

# CHANGING MINDS



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**MENTAL HEALTH**  
at Work and How to  
**BETTER SUPPORT**  
**YOUR EMPLOYEES**

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# **CHANGING MINDS: MENTAL HEALTH AT WORK AND HOW TO BETTER SUPPORT YOUR EMPLOYEES**

Historically, mental health conditions have been misunderstood, and in some spaces, a taboo topic. Both at work and at home, many have had a fear of admitting they suffer from any number of conditions due to judgement from others. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), one in five adults have or have had a mental illness.



## Over the past several years,

the mental health movement in the workplace has grown and people are becoming more comfortable talking about their stressors and feelings. Companies are also more frequently recognizing and addressing mental health issues, too, with big corporations such as American Express, Adobe, and Microsoft adding employee assistance benefits or initiatives to help employees with their mental health.

According to the CDC, nearly 63% of Americans are part of the workforce, meaning that, even if just 20% of those workers are affected, there is a

large swath of workers suffering from symptoms of mental illness. With more than \$16 trillion on the line in healthcare costs, both to individuals and companies, it's important to understand what mental illness is, how it affects workers, and what can be done to help in the future.

In this ebook, you will learn the causes and myths associated with mental health, benefits of a mental health initiative, and how to make the case for and build a mental health initiative in your organization.

## DEFINING MENTAL HEALTH

[mentalhealth.gov](https://www.mentalhealth.gov)

***Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices.***

*There are several factors that play into mental health:*

- › *Biological factors, such as genes or brain chemistry*
- › *Life experiences, such as abuse or trauma*
- › *Family history of mental illness*



These factors can affect your employees in different ways. Some will have mild symptoms they can manage easily while others may have more severe symptoms that affect their day-to-day living. They may feel tired, sad or “down,” angry, or guilty. They may have extreme worry, experience mood swings, withdraw from activities, or change how they eat. They may experience any combination of these symptoms or others not listed.

# CAUSES

Mental health problems can have a wide range of causes. For many people, it's most likely a combination of factors and what upsets one person may not affect another the same way.

Certainly, a big trigger is change and uncertainty. A perfect example is the COVID-19 global pandemic – businesses had to adapt quickly to change and many workers were left feeling isolated at home wondering when things would get back to “normal.” A [KFF Health Tracking Poll](#) found that 53% of adults in the United States reported that their mental health was negatively impacted due to worry and stress over the coronavirus.



*Other common reasons people may experience a mental health crisis in relation to work are:*

- › *Being discriminated against and/or bullied*
- › *Unattainable deadlines or expectations*
- › *Feeling pressured*
- › *Long-term stress*

*However, there are traumas or conditions that occur outside of work that can often affect a person's mental health and bleed over into their work life. They could:*

- › *Have physical causes – injuries, neurological conditions, or long-term illnesses*
- › *Live in poverty, have debt, or be unhoused*
- › *Suffer from trauma, abuse, or neglect*
- › *Have lost someone close to them*
- › *Use and abuse illegal substances*

*Diet, exercise, and sleep can also play a role in mental health.*

# WARNING SIGNS

More than 75% of U.S. employees have dealt with issues that have negatively affected their mental health, according to the American Health Association (AHA). While there are many diagnoses possible in those cases, each with their own sets of symptoms, there are common ways that mental health struggles show up in the workplace.



- 1. DIFFICULTY PROBLEM-SOLVING.** Employees may have a hard time focusing or seem more easily confused. They may also take longer to finish tasks than they normally do.
- 2. DIMINISHED PRODUCTIVITY.** A combination of factors such as anxiety and lack of sleep make it hard to remain focused and productive.
- 3. MOOD SWINGS.** Employees could have inconsistent emotions or switch quickly between high and low emotional states.
- 4. IRRITABILITY, FRUSTRATION, AND ANGER.** Anxiety and stress are at play here as employees may more openly show these emotions about projects or coworkers.
- 5. UNWARRANTED ANXIETY AND WORRY.** Employees could be paranoid about coworkers, job performance, etc. and fear that they will lose their job.
- 6. DECLINING INVITATIONS.** Regularly missing out on social situations such as group lunches or happy hours can be a sign of mental health struggles. Common symptoms include feeling isolated, loneliness, and self-loathing.
- 7. CHANGES IN EATING OR SLEEPING.** Often skipping meals or not eating with others at work can be cause for concern. Another sign is constantly being tired or falling asleep on the job.
- 8. ABSENTEEISM.** Everyone needs time off, and the occasional “mental health day” is expected. However, some employees may have a combination of problems that need more attention and time to address.
- 9. CHANGES IN APPEARANCE.** Employees may struggle to keep up their appearance, have poor hygiene habits, or dress inappropriately.

# COMMON MYTHS ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

While conversations about mental health are becoming more frequent, there are still many myths and misconceptions.

## Myth No.1

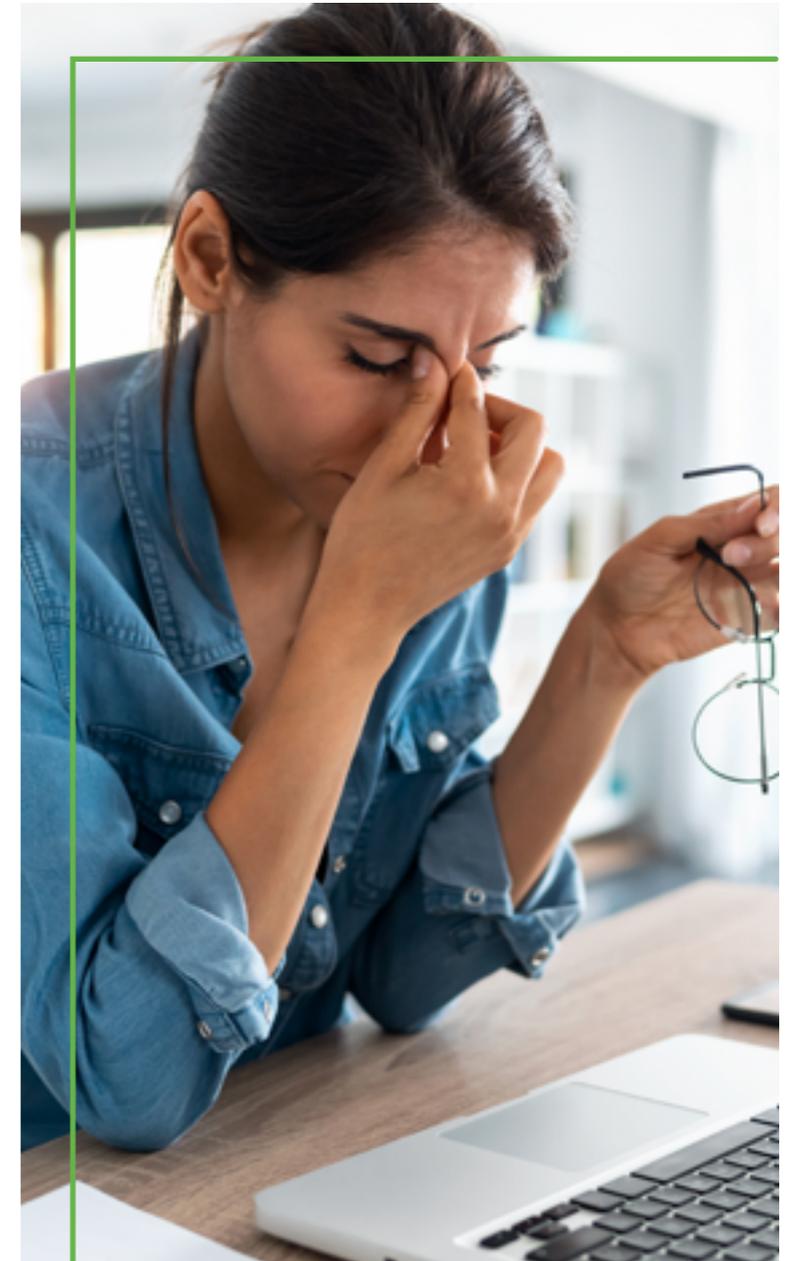
# MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS ARE UNCOMMON

When something isn't openly talked about, people can often pretend like it's not happening or not common. However, according to the National Institute of Mental Health ([NIMH](#)), nearly one in five adults in the U.S. live with a mental illness.

And while depression is perhaps the most well-known mental health issue, [anxiety](#) disorders are the most common in the U.S. – 40 million adults are diagnosed with one every year. While it's not uncommon for someone to experience depression symptoms with an anxiety disorder, there are other diagnoses. For example, General Anxiety Disorder affects 6.8 million adults in the U.S., Panic Disorder affects 6 million, Social Anxiety Disorder affects 15 million, and specific phobias affect 19 million. Other common diagnoses include Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Borderline Personality Disorder, and Bipolar Disorder.

The character Rebecca Bunch from the show “My Crazy Ex-Girlfriend” is a great example of how mental health struggles can present themselves and affect someone's work and home life. Gradually through the series, it is revealed that Rebecca suffers from depression, anxiety, OCD, and fixation, with a final diagnosis of borderline personality disorder (BPD). She functions well when she isn't triggered, but when something goes wrong in her relationships, it affects all aspects of her life, leading her to quit jobs.

What this show does well, and what L&D leaders can do, is show compassion. Being compassionate when someone is struggling can mean the difference between that person underperforming or quitting (or worse), versus them feeling safe to express themselves and take the time they need to regroup.



## Myth No.2

# IF SOMEONE DOESN'T SEEM STRESSED OR ANXIOUS, THEY MUST NOT BE.

We've all been there – we see someone we admire for their strength and resilience because nothing seems to phase them. But it doesn't matter how outwardly successful or put together people seem. Many people are fighting internal battles, whether it's stress, anxiety, or something more.

This is why it's important to have regular well-being conversations and check-ins with employees – even the ones who don't seem phased by anything. Working to develop emotional intelligence can help leaders understand how they feel, and in turn, how others feel as well.

A great fictional example of this is Chris Traeger from "Parks and Recreation." He's an overachiever, marathon runner, super healthy eater, and he believes he's going to live to be 150. But he realizes he's depressed and needs to seek help for it.



### Myth No.3

## EVERYONE EXPERIENCES AND EXPRESSES STRESS AND ANXIETY THE SAME WAY.

Everyone reacts differently to stress and anxiety, and sometimes the way people experience or express these feelings don't make sense. Employees might all have different experiences and responses to work stressors. One might be able to buckle down and focus under pressure while another might get hung up on minute details and feel a loss of control.

Holly Golightly in "Breakfast at Tiffany's" describes her feelings of anxiety as the "mean reds" followed by feelings of fear and not knowing what she's afraid of. However, when "Girls" character Hannah Horvath's anxiety manifests, it does so in physical tics because of her OCD.

Understanding that there isn't a one-size-fits-all approach to mental health, and making that clear to leadership, is incredibly beneficial. This way all employees, no matter their struggles, feel like they can be heard and are cared for.



Myth No.4

## SEEKING HELP MAKES YOU WEAK OR INCOMPETENT.



Tony Soprano of “The Sopranos” said it best: “I understand therapy as a concept, but in my world, it doesn’t go down.”

For as long as there has been a stigma around mental health, there has been a stigma about seeking help for it. Many often thought asking for help made them appear weak, and they wanted to protect their image. And while mental illness can be a challenge, it’s not a weakness. When leaders can gain an understanding of what’s going on in some workers’ brains, they can unleash strengths like empathy and compassion – and leaders exercising emotional intelligence strengthens the entire workforce.

Those searching for mental health assistance has grown. In 2019, the [NIMH](#) found that among the 51.5 million adults with any mental illness, 44.8% received mental health services in the previous year.

## Myth No.5

# MENTAL ILLNESS IS A PART OF WHO I AM, AND I'LL LOSE MY EDGE IF I SEEK HELP.

Many people might feel like anxiety gives them an edge, and if they try to manage it, then they won't be on top of their game. Randall Pearson of "This is Us" illustrates this as he recognizes that he has mental health struggles, but that those struggles are part of who he is.

Letting go of a certain idea or standard of ourselves can be difficult. There's nothing wrong with being diligent or wanting to double-check something, but it's important to remember that mistakes are a part of life and they don't define us. Managing stress is healthy.





# *Why You Should Talk About **Mental Health** in the Workplace*

Maybe you don't talk about it at work because you don't know what to say. Or you think by saying something, you'll only make it worse. Being open, sharing, and talking about mental health can feel tricky as well as terrifying, and that's what's holding everyone back from having the tough conversations that need to be had. And the more no one talks about it, the more the stigma will grow.

But as an employer, you can and should work to change your organization's actions and thoughts on mental health.



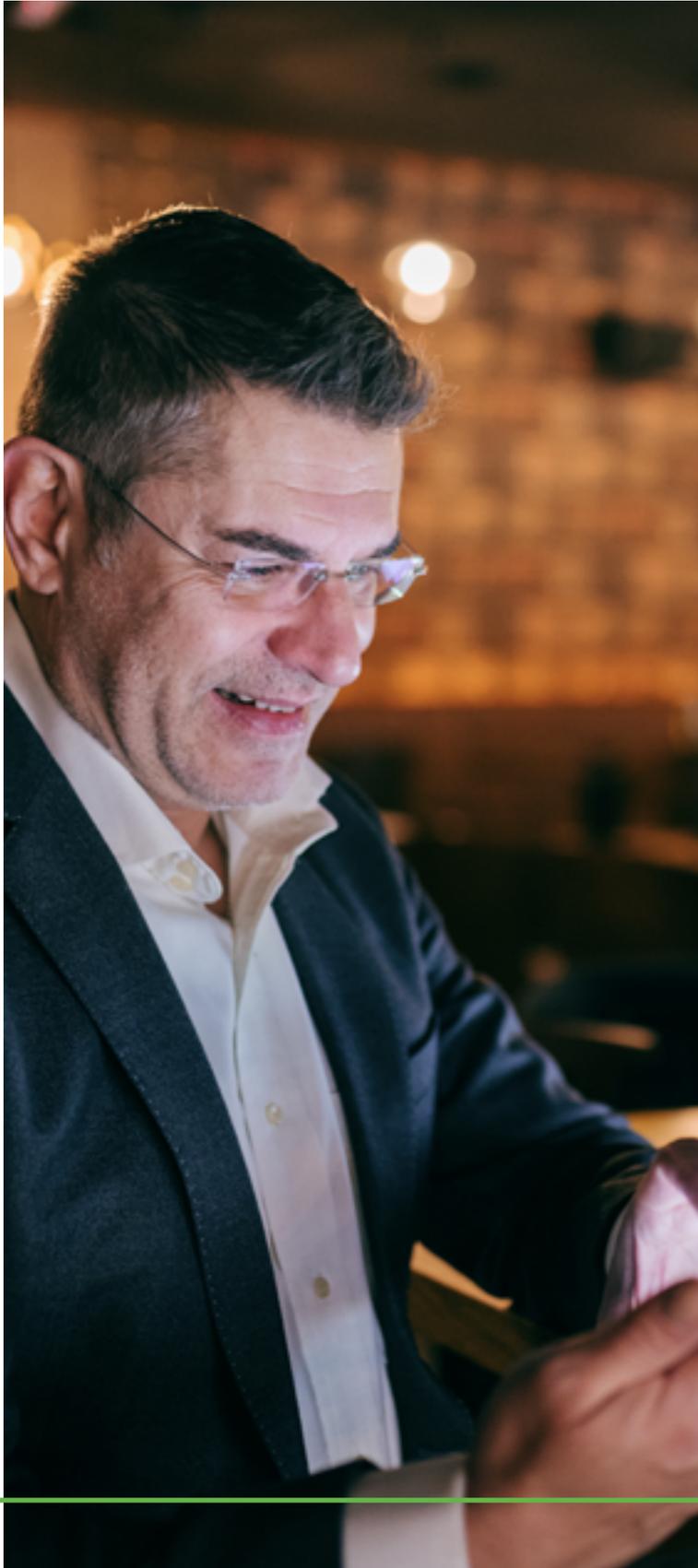
## ***Why You Should Have a Mental Health Initiative***

The costs associated with mental health conditions and their stigma shouldn't be dismissed. The World Economic Forum [found](#) that, globally, mental health disorders will cost countries \$16.3 trillion between 2011 and 2030, overtaking the costs of both heart disease and cancer. The costs are often underestimated because the indirect factors such as absenteeism and presenteeism (the practice of coming to work despite illness/anxiety, resulting in limited productivity) are overlooked.

Every year, 217 million days are [lost](#) due to absenteeism and presenteeism. If you want to put a number on it, that's \$16.8 billion in lost productivity every year. While more serious diagnoses fall under this umbrella, of those 217 million days lost, one million of them are people missing work because of stress. And 41% of those stressed workers have said it has impacted their productivity.

[Stress.org](#) shared that 63% of U.S. workers are ready to quit their jobs due to stress while Human Resources Executive found that eight in 10 employees would consider leaving their current position for a company that had more of a focus on employee mental health.

All these statistics show that beyond the clear benefits to the employees themselves, there are many strong business reasons to develop and enact a mental health initiative for your workforce.



# BENEFITS TO HAVING A MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

## **1. Breaking the Stigma of Mental Illness**

Consider that one of your employees has a mental illness. Let's call him Tim. Tim seeks treatment for his mental illness and in his home life it is openly discussed and accepted. But at work, no one really talks about it, or if they do, it isn't positively. Coworkers say people use mental illness as an excuse for less work or special treatment. Now Tim feels conflicted – he can't be his authentic self at work because the people he spends the most time with don't understand and aren't compassionate. Through education and open discussion, your organization can break down the stigma surrounding mental health.

## **2. Creating a Culture of Acceptance**

Tying into number one is the idea of acceptance. By educating employees and having open discussions, Tim feels empowered to share, knowing that his peers will accept him and his illness. Having everyone share something about themselves that makes them unique (voluntarily, of course) can help build a culture of acceptance, because we all have something different about ourselves. Developing active listening and communication skills can help set the foundation for a culture of acceptance.

# BENEFITS TO HAVING A MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

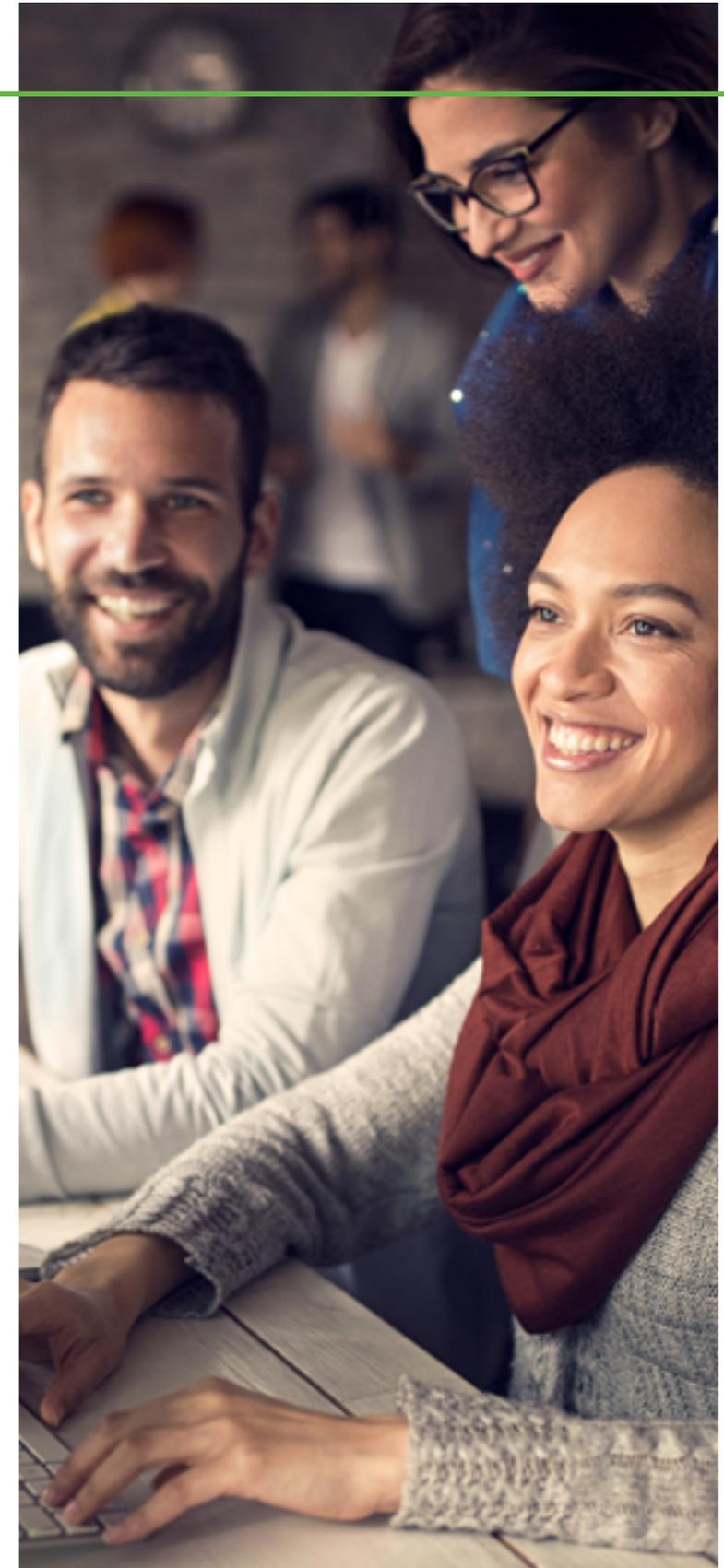
### **3. Better Culture Attracts and Retains Employees**

Some of the most talented and high-potential employees have a mental illness. If you want to hire them, having a reputation for accepting mental health is vital. Having the right resources for new employees can be an advantage when competing for talent. Also, your current employees will be more likely to stay if your culture is one of acceptance.

### **4. Becoming a More Inclusive Workplace**

Those suffering from mental illness often feel isolated, alone, and like no one can possibly understand how they feel. These feelings are only exacerbated when they think everyone around them isn't like them. You can work to prevent this by encouraging employees to connect and be open about their struggles.

***Now that the benefits of a mental health initiative have been laid out, where do you begin? By talking to your employees, of course!***



# WORKPLACE MENTAL HEALTH **SITUATIONAL** **ASSESSMENT**

As a leader in your organization, you have the power to start this process. You'll need high-level leadership buy-in to enact new initiatives, so having employee feedback is a great way to help get that buy-in. Here are just a few questions you can send out to your employees to gauge how they feel about how mental health is being addressed in your organization, so you can gather suggestions on improvement:

Let employees answer these questions anonymously in case they are not comfortable sharing openly just yet.

*Do you feel our organization cares about your mental health and well-being?*

- Not at all
- Somewhat
- Definitely

*On a scale of 1 to 5, please rate how you feel about how our organization addresses mental health.*

- Excellent
- Good
- Neutral
- Bad
- Terrible

*What are your biggest sources of stress at work?*

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

*Do you feel you have a good work/life balance?*

- No
- Yes

*Do you take steps to manage stress and anxiety at work?  
If yes, what steps?*

- No
- Yes, \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

*How could we improve in supporting your mental health?*

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

# **BUILDING A STRONG MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE**

Now that you know how to get started, let's look at what goes into this initiative, how to market it to leadership and the company as a whole, and what different roles can do to help.

# WHAT TO INCLUDE

## **1. Have a Trickle-Down Approach**

Starting with a peer-to-peer connection is great, but it can mean even more when coming from the C-suite. Whether they share their experiences or are open to listening to the concerns of their employees, C-suite members can really make a difference. Shared experience can help others not feel alone and helps to build trust. Listening provides a platform for people to be vulnerable and heard.

When those in positions of power speak openly about mental health in the workplace, employees are soon to follow.

## **2. Be Proactive and Educate Employees**

Educate your teams on what mental health is, what it isn't, and how they can help and make

a difference. This can include group training, self-directed learning, lunch and learns, etc.

Once employees are aware of the signs and see a fellow employee in distress, they will know how to react and can provide assistance, encouragement, a sounding board, etc. This peer-level support is a great foundation to building on your initiative.

## **3. Offer Resources to Employees**

There are myriad resources an organization can offer its employees. Many companies have adopted Employee Assistance Programs that provide employees with access to free and confidential counseling services.

Adopting wellness programs can be beneficial as they focus on self-care, managing stress, diet, exercise, etc.

Also consider providing links to online assessment tools that screen for anxiety and other disorders. This can give employees a starting place and provide further information and resources as well.

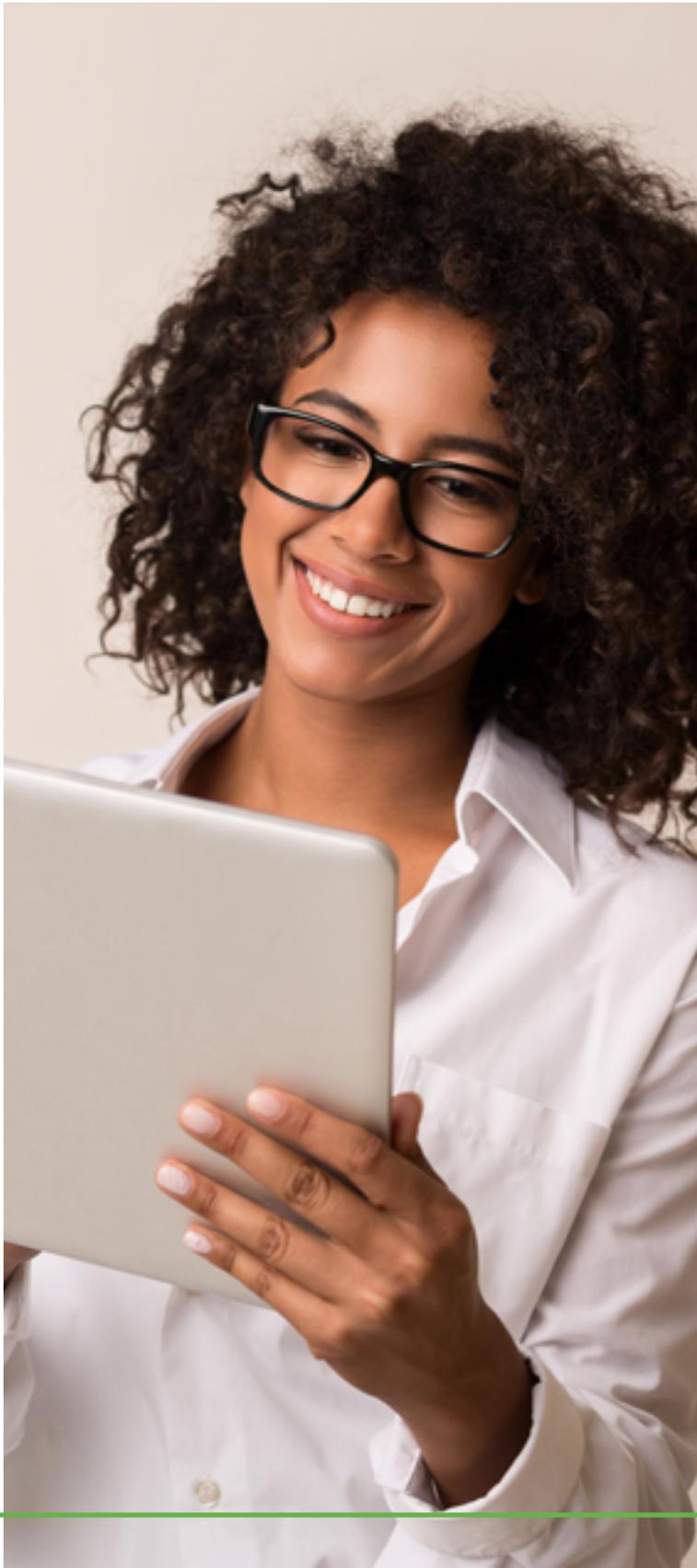
## **4. Be Flexible and Adaptable**

Especially at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, flexibility and adaptability was key. Abrupt change caused many to be isolated and changed the way everyone works, with new distractions, new hours, etc. Being receptive to the idea that each employee has their own wants and needs at a job can help keep them engaged.

By making your workplace less rigid and structured, you can limit stress that could affect health and well-being.

# MANAGER ROLE

Managers and leaders are there to support their employees as they face stressors and concerns, and it should be no different with mental health concerns. Managers should:



***Be  
Vulnerable***

No one should be ashamed or afraid to share their experiences. Shared experience, especially when it comes from people in power, can help to normalize mental health struggles and break down the stigma of it.

***Check In***

Routine check-ins are a great way for a manager to build and foster connection with their employees. These chats build a rapport and can be a safe place for an employee to share how they feel. It is also on the manager to ask questions that go deeper than “How are you?” to really get to the meat of what employees need.

***Understand  
Concerns***

Managers need to be aware of the top workplace stressors – job demands, not receiving needed support, relationships, change – and how those can affect employees.

***Provide  
Support***

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to mental health, so managers will need an arsenal of tools available for different situations. These can span from providing quiet workspaces to support groups to additional training.

# L&D PROFESSIONALS AND LEADERSHIP ROLES

Leadership and development professionals (L&D) also carry the weight of helping employees manage their mental health.

# *The biggest impact L&D can have on employees' mental health is **through training.***

Providing employees with engaging content that easily explains how to notice the warning signs, cope with the struggles, and reduce the stigma of mental health is key. As more and more people open up about their struggles, it works to debunk the previous myths and opens up the floor for conversations about mental health at work.

## THE FIRST THING TO DO IS “**FIND A CHAMPION**”

It's important to get leadership buy-in for your initiative, and that can be hard to come by when leaders are focused on many strategic goals.

This is someone who is influential within the company and is passionate about mental health care. This person will have a plethora of knowledge and statistics and can point out possible obstacles and changes to the initiative and how it's presented to leadership.

### **BIZLIBRARY OFFERS**

*a comprehensive library of content filled with videos on mental health and more. For a sample of what we have to offer, check out our Mental Health Playlist.*



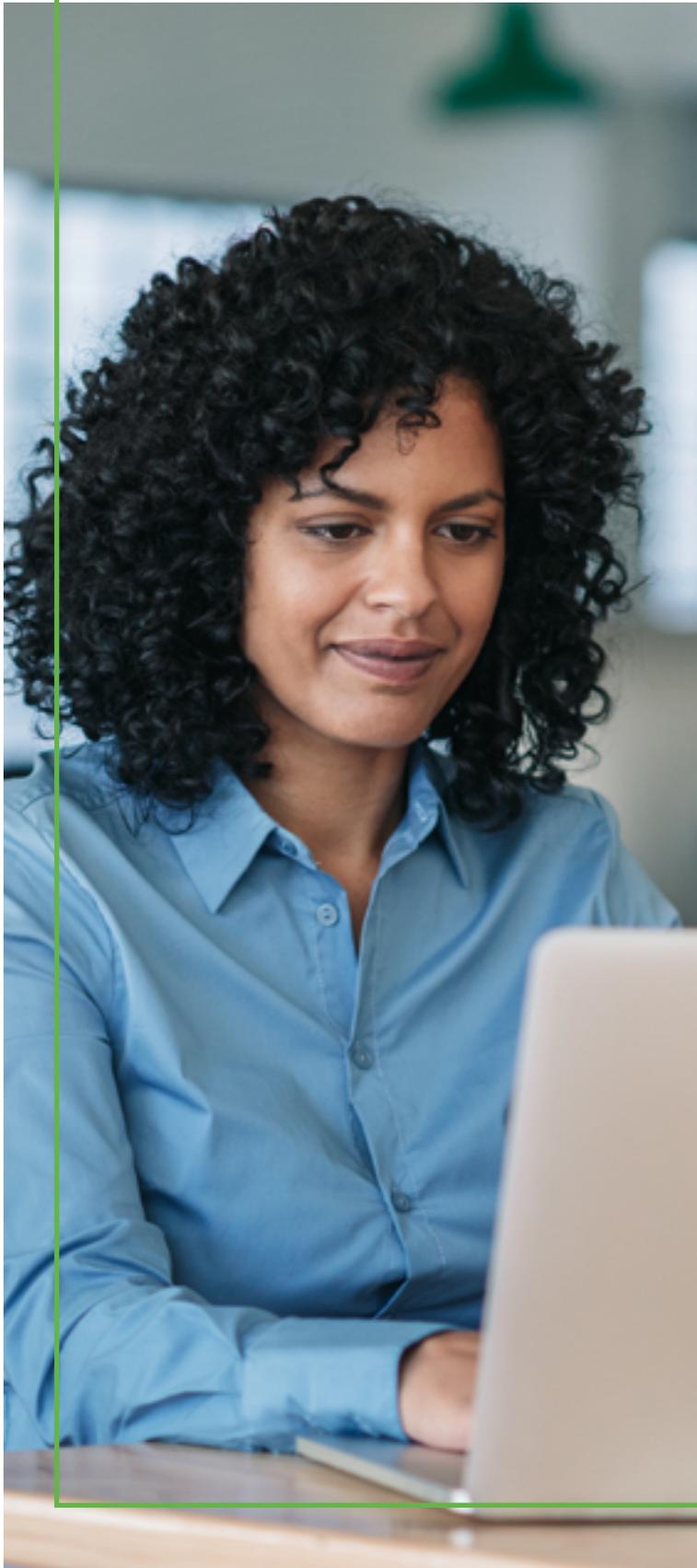
The presentation should be able to prove to leadership that there will be a return on investment in this initiative. Providing them with statistical and anecdotal evidence will go a long way in helping them achieve this. It should also tie into the overall company strategy and clarify foreseen problems.

Explain how you will measure success by keeping an eye on data and KPIs within a learning platform. Share how this benefits the program's future by using these insights to measure the program's success and prove out the ROI to your leadership team.

If leaders do buy into having an initiative, there are actions they can take to help support it more than just giving the go-ahead. Leaders should look into modifying any existing policies and procedures already in place. They should consider flexibility in starting/ending time, PTO, communication, and sick days.

Another option is to reframe how performance reviews are viewed. Turning these into a conversation regarding feedback and learning, in addition to quantified goal measurement, can alleviate some of the stress employees feel toward them.

**ONCE YOU'VE BEEN GIVEN THE GREEN LIGHT ON YOUR INITIATIVE, IT'S TIME TO PROMOTE IT!**



# *How to **Promote** Your Mental Health Initiative*

When promoting your initiative, you will need to focus on both current and prospective employees. Being able to address mental health will help you recruit new employees who may be looking for this in a workplace. Building this into a benefits package and laying out what is included (PTO, training, flexibility, an EAP) will be a positive addition to recruitment strategies.

For your current employees, make sure they know there are policy changes as well as new resources available to them. This helps address the needs of your current employees and helps with retention if they were seeking out alternative employment that provided these benefits.

# *The Future of Mental Health in the Workplace*

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It should be becoming clear how important caring for the mental health of ourselves and our coworkers is. We need to prioritize our mental health care now and in the future. So, what does that look like?

It is important for employees to **find a work-life balance**. A study done by Oracle.com found that 85% of people say their mental health issues at work negatively affect their home life by causing sleep deprivation, poor health, declining relationships, and isolation from their social groups. The coronavirus pandemic certainly amplified this as an issue, so make sure employees know how to set boundaries and limitations for themselves.

**Providing the necessary support** for employees is also a crucial step toward bettering mental health care in the future. The same Oracle.com study found that only 18% of people prefer talking to a human about their mental health problems. That means 82% of respondents would rather talk to a robot – they said they are judgement-free, unbiased, and provide quick answers to health-related questions. Making these sorts of technological resources available will help provide employees with options when it comes to their self-care.



Be sure to also **consider the business costs and value of mental health care** at your organization. Millennials and Gen Z make up the majority of the workforce, and they care about their mental health so much that they will leave their role if a new job is offering better benefits or they feel like their current role isn't doing enough for them. Research has found that 50% of millennials and 75% of Gen Z workers have left a role because of mental health concerns. For a company, it costs nearly 33% of the exiting employee's salary to replace them – even more for those leaving senior level positions.

Lastly, **mental health benefits will become the norm**. The 2019 Mental Health at Work Report found that the most commonly desired workplace mental health resources employees wanted were a more open and accepting culture, clearer information about where to go or whom to ask for support, and training.

# BENEFITS FOR THE FUTURE

Employee Assistance Programs provide employees with resources and services usually at no cost to them. They can include built-in counseling for many issues an employee may face and are 100% confidential. It will be your job to make sure employees know about these resources, often reminding them they are available and how to access them.

While this may seem unfeasible, providing unlimited PTO or sick days will be key in the future. 90% of employees have admitted going to work while feeling sick. Employees often feel like missing work will put them too far behind, they don't want to use up their PTO or limited sick days, or they feel pressured to be physically present. Enacting this policy will make employees feel safe and supported, especially when they don't feel well. Some leaders are concerned that employees would abuse an unlimited PTO policy, but many companies already using them have not found that to be true.

Flexible scheduling will need to become a more accepted practice. Your employees have a lot of demands on their time outside of work, and flexible scheduling could help ease their stress – and it will look different for everyone. Some will want to start earlier, and some won't want to come in until later.



# Using Your Training Program



**OUR EXTENSIVE CONTENT LIBRARY HAS VIDEOS TO COVER THESE TOPICS AND MORE RELATED TO MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE.**

Providing training to employees is a huge component that will help them embrace the idea of mental health in themselves and others, along with ways to cope with struggles, and resources to go to for help. Training on mindfulness, emotional intelligence, resilience, breathing exercises, and coping strategies can be a great place to start.

Mindfulness is achieved by focusing on your awareness in the present moment, while calmly acknowledging and accepting your feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations, all without judgement. Breathing exercises can help with this.

Emotional intelligence is the ability to identify and manage your own emotions, as well as the emotions of others.

Resilience at work is a characteristic of employees who deal well with the stressors of the workplace.

There's still a lot of work to be done, but breaking down the stigma of mental health is here to stay.

***What mental health needs is more sunlight, more candor, and more unashamed conversation.***

**—GLENN CLOSE**

# A PARTNERSHIP WITH BIZLIBRARY

A partnership with BizLibrary can help you utilize training and development to bring more light to mental health in your organization.

## TALK WITH ONE OF OUR EXPERTS

Talk with one of our experts to learn how we can help with overcoming challenges around mental health awareness, leadership communication, building emotional intelligence, and much more.



Thriving With Work  
and Well-Being In a  
Changed World

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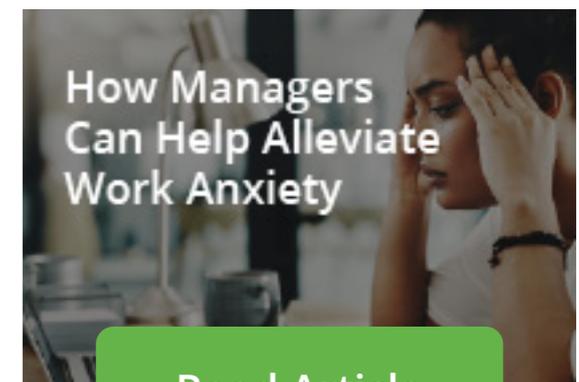
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How Managers  
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