Health & Community Services

Sector EAP analysis and clinical insights

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P R O G R A M S

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Introduction

This report considers the psychosocial risks and insights derived from EAP (Employee Assistance Program) observations for customers in the Health & Community Services Sector. It is intended to support Assure Programs' business partners in exploring trends at an industry level and is best used in conjunction with each customer's individual EAP reporting and other data sources, to inform proactive mental health and wellbeing strategies.

Assure covers over one million Australians across all industry sectors including employees' family members, and in 2019 provided 65,000 hours of EAP counselling and 6,800 hours of support for critical incidents and significant events. 77% of all Assure's counselling sessions were face to face, and 95% of clients were either 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied' with their counselling experience.

In the Health & Community Services Sector, Assure provides EAP services to 69 organisations, totalling 66,000 employees plus their families. In 2019 Assure provided 5,200 counselling sessions and 280 hours of support for critical incidents and significant events in this sector.

Mental health issues are the most common reason people are accessing EAP at Assure, comprising 35% of all presenting concerns. Because we only use experienced psychologists (not provisionally registered psychologists, counsellors, social workers or chaplains) we are able to assess and treat these issues (particularly complex and trauma-related cases) using evidence-based interventions. Additionally, if appropriate, we offer continuity of care for longer term treatment in conjunction with a GP Mental Health Care Plan, where clients can receive rebates through the Medicare system when necessary and continue to use the same Assure psychologist if they choose.

Industry context and psychosocial risks

There are a diverse combination of psychosocial factors that may place personnel in the Health & Community Services Sector at a greater risk of psychological harm. In particular, workplaces in the Health & Community Services Sector are often characterised by heavy workloads, a fast pace of work, tight schedules, understaffing, paperwork, regulatory requirements, and departmental bureaucracy. Each of these factors may contribute to a worker's experience of stress, fatigue, frustration, mental ill-health or burnout if organisations do not take proactive steps to manage them appropriately and foster a psychologically safe and healthy workplace. These risks, in conjunction with other aspects of organisational culture, may increase the likelihood that some workers will be susceptible to mental health issues, leading to higher rates of EAP utilisation as a result.

Although working in the Health & Community Services Sector can be a highly rewarding experience due to the immediate and profound impact that such work can have on the welfare of others, working in a caring or healthcare position also poses unique challenges. Provide a high quality standard of care to patients and clients from a range of socially, economically and demographically diverse backgrounds can be emotionally, socially and physically taxing. In addition to this, the day-to-day work of a professional in the Health & Community Services Sector is likely to be significantly influenced by changes across the sector on matters of policy, funding and organisational structure. Over time, these changes can take a toll on the psychological health and wellbeing of personnel.

Other features of the work environment may also make personnel in the Health & Community Services Sector more vulnerable to psychological problems. For example, many healthcare and community services workers are required to deal with dependent, demanding or violent patients on a regular basis, necessitating well-developed skills in de-escalating emotionally charged interactions with tact, compassion and empathy whilst continuing to provide a high quality standard of care.

In some areas of Health & Community Services, personnel may also be subject to an increased risk of vicarious trauma. For example, workers in intensive care units, burn units, emergency rooms and operating rooms may need to provide treatment or support to individuals who have experienced significant physical and/or psychological trauma. Depending on the type of role, some workers could also experience distress related to witnessing or hearing about a patient's death.

For some workers, the emotional and physical exhaustion associated with these one-off or cumulative exposures may culminate in the experience of compassion fatigue, described as the diminished ability to empathise with or feel compassion towards others. Understanding how to proactively safeguard the wellbeing of team members in these situations and manage their degree of risk is of critical importance in this sector, particularly given the importance of maintaining a high quality standard of care.

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COMMENTARY

Although working in the Health & Community Services Sector can be a highly rewarding experience due to the immediate and profound impact that such work can have on the welfare of others, working in a caring or healthcare position can also be emotionally, socially and physically taxing.

Having noted this combination of stressors, we should not be surprised that the Health and Community Services Sector has significantly high levels of EAP utilisation. However, capitalising on identified strengths and taking proactive steps to manage or eliminate psychosocial risks can go a long way towards cultivating a psychologically safe and healthy workplace.

EAP Insights

The information on the following pages summarises EAP utilisation for Assure's customers in the Health & Community Services Sector over the past two years, in comparison with all other sectors. We can make the following observations and insights:

- Overall utilisation increased marginally from 11.30% in 2018 to 11.43% in 2019, compared to 8.15% for the all-sector average in 2019. This stable degree of utilisation reflects consistent levels of awareness and acceptance of mental health issues between 2018 and 2019. The observation that EAP usage is substantially higher in the Health & Community Services Sector may relate to the diverse psychosocial risks associated with this sector and the emotionally, socially and physically demanding nature of the work.

- The most common age of clients (28% aged 30-39) is consistent with other sectors, and was more or less consistent between 2018 and 2019 (26%).

- 38% of clients were in their first 2 years of tenure, and 20% were in their first 2 to 4 years. This was comparable to the length of tenure observed in other sectors, whereby 37% of clients were in their first 2 years of tenure, and 19% were in their first 2 to 4 years. This suggests that employees in the Health & Community Services Sector who are early in their tenure may be more likely to utilise Assure's EAP service than those with longer periods of tenure.

- Substantially more clients were female (77%) than for other sectors (63%). Although this may be consistent with the overall gender mix of employees in the Health & Community Services Sector, it could also reflect an opportunity to normalise the value and importance of help-seeking for all gender groups in this sector.

- Access by family members was consistent between 2019 (12%) and 2018 (11%). This rate of utilisation was only marginally lower than the rate across all sectors during 2019 (13%).

- Employee awareness about their EAP service comes most commonly from their supervisor (26%), which was higher than in other sectors (20%). This was followed by HR or People & Culture (21%). This data suggests that equipping supervisors and HR personnel with the capabilities required to support vulnerable staff members and offer a referral to EAP when needed may be of particular importance in this sector, given that these personnel are the primary gateway to EAP for many employees.

- The mix of workplace concerns (36%) and personal concerns (64%) was consistent with other sectors and remained more or less stable. However, it should be noted that whilst relationships and mental health issues are classified as personal concerns, they often have their origin in workplace pressures. Furthermore, workplace issues can often be a factor underpinning stress in the home environment.

- Among personal concerns, relationship issues within couples and families were the most commonly reported (24%), which is similar to the all-sector average (26%). This was followed by symptoms of anxiety (16%), which again is consistent with the all-sector average (also 16%).

- Among workplace concerns, supervisor conflict and perceived bullying (14%), excessive workload pressures (12%), concerns about performance and reduced productivity (9%) and work life balance (7%) were the most commonly reported concerns. These were largely stable between 2018 and 2019, and were also more or less consistent with other sectors.

- Access to Assure's Manager Support Program was primarily to help employees through change, critical incidents and other stressful situations (33%), which was consistent with the frequency of this concern other industries (33%), but lower than the frequency of this concern in 2018 (37%). The largest increase between 2018 and 2019 related to managing the difficult behaviour of an employee/colleague (up from 16% in 2018 to 20% in 2019), reflecting an opportunity to educate managers about having difficult conversations in the workplace and managing concerns pertaining to behaviour and performance.

Mental Health & Wellbeing Strategies

Assure has been working with a number of its customers in the Health & Community Services Sector to develop and deliver proactive mental health and wellbeing strategies. Every organisation has its own challenges and priorities so there is no one-size-fits-all solution, but common themes include:

- Mental health awareness (for leaders and employees), including how to support staff in need and refer them to EAP when required

- EAP awareness: Assure has an awareness video to allow much greater reach via customer Intranets and email

- Dealing with aggressive patients/clients and difficult patient/client conversations

- Change management

- Leading resilient teams

- Handling vicarious trauma, including the psychological risk associated with one-off or repeated exposure to confronting or emotionally distressing situations and cases

- Creating psychologically safe workplaces

- Wellbeing assessments and positive psychology programs have also been helpful for people who are already coping well ('surviving') but want to raise their performance to another level ('thriving').

- Electronic or virtual delivery of training and awareness programs allows employees to access them in geographically remote locations and at times that fit with rosters and operational requirements.

Resilience and self-care: Noting the increasingly complex and uncertain environment within the modern workplace, the need to build a resilient and agile workforce is critical. Research tells us that one-off resilience training simply does not cut it, so how can we create sustained behaviour change to help employees and leaders navigate our increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous work environment? Assure has designed a program Thrive to address this, using an assessment tool based on the 6 key neuroscience pillars of resilience, that can be targeted to the specific needs of each organisation. Acknowledging the need to scale up across large, geographically dispersed workforces, this program incorporates virtual coaching via state-of-the-art technology and artificial intelligence, alongside face-to-face training and coaching programs. This approach provides an interactive and engaging way to build resilience through a comprehensive program tailored to different learning needs.

Psychosocial risk assessments: As a precursor to deciding on specific mental health and wellbeing initiatives, and to help target investment in the most cost effective way, we would recommend carrying out an assessment of psychosocial risks across your organisation. Assure has developed an online assessment tool the Backbone of Mental Health & Wellbeing in the Workplace which allows business leaders and employees to assess strengths, or areas to improve, within 8 key areas of clinical risk.

If you would like to discuss your strategy for proactively improving the mental health and wellbeing of your organisation, please talk to your Assure Programs Customer Care Manager or call (07) 3211 8919.

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WHO HAS BEEN ACCESSING EAP?

EAP Utilisation

11.43% — Health & Community Services 2019	11.30% — Health & Community Services 2018
8.15% — All industries 2019	6.45% — All industries 2018

EAP client age (as % of all clients)

Age	Health & Community Services 2019	Health & Community Services 2018	All industries 2019	All industries 2018
<20	4%	5%	4%	4%
20-29	19%	18%	24%	23%
30-39	28%	26%	33%	33%
40-49	23%	23%	24%	24%
50+	26%	28%	15%	16%

■ Health & Community Services 2019   ■ Health & Community Services 2018   ■ All industries 2019   ■ All industries 2018
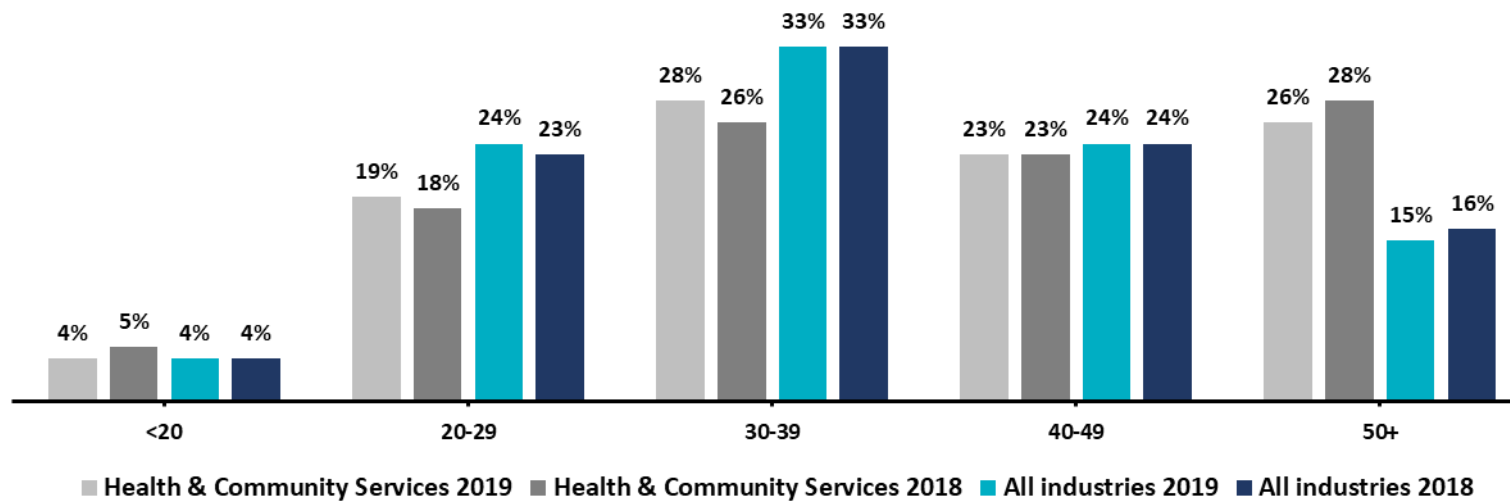
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EAP client gender (as % of all clients)

	Male	Female
Health & Community Services 2019	23%	77%
Health & Community Services 2018	22%	78%
All industries 2019	37%	63%
All industries 2018	37%	63%

■ Male ■ Female
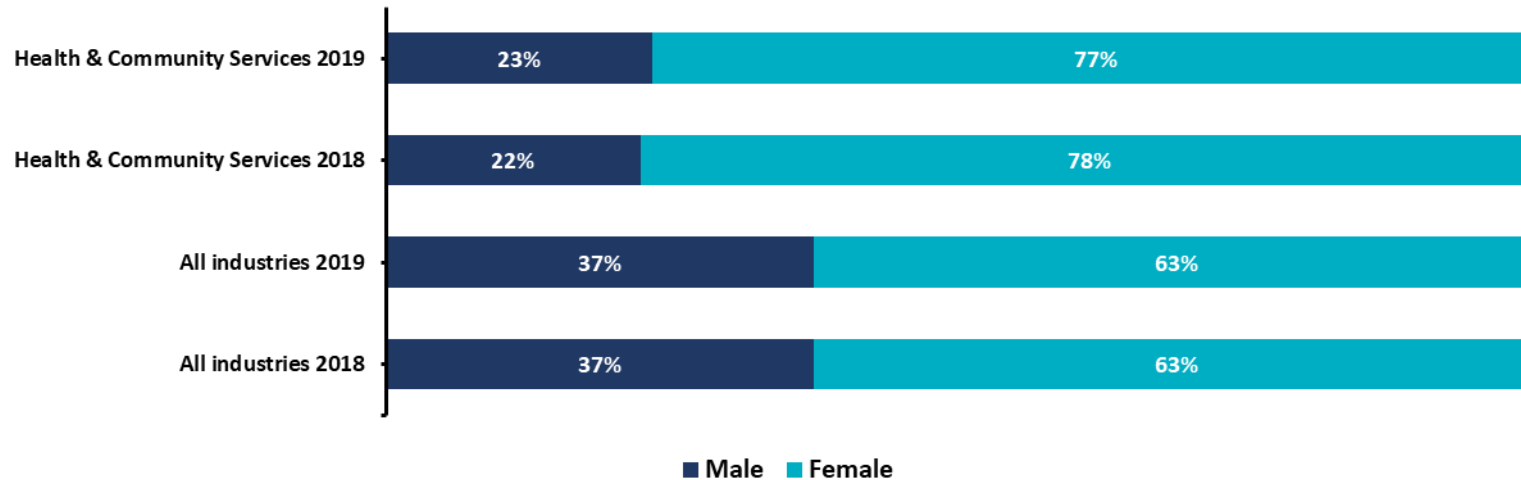
EAP client type (as % of all clients)

	Employee	Family Member
Health & Community Services 2019	88%	12%
Health & Community Services 2018	89%	11%
All industries 2019	87%	13%
All industries 2018	87%	13%

■ Employee ■ Family Member
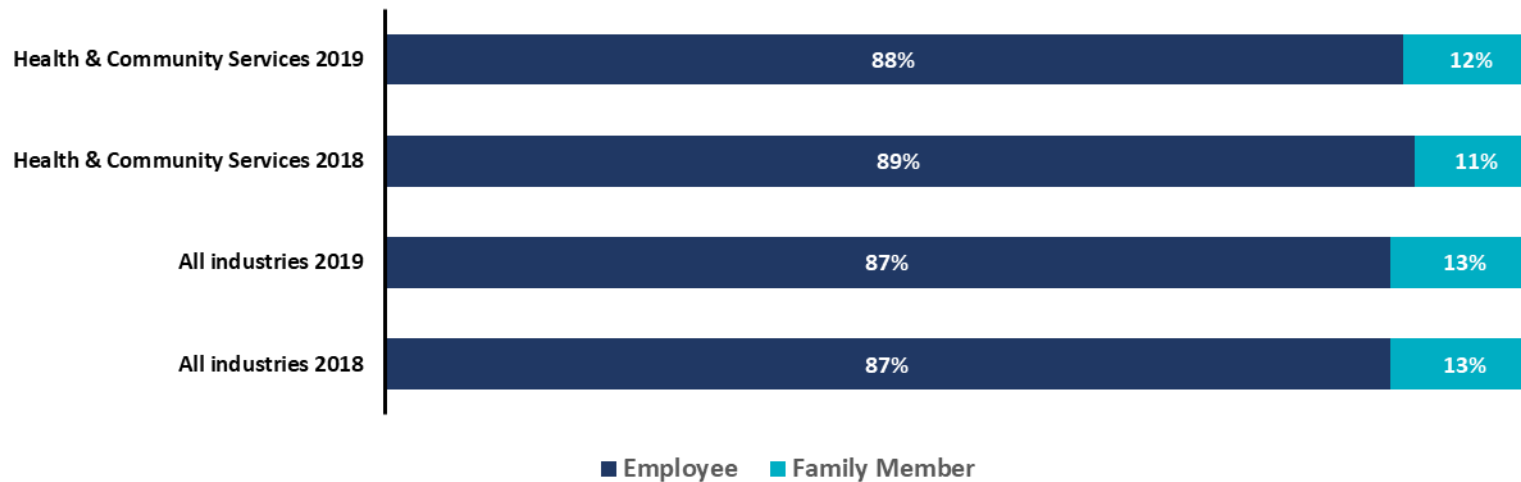
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EAP client length of employment (as % of all clients)

	0-2yrs	2-4yrs	4-6yrs	6-8yrs	8+yrs
Health & Community Services 2019	38%	20%	10%	8%	24%
Health & Community Services 2018	41%	18%	10%	9%	23%
All industries 2019	37%	19%	11%	8%	25%
All industries 2018	36%	19%	11%	8%	26%

■ 0-2yrs ■ 2-4yrs ■ 4-6yrs ■ 6-8yrs ■ 8+yrs
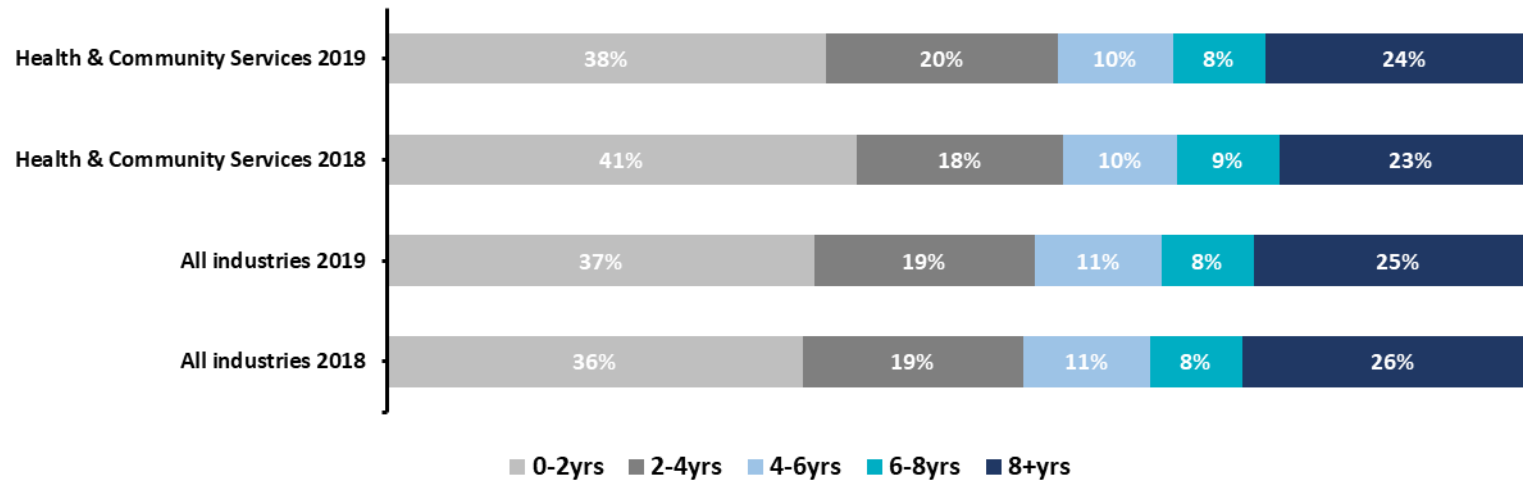
How learnt of EAP? (as % of all clients)
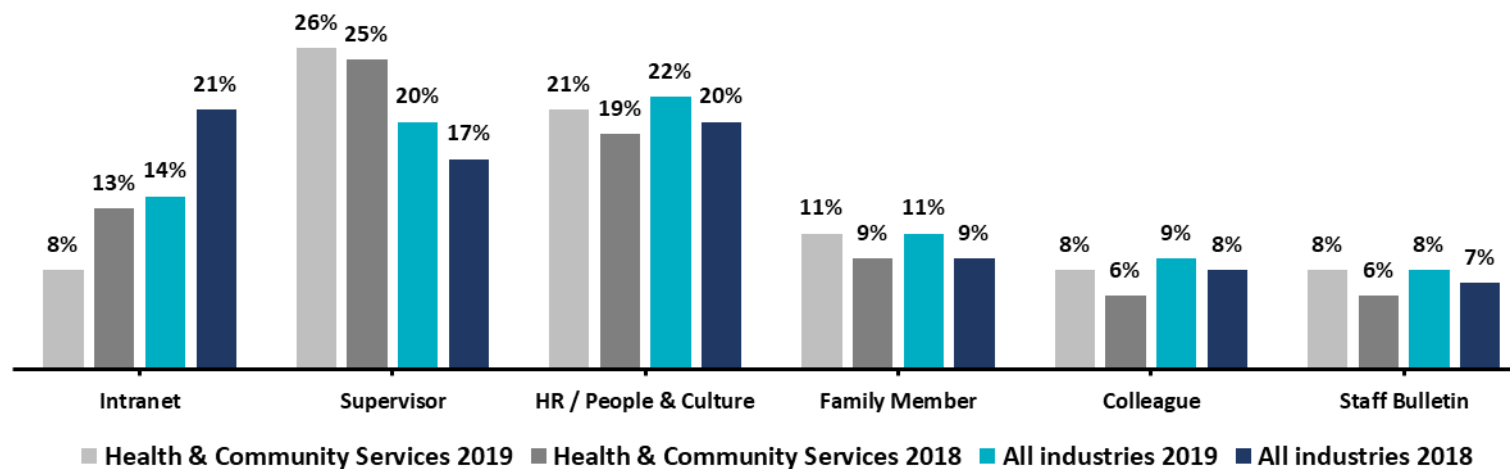
	Intranet	Supervisor	HR / People & Culture	Family Member	Colleague	Staff Bulletin
Health & Community Services 2019	8%	26%	21%	11%	8%	8%
Health & Community Services 2018	13%	25%	19%	9%	6%	6%
All industries 2019	14%	20%	22%	11%	9%	8%
All industries 2018	21%	17%	20%	9%	8%	7%

■ Health & Community Services 2019 ■ Health & Community Services 2018 ■ All industries 2019 ■ All industries 2018

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PROGRAMS

Primary presenting concern (as % of all clients)

Workplace concern
- 36% Health & Community Services 2019
- 39% Health & Community Services 2018
- 34% All industries 2019
- 36% All industries 2018

Personal concern
- 64% Health & Community Services 2019
- 61% Health & Community Services 2018
- 66% All industries 2019
- 64% All industries 2018

■ Health & Community Services 2019   ■ Health & Community Services 2018   ■ All industries 2019   ■ All industries 2018
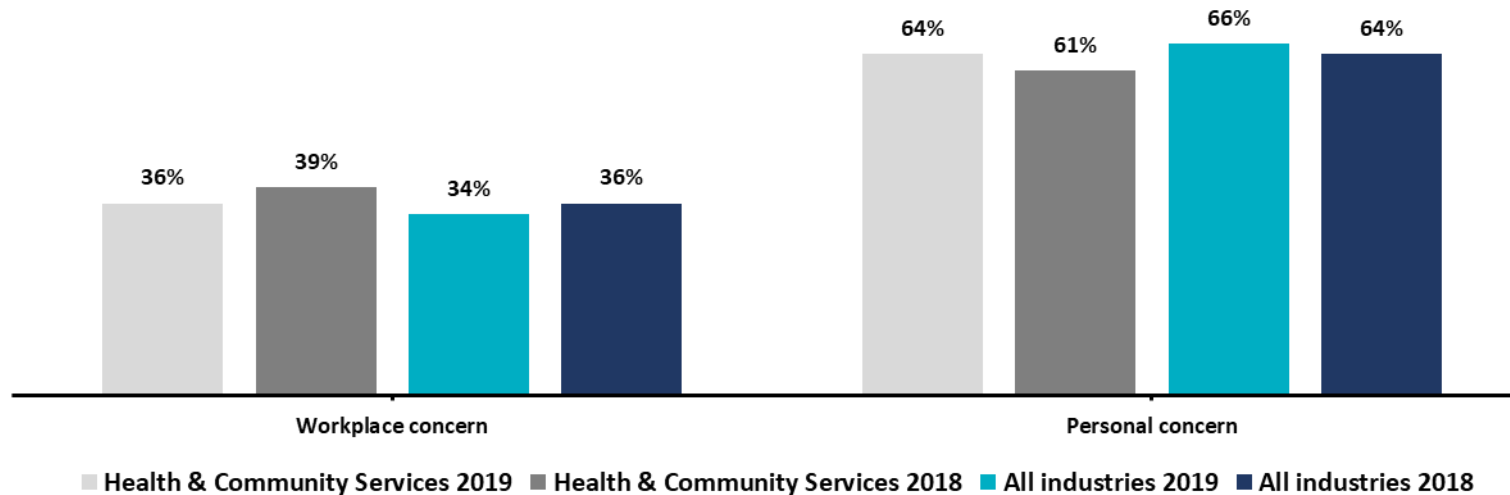
## Top 5 primary presenting concerns - PERSONAL (as % of all clients)

Relationship - Couple: 17% / 15% / 19% / 20%
Mental Health - Symptoms of Anxiety: 16% / 14% / 16% / 14%
Stress - Personal Demands: 7% / 8% / 7% / 7%
Relationship - Family: 7% / 8% / 7% / 7%
Wellbeing / Resilience: 7% / 7% / / 6%

■ Health & Community Services 2019   ■ Health & Community Services 2018   ■ All industries 2019   ■ All industries 2018
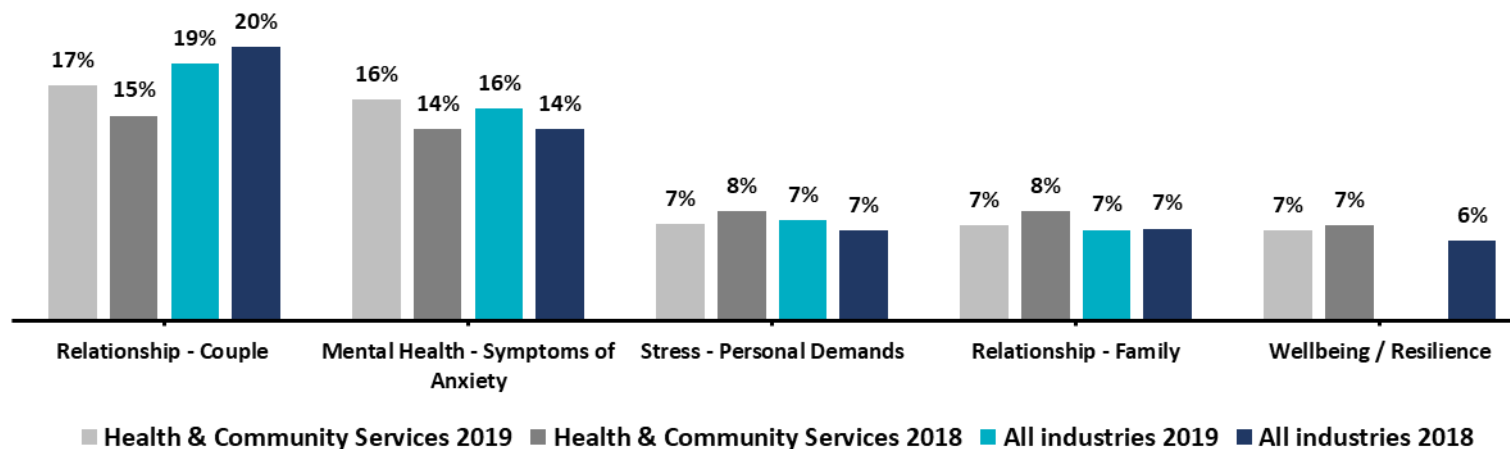
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Top 5 primary presenting concerns - WORKPLACE (as % of all clients)

	Health & Community Services 2019	Health & Community Services 2018	All industries 2019	All industries 2018
Work Demands - Excessive Workload Pressures	12%	11%	16%	15%
Performance - Reduced Productivity	9%	8%	10%	11%
Conflict - With Supervisor (s)	7%	7%	7%	6%
Workplace Justice - Target of Alleged W/place Harassment (Bullying)	7%	9%	5%	6%
Work Health - Work Life Balance	7%	6%	7%	8%

Reasons Managers accessed Manager Support Program (as % of all MSPs)

	Health & Community Services 2019	Health & Community Services 2018	All industries 2019	All industries 2018
Managing groups/people through change or critical incidents	33%	37%	33%	34%
Managing a distressed employee/colleague	20%	23%	26%	27%
Advice on referring employee to the EAP	26%	24%	22%	21%
Managing difficult behaviour of an employee/colleague	20%	16%	15%	16%
Managing poor performance of an employee/colleague	0%	1%	3%	2%