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Stressed workers will cost you

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EVERYONE is worried about losing their jobs but as a business owner it could cost you more.

There's high anxiety among many employees as they worry about the possibility of becoming a statistic.

Greg Robertson, general counsel for Harmers Workplace Lawyers, says employers are now facing the prospect of increased cases claiming psychological damage and mental illnesses such as depression in their workforces, which in turn poses potential legal challenges for businesses.

"While some employment sectors naturally have a higher number of cases of stress and depression, such as emergency services operators who are often placed in very traumatic situations, we are seeing a significant increase in mental illness cases amongst employees in many other sectors as the economic situation deteriorates and redundancies and rumours of redundancies take hold," he says.

"This high anxiety situation may have serious legal and productivity related ramifications for businesses.

"From a legal perspective, employers who ignore the situation open themselves to significant legal risk, for example, for breach of anti-discrimination and occupational health and safety laws or for breach of contract claims. Practically, employers can face an increase in their workers' compensation premiums, and will see productivity suffer due to

higher employee absenteeism and low morale."

Part of an employer's common law duty of care to their employees is to take reasonable care of the safety of the employees.

This includes an obligation to take reasonable care of the mental health of employees.

Soothing the nerves

How to avoid stressing out your staff:

- * Have a clear anti-bullying policy to combat interpersonal conflict in the workplace
- * Change the organisational structure of the workplace by conducting an organisational risk assessment
- * Change the content or type of work employees are expected to carry out
- * Encourage an improved level of physical fitness in the workplace, eg gym membership incentives or providing access to healthy snack food
- * Take measures to improve employees' work management skills