

Media release

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Personal stories of discrimination shed light on workplace experiences

The Public Health Association conference was told today that people who experience mental illness face discrimination not only when they are job-seeking but also after they've secured a job.

Vanessa Cooper, a Like Minds, Like Mine Health Promoter from the Mental Health Foundation, told the conference in Dunedin that discrimination in employment could be very subtle, from being left out of decision-making, through to outright bullying.

Vanessa's research, which was a collaborative project with the University of Auckland and Balance New Zealand, a bipolar support network, and undertaken as part of her Master's degree in Health Sciences, found that many of the research participants had experienced high rates of discrimination resulting in some of them leaving their job.

"The advice from participants, who were aged from their late 20s to 60s and who all experience bipolar disorder, was "don't disclose your mental illness".

"Their belief, based on past experience was that if colleagues knew they had a mental illness, everything they said and did would be under the microscope and seen through the filter of that illness. But for these people, there were high levels of stress and anxiety that their manager or colleagues would find out, which diminished their sense of wellbeing.

"Many research participants said that disclosing their experience of mental illness was a positive move, but only after establishing some credibility in the job, as they were constantly faced with the stereotypes and myths of associated with the word 'bipolar'."

Vanessa told the conference she believed the country needs more behaviour change like that advocated through campaigns such as Like Minds, Like Mine - "What you do makes the difference", and "Know me before you judge me".

"We need to challenge preconceptions about the abilities of someone experiencing mental illness.

"More understanding of how to support an employee or colleague with experience of mental illness is also needed. Especially considering that half of all New Zealanders will experience a mental health issue in their lifetime, it's critical that such a huge pool of talent is not wasted through discrimination. We can't afford to ignore mental health issues in employment and the wealth of contribution people with mental health challenges can and do provide to the economy."

For further information please contact:

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