



5 WAYS HR CAN SUPPORT EMPLOYEES' MENTAL HEALTH

An employee's mental health includes how they think, feel and act, and includes their emotional and social well-being. While mental health includes mental illness, the two aren't interchangeable. An employee can go through a period of poor mental health but not necessarily have a clear, diagnosable mental illness. Additionally, an employee's mental health can change over time, depending on factors such as their workload, stress and work-life balance.

While 1 in 5 U.S. adults experience mental illness annually, a recent study by Deloitte revealed that less than half receive treatment. A study from the Mental Health in the Workplace Summit also found that

mental illness is the leading cause of disability for U.S. adults aged 15 to 44 and that more workdays are lost to mental health-related absenteeism than any other injury or illness.

Given its prevalence, you can expect that employees at your organization are experiencing mental health challenges or mental illness. That's why it's so important that your organization creates a culture that supports employees' mental health. While this may sound complicated, creating a workplace that is supportive of mental health and illness is easier than it seems. Here are five simple ways that your company can support employees and their mental health.

1. Promote Mental Health Awareness in the Office

The first step to creating a workplace that is supportive of employees' mental health is promoting awareness and destigmatizing mental health or illness. Provide resources to help employees learn more about mental health or mental illnesses, and give information about how employees who may be struggling can seek out help. When you openly talk about mental health, employees are more likely to feel comfortable about the concept and reach out to managers or co-workers if they're struggling.

You can also establish a workplace environment that is supportive of mental health by:

- Encouraging social support among employees, such as an organized support group that meets regularly
- Setting up an anonymous portal through which employees can reach out to let HR or managers know that they're struggling with high stress and need help
- Providing training on problem solving, effective communication and conflict resolution
- Promoting your employee assistance program (EAP), if you offer one

2. Offer Flexible Scheduling

Work-life balance, or a lack thereof, can affect an employee's mental health. To help employees better balance their work and personal lives, employers across the country are embracing workplace flexibility. While this looks different at every company, workplace flexibility can include flextime, telecommuting and unlimited paid time off (PTO) policies. Flexible schedules provide employees with job satisfaction, better health, increased work-life balance and less stress.



3. Address Workplace Stress

Nearly 80% of Americans consider their jobs stressful. Chronic workplace stress can contribute to increased employee fatigue, irritability and health problems. Additionally, workplace stress costs U.S. employers approximately \$300 billion in lost productivity annually.

While it may not be possible to eliminate job stress altogether for your employees, you can help them learn how to manage it effectively. Common job stressors include a heavy workload, intense pressure to perform at high levels, job insecurity, long work hours, excessive travel, office politics and conflicts with co-workers.

You can implement various activities to help reduce employee stress, which can improve health and morale—and productivity.

- Make sure that workloads are appropriate.
- Have managers meet regularly with employees to facilitate communication.
- Address negative and illegal actions in the workplace immediately—do not tolerate bullying, discrimination or any other similar behaviors.
- Recognize and celebrate employees' successes. This contributes to morale and decreases stress levels.

4. Evaluate Your Benefits Offerings

Review the benefits you offer to ensure that they support mental well-being, too. Evaluate your current health plan designs. Do they cover mental health services? Reviewing the offerings that your organization provides is essential to creating a culture that supports employee mental health.

In similar fashion, look to see what voluntary benefits you can offer to support mental well-being. Consider offering simple perks like financial planning assistance (as financial stress often contributes to poor mental health), employee discount programs (where employees can receive gym memberships, stress-reducing massages or acupuncture at a lower cost) and EAPs to support your employees.

5. Provide Mental Health Training for Managers

One of the most significant problems hindering mental health support at work is the stigma that surrounds mental health. Despite the recent moves in society toward destigmatizing mental health, issues still persist. To ensure that no stigma surrounding mental health exists at your organization, it's important that you properly train management in recognizing the signs of mental illness, excessive workplace stress, workplace bullying and fatigue. Moreover, managers should be trained to handle potentially difficult conversations with employees surrounding their mental health. Ultimately, they should be prepared to speak openly about mental health rather than avoid the topic.