobs. People with disability may be less likely to get jobs than their peers who don't have disability.
- **Selection into certain types of jobs and exposure to poor psychosocial working environments:** When people with disability get jobs, they are more likely to experience poorer working conditions, such as being underemployed or experiencing more psychosocial job stressors, like job insecurity.

- **Selection out of work:** People with disability are more likely to become unemployed and retire early. This may be influenced by the poorer quality jobs they were working in.
- **Environmental factors are external to a person.** They constitute the physical, social, and attitudinal environment in which a person lives. This includes the built environment, transport accessibility, access to services (health, disability, employment), social attitudes and discrimination, and the availability of jobs.

- **Personal factors are internal to a person.** This includes attributes like gender, age, LGBTQIA+ identity, Indigenous status, ethnicity, disability type and severity, education, occupation, and work history.
- These interlinked components are conceived of as 'disabling' because people with disability have higher exposure to barriers that may reduce their ability to gain and maintain employment. The three main components impact one another and each directly affects mental health.

Further information

The CRE-DH generates evidence to guide social and health policy reform with the aim of improving the health of Australians with disability aged 15-64 years and reducing inequitable, avoidable health and wellbeing disparities between Australians with and without disability.

This fact sheet was produced by the CRE-DH team and funded by the NHMRC (GNT1116385).

Employment information is based on the Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers (2018) as presented in:

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2024). *People with disability in Australia*. Retrieved from <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia>

Centre of Research Excellence in Disability and Health (2022). *Disability and Wellbeing Monitoring Framework: Baseline indicator data for Australians aged 18-64 years*. Melbourne: Centre of Research Excellence in Disability and Health. <https://doi.org/10.25910/ffxs-wd42>

More information on Disabling Working Environments is available in the following article:

Milner A, Shields M, King TL, Aitken Z, LaMontagne AD, Kavanagh AM. (2019) Disabling working environments and mental health: A commentary. *Disability and health journal*, 12(4), 537-541. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dhjo.2019.06.002>

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