



Australian Government

Comcare



CASE STUDY

WEBINAR: Assessing functional capacity to work for psychological injuries

Patient background

Lisa is a 43-year-old woman presenting with significant emotional distress. Lisa has no history of mental illness, and this is the first appointment in which she has mentioned feeling stressed.

Workplace context

Lisa is employed by a government organisation that provides services to Australians in need of support. She is an experienced team leader with responsibility for approximately 30 staff. The team's main activity is assessing, and processing, claims for assistance.

The last two years have seen significant disruptions to usual work practices and workloads for Lisa, in response to national emergencies such as the Covid-19 pandemic, fires and floods, including:

- increased team numbers
- expectations that the team will work extra hours and process more claims
- changes in work locations, including substantial periods of working exclusively from home.

These have raised additional management challenges, including supporting staff members who are struggling to cope, while maintaining or increasing productivity. Since the shift to working from home, the boundaries between work and home seem to have blurred, with Lisa's manager sometimes messaging her outside of normal hours. Lisa notices that she works longer hours when working from home. She has also developed a habit of regularly checking for work messages when she is not working and finds it hard to 'switch off' from work.

Home context

Lisa is married with three school-aged children. Her husband works long hours running his own business and shares domestic duties when he is at home but leaves early and is often home late. Lisa is the children's primary carer and shoulders most of the domestic responsibilities. Over the past two years, at

different times these have also included home schooling responsibilities for the children, which Lisa has found to be extremely draining.

Presenting symptoms

Lisa starts crying as she describes to her GP that she is feeling overwhelmed and exhausted by the demands of work and home. She reports that her sleep is poor; she is struggling to get to sleep as she is thinking about situations at work, and wakes early, again thinking about work issues. She struggles to get moving in the morning, but as the day progresses her energy and motivation returns, although not to her usual levels. She has noticed at work that she can feel her heartbeat increase and finds this uncomfortable and concerning. Her patience at work and home is poor. At home she has noticed herself yelling at the children more frequently and over minor matters. She is 'snappy' with her husband and feels resentful that he is not more available to share the load. She wonders if he sees work as an 'escape' from home responsibilities and whether he spends more time at work than he needs to.

At work Lisa tries to maintain a professional face, but to her shame she has broken down in tears at times following stressful events. Once she begins crying it's difficult to stop. Although she is usually a conscientious and supportive manager, she recently finds it hard to give her staff the time they need and wishes they could just sort things out without her.

Lisa says that she feels exhausted all the time and is rarely undertaking exercise. Lisa reports feeling like she's 'hitting the wall' and has taken a couple days of sick leave for some breathing space.

She can't see an end in sight for the increased work demands or any change to demands at home. She says she fantasises about staying in bed and letting others pick up the pieces. She wonders if she should quit her job but doesn't feel capable of looking for a new one. She asks her GP to give her a medical certificate so she can have a week off work to rest as she is finding it hard to cope.