Boston College
Center for Work & Family

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Mental Health in the Workplace

Providing recognition, acceptance, and support

Over the past several years, there has been an increasing recognition of the impact of mental health in the workplace. From the pervasive problems of stress and burnout in the workplace, to the movement toward creating cultures of authenticity and belonging, to the examination of the costs of absenteeism and presenteeism, addressing mental health has emerged as a topic not to be shied away from, but to be met with directly.

In this briefing, we look at mental health in the workplace from two perspectives, and hope to provide some insight into both.

1. **We look at how companies can best support individuals in the workplace who have mental health diagnoses or conditions.** This includes a review of the most common diagnoses and their prevalence as well as guidelines and best practices around the optimal ways to support employees when they are at work. We also discuss the persistence of stigma around mental health and how organizations can work to decrease the stigma and increase opportunities for employees to ask for and gain access to the help they need.

2. We hope to **identify ways workplaces can become more "psychologically healthy"** so employees are not at risk for increased mental distress due to workplace conditions. We review ways companies can make their workplace cultures more supportive, with the purpose of mitigating some of the factors that can lead to mental health issues. It is widely recognized that stress at work contributes to burnout, as well as other physical and psychological health problems.

We have integrated promising practices from leading companies in the report to demonstrate the approaches these organizations are taking to addressing mental health at work.

Mental Health Conditions in the Workplace

In a given year, 1 in 5 adults in the U.S. experience mental illness, and almost 1 in 25 live with a serious mental illness (National Alliance on Mental Health). In a survey of working adults, 76% of U.S. employees report having struggled at some point with at least one issue that affected their mental health, and 42% have been diagnosed with a mental health disorder. Despite how many people personally struggle with mental health, it is often not discussed openly in professional settings. As a result, the prevalence of common diagnoses among working adults may be underestimated by employers and not properly addressed. Of those diagnosed with a mental health disorder, 63% have not disclosed it to their employer (American Heart Association) and almost 60% had not received mental health services in the previous year (National Alliance on Mental Illness).

Understanding what kinds of diagnoses employees might be dealing with is an important first step leaders can take toward supporting employees with mental health conditions, developing resources that meet their needs, and building a psychologically healthy workplace.

Annual Prevalence Among U.S. Adults, By Condition	
Anxiety Disorders	19.1%
Substance Use Disorders	7.8%
Major Depressive Episode	7.2%
Posttraumatic Stress Disorder	3.6%
Bipolar Disorder	2.8%
Borderline Personality Disorder	1.4%
Obsessive Compulsive Disorder	1.2%
Schizophrenia	<1%

Demographics

Data from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) breaks down the prevalence of mental illnesses among U.S. adults by demographic, and some notable disparities arise. The data shows that 22.3% of women had experienced a mental illness in the previous year, compared to 15.1% of men. They also found that younger millennials are more likely to struggle with mental health issues: 25.8% of 18-25 year olds had a mental illness in the previous year, compared to 22.2% for ages 26-49 and 13.8% for ages 50+. There are differences among racial and ethnic identities as well. Among individuals that are two or more races/ethnicities the prevalence of any mental health condition was 28.6% in the previous year, which is more than 8 percentage points higher than any other group (white individuals were the next highest at 20.4%).

These differences in prevalence based on sex, age, and race demonstrate the importance of intersectionality when aiming to have an inclusive and open conversation surrounding mental health. Employers can help support those struggling with mental illness by recognizing how mental health intersects with other parts of one's identity and inviting employees of diverse identities to actively participate in creating policies and conversations around mental health.

Also important to note is the high prevalence of comorbidity between substance use disorders and other mental illnesses (National Institute on Drug Abuse). This does not necessarily mean that one caused the other, even if one appeared first, but they often co-exist. According to SAMHSA, 3.7% of Americans aged 18 or older have both a substance use disorder and mental illness.

Each year more than 34,000 individuals take their own life, leaving behind friends, family members and co-workers to navigate the tragedy of their loss. Suicide is the 10th leading cause of death among adults in the U.S. and the 3rd leading cause of death among adolescents (NAMI).

Impact/Costs

The prevalence of mental illness among working adults comes not only at a personal cost to the individuals struggling with these conditions, but also at a broader cost to productivity in the workplace. The economic cost of mental health in the U.S. is over $200 billion per year, which is higher than the economic burden of heart disease, strokes, cancer, and obesity. Of this total cost, $66 billion is a consequence of productivity losses related to mental health. Mental illness causes more cumulative days of work loss (absenteeism) and work impairment (presenteeism) than other chronic conditions (Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine). The good news is that by investing in resources aimed to improve employees' mental health, employers will see even greater returns in productivity. The World Health Organization estimates that for every $1 put into treatment for common mental health disorders, there is a return of $4 in improved health and productivity. By using preventive strategies to create a more psychologically healthy work environment and providing support for employees already struggling with mental health conditions, employers will not only create a healthier workforce, but will also reduce costs and improve productivity levels.

Stigma

In recent years, great strides have been made in acknowledging the prevalence of mental health conditions and the importance of addressing them. At the same time, there remains a stigma surrounding mental health that prevents people from coming forward with their struggles and seeking the treatment they need without fear of judgment or repercussions. In a Mental Health America survey, 55% of people reported they were afraid to take a day off from work to attend to their mental health and 69% of people reported that it felt safer to remain silent about their workplace stress. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, 8 out of 10 workers with a mental health condition report that shame and stigma prevented them from seeking treatment.

Myths and misconceptions surrounding mental health are a large contributor to this stigma. These harmful stereotypes can lead to discrimination, bullying, and

rejection by co-workers and peers (Kaiser Permanente). The National Alliance on Mental Illness's StigmaFree Me campaign reports that due to stigma, people living with mental health conditions are often: alienated and seen as "others," perceived as dangerous, and seen as irresponsible or unable to make their own decisions. They are less likely to be hired, less likely to get safe housing and are more likely to be criminalized than offered health care services. Some are afraid of rejection to the point that they don't always pursue opportunities.

Companies have a responsibility to raise awareness of the reality of mental illnesses, foster a respectful conversation in the workplace, and provide support to those struggling. Executives and managers can lead by example to eliminate stigma from the top down and make their employees feel comfortable bringing their full, authentic selves to work without feeling a need to hide their mental health struggles or pretend to be okay if they're not.

EY

EY's initiative to address the stigma of mental illness and addictions began in October 2016. The initiative, now called We Care, was developed to encourage peers, colleagues and leaders to recognize the signs that someone is struggling, ask if they are okay and if needed, connect them to EY Assist, EY's combined internal and external Employee Assistance Program. The campaign focuses on the stigma of mental illness and addiction because only 30% of Americans with a mental illness get care-even through common treatments are 80% effective.

EY Assist utilization increased after the first year, but the company realized they needed to do more. EY understood that their employees did not have to have a diagnosed mental illness or an addiction to be struggling. EY expanded We Care to address life's challenges including caregiving, financial difficulties, relationship issues, current events and other matters. Now in its third year, We Care has led to a sustained 40% increase in EAP utilization. We Care is part of EY's larger well-being platform: Better You. Better You has a wide array of resources to support the emotional, physical, financial and social well-being of their employees. Together, Better You, We Care and EY Assist provide comprehensive resources to support the well-being of our people at EY.

stigma*free*

National Alliance on Mental Illness

Reducing Stigma

A Harvard Business Review article lays out five actionable steps that managers can take to reduce stigma in their workplace and create a more mental health positive corporate culture:

1. **Pay attention to language.**
   Using phrases like "that's depressing" or calling someone "crazy" can stigmatize mental health conditions and make those struggling feel unsafe coming forward. Employees can think consciously about the way they speak about mental health and call it out if they hear a co-worker speak in a harmful way.

2. **Rethink "sick" days.**
   No one questions if an employee needs to take time off when dealing with a physical illness like cancer or the flu, but it's less normalized to take days off when coping with mental illness. Managers can encourage employees to request days off to take care of their mental health.

3. **Encourage open and honest conversations.**
   Leaders can work to create safe spaces for employees and encourage them to open up. This can include sharing their own experiences to show that it's okay to speak up when dealing with mental health issues and doing so won't affect one's career advancement.

4. **Be proactive.**
   Stress has been shown to exacerbate mental health symptoms. Companies can help employees reduce stress and burnout by proactively offering access to programs, resources, and educational opportunities that aim to manage stress before it becomes a more serious problem.

5. **Train people to notice and respond.**
   Resources like Mental Health First Aid can help train employees to recognize the signs that someone is struggling and learn how to listen, assess risk, and connect them with the resources they need.

Burnout

Rge Mayo Clinic defines burnout as "a state of physical or emotional exhaustion that also involves a sense of reduced accomplishment and loss of personal identity." The problem of burnout in today's workplaces is widespread--according to a 2018 Gallup study of 7,500 full-time employees, 23% of employees reported feeling burned out at work very often and always, and an additional 44% reported feeling burned out sometimes. Employers must address the possibility that their workplace culture might cause or contribute to burnout among employees. The top five factors correlated with burnout were unfair treatment at work, unmanageable workload, lack of role clarity, lack of communication and support from manager, and unreasonable time pressure. Other risk factors include: inadequate health and safety policies, inflexible or excessive working hours, lack of team cohesion, and bullying and harassment by peers and supervisors (World Health Organization).

While burnout is not a medical diagnosis, the World Health Organization has officially recognized it as a workplace phenomenon. Burnout has been shown to cause a number of health issues and symptoms, including fatigue, headaches, stomach problems, irritability, depression, withdrawal, and self-medication with drugs and alcohol (Business Insider, Good Men Project). Burnout is costly not only for those it directly affects, but also on an organizational level. Employees who are burned out are 63% more likely to take a sick day, are 2.6 times more likely to be actively looking for a different job, and have 13% lower confidence in their job performance (Gallup). Burnout is estimated to cost the global economy $323.4 billion each year (Business Insider).

Loneliness

Another under-discussed component of mental health in the workplace is the prevalence of loneliness among employees. A UK study found that the most important factor in workplace happiness is positive social relationships with coworkers, and research shows that feeling socially connected is correlated with higher psychological well-being, which results in high productivity and performance. (Business Insider). Alternatively, social isolation and lack of support are associated with health conditions like greater risk of cardiovascular disease, compromised immunity, increased risk of depression, and shortened lifespan.

Lack of social support is also proven to impair productivity, creativity, and decision-making. Sigale Barsade and Hakan Ozcelik, who research workplace loneliness, make the point that, "Importantly, we find that loneliness is not simply the lonely employee's problem; it influences colleagues as well as performance outcomes. Organizations need to take tackling the problem of loneliness seriously for both their employees' sake as well as the sake of the organization itself" (HBR). To address the issue of loneliness, employers should make it a strategic priority to facilitate networks that employees can turn to for advice and emotional support. This might include connecting mentors with employees, assigning onboarding partners for new employees, encouraging participation in ERGs, and reducing barriers to healthy social interaction in the workplace.

Supporting employees with mental health conditions

Employers can actively support employees with mental health conditions by providing access to a variety of mental health resources and services. These resources can significantly reduce the barriers to receiving help for mental health issues, both by making it easier logistically and financially to access services and by reducing the stigma that comes with doing so.

Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs):
97% of companies with more than 5,000 employees have an EAP (HR Dive). A study in the Journal of Management found that employees who took advantage of EAPs - including short-term counseling, screening, and awareness tools - showed improvements in anxiety, depression, and alcohol abuse symptoms after 5 months. Additionally, a 9-year longitudinal study found that the use of workplace counseling through EAPs improved absenteeism by 28%, presenteeism by 24%, workplace distress by 13%, work engagement by 8%, and life satisfaction by 22% (America Journal of Health Promotion).

Flexibility:
The ability to shift schedules or work remotely can help support mental health. Respondents to a recent survey said that remote work could help them reduce stress and improve productivity by reducing distractions during the work day (75%) and interruptions from colleagues (74%), keeping them out of office politics (65%), allowing for a quieter work environment (60%), and giving them a more comfortable (52%) and personalized (46%) work environment (Mental Health America).

Employee Resource Groups (ERGs):
An employee resource group can be a tangible way for companies to provide support to employees struggling with mental health. Mind Share Partners' Toolkit for Creating an ERG discusses the benefits of creating a separate group specifically to address mental health, which is often grouped with a general disability ERG or a discussion of stress and

wellness. This could dilute its importance as a distinct issue facing employees and might worsen stigma. It's important to make it clear that a mental health ERG is not only for those with a diagnosed condition—anyone who wants to learn more, or is looking for ways to support coworkers or loved ones with mental illness should be able to participate.

Virtual support:
While an app can't replace the value of in-person support, there are a number of online resources that can offer help. Apps like Headspace and Calm provide self-guided meditation aimed to reduce stress and anxiety. Other apps connect employees to mental health providers, therapy, and coaching programs.

Insurance coverage for external resources:
There should be parity in coverage between mental health and physical health care, and companies have a responsibility to make sure employees struggling with mental health have access to the providers and services they need.

Family Support:
When a person is living with a serious mental illness, the whole family may be affected (American Psychological Association). Family members experience a myriad of emotions and stresses related to caring for someone with a mental illness, and can benefit from supports like EAP, flexible working, support groups and other resources.

Mental Health First Aid

Mental Health First Aid prepares people to assist someone experiencing a mental health or substance use-related crisis. Courses teach participants about risk factors and warning signs, strategies for how to assist in crisis and non-crisis situations, and where to turn for help when it's needed. By providing this training, companies can ensure that some of their employees are informed and ready to offer support and assistance to coworkers who need it. Mental Health First Aid's "ALGEE" plan outlines 5 concrete steps that can be taken to help a peer in need:

ALGEE: THE ACTION PLAN

A	APPROACH, ACKNOWLEDGE RISK, ASSIST, AND ASK THE QUESTION (IF APPLICABLE
L	LISTEN NON-JUDGMENTALLY
G	GIVE RE-ASSURANCE AND INFORMATION
E	ENCOURAGE APPROPRIATE PROFESSIONAL HELP
E	ENCOURAGE SELF-HELP AND OTHER SUPPORT STRATEGIES

Source: Mental Health First Aid

Prudential

Prudential embraces a holistic approach to the wellbeing of its employees and understands the health of its workforce is intrinsically linked to that of the organization. Its multi-dimensional definition of health focuses on the physical, emotional, social, financial and cognitive wellbeing of its employees and provides a foundation for the development and delivery of its programs and services.

Within that framework, Prudential recognizes behavioral health as an integral component which serves the emotional and overall health needs of its employees. And Prudential does not rest at offering mental health related benefits to its employees and their families. Rather, their proactive approach encourages employees to become actively involved in their emotional health. An extensive Behavioral Health program provides a myriad of programs and services, including confidential on-site and external EAP counseling, life, budget and adult care coaching, mental health related webinars, mindfulness sessions, Serenity Rooms, and work-life resources and

referral services. An Alternative Work Arrangement program further supports the company's commitment to well-being by recognizing the importance and value of a flexible work schedule. The Behavioral Health team also partners with managers to help appropriately address behavioral concerns within the workplace and serves as an excellent resource to assist in identifying services which support the emotional health needs of employees, both at work and at home.

To compliment the broad scope of services offered, Prudential facilitates a variety of forums that encourage employees at all levels to participate in open conversations focused on mental health and wellbeing. Prudential understands that the work environment is a critical driver of health and is committed to continuing its focus on reducing the stigma of mental health in the workplace and building a culture of health that benefits employees, their families and the enterprise.

Creating a psychologically healthy workplace

Many employees are looking to their employers to provide more resources that support their mental health and well-being in the workplace. A recent survey found that 23% of respondents wanted mental health training at their workplace, 22% wanted clearer or more information available about where to go or who to ask for mental health support, and 22% wanted a more open culture about mental health at work (Mind Share Partners). According to an American Heart Association survey, 42% of U.S. employees would like their employers to provide more information about mental health benefits, accommodations, and resources, and 40% want their employers to train managers and supervisors to identify emotional distress among workers.

Too often the burden falls on employees to take care of their mental well-being and learn to cope with the stressors that arise in the workplace. Employers should take on a share of this responsibility and work to address stress, burnout, and mental health issues on an organizational level. Best practices will differ by company, but the following corporate practices can serve as examples of policies and programs that aim to foster a psychologically healthy work environment. Employers can check in with employees regularly through anonymous surveys and feedback to gauge levels of stress, well-being, and mental health and work to adjust the company's approach as necessary.

Johnson & Johnson

Johnson & Johnson is guided by Our Credo, centered on the belief that their employees are the heart, mind and soul of the Company.

They believe health and well-being can ignite full engagement in all facets of their employees' lives. That's why they're committed to fostering work-life balance with a culture of health and well-being built around providing resources to promote healthy habits, healthy options to achieve their personal best.

To reinforce well-being, Johnson & Johnson's Global Healthy Mind Policy outlines approaches, resources and programs to raise awareness of mental well-being in the workplace. Their Mental Health Diplomats, part of the Alliance for Diverse Abilities Employee Resource Group, are active in 21 countries and focused on removing the stigma associated with mental illness.

Johnson & Johnson also launched an enhanced and unified global Employee Assistance Program (EAP) and WorkLife Services program, including access to confidential short-term counseling, 24/7 online tools, resources and on-site crisis support. From work and relationship concerns to stress and anxiety, to legal and financial consultation services, this resource is available to employees and their family members at no cost.

NORTHROP GRUMMAN

Northrop Grumman's EAP has been working to "normalize" mental health conversations by leaning into topics that are impacting our society as a whole, including increased levels of anxiety, isolation, suicide and addiction (including the opioid crisis). This has been accomplished through education, communications, awareness, and trainings that have been attended by hundreds of employees and managers.

Northrop Grumman's EAP partnered with multiple ERG leaders during Mental Health Awareness Week in May. This grass roots coalition developed a campus-wide event that included offering multiple mental health live trainings and webinars. Topics included:

- Family mental health with an emphasis on supporting parents with children and teens, and EAP support across generations.

- Understanding Depression, Suicide and PTSD—a licensed counselor provided suicide prevention training and an employee ERG leader and veteran shared his powerful testimonial of battling PTSD and his journey to well-being.

- Training on the health and business benefits of mindfulness. Employees were provided an opportunity to participate in a virtual mindfulness micro-break to give them a chance to focus, refresh and recharge.

"We need to take care of our mental health with the same attention we take care of our physical health. We have a responsibility to support employees and provide tools and resources for them to be their personal best. Mental well-being is not a nice-to-have. It's a must-have. Building a culture of workplace health takes time and commitment, but it can be done, and it needs to be done."

— JENNIFER BRUNO,
VICE PRESIDENT OF GLOBAL HEALTH SERVICES
JOHNSON & JOHNSON

MERCK

Merck is a global biopharmaceutical company inspired by a shared vision and mission to save and improve lives. This commitment extends to the company's employees. LIVE IT is a holistic approach to well-being designed by and for employees and their families to be healthier and more productive, both professionally and personally.

Merck addresses mental health through the LIVE IT BALANCE IT component. From an analysis of corporate claims data, health risk assessment data and utilization of the Employee Assistance Program (EAP), Merck recognized that awareness of mental health resources could be improved and the stigma associated with mental health could be reduced to improve access to available resources. Feedback from employee business resource groups says that a large percentage of employees "cover" or mask their true selves at work, especially those dealing with a mental health condition.

In 2018, Merck offered the first of five Mental Health First Aid Training course to employees at corporate headquarters. After the course, some participants volunteered to become mental health ambassadors, called **Mind Well Champions**. These champions continue to work at a grassroots level to reduce the stigma of mental health by helping to raise awareness about mental health conditions, promoting relevant support services, challenging assumptions, and leading by example to help replace silence and stigma with acceptance.

Google offers industry-leading benefits to take care of the diverse needs of Googlers in and outside of work. This includes a host of mental health resources to meet people wherever they are. Peer support and connection are critical to emotional well-being, so Google supports and sponsors a grassroots initiative called Blue Dot that strives to foster mental health allyship, peer support, and training. **Blue Dot** is run by Googlers who aim to destigmatize seeking help and are passionate about raising awareness for mental health issues. Sometimes the simple act of listening non-judgmentally can be the first step in the journey to better mental health and well-being.

The Blue Dot program is comprised of the following:

Active Listener Training:
An online training to ensure Blue Dot listeners have the skills they need to communicate and listen with empathy and without judgment, and to share the many resources available.

Allyship:
By choosing to be a Blue Dot ally and visibly displaying the Blue Dot sticker on their badges and laptops, Googlers bring awareness to what can often be a silent or invisible issue.

Peer Support:
Participants create safe spaces for employees to connect and seek support by displaying a Blue Dot sticker and encouraging private conversations.

Advocacy:
Partnerships with employee resource groups, Benefits, and other champions of mental health aim to defeat stigma and foster open communication around mental health through events, panels and speakers.

"Reducing the stigma around mental health is tantamount to developing a supportive work environment. We foster partnerships with key stakeholders across the business that allows us to maintain a culture of health and well-being that focuses on the individual, the business, and the community."

— SHARON SMITH, CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER. PRUDENTIAL

Conclusions

There are many steps employers can take to help manage stress in the workplace and improve mental health. These include: regularly assessing employee workload, providing flexible work schedules and the option to work from home, reducing distractions or noise in the work area, encouraging employees to take regular breaks throughout the day and providing quiet space to rest, and advocating for regular exercise and a healthy diet.

Organizations can encourage employees to talk with the company's EAP or a mental health professional if they're experiencing chronic stress or have other concerns about mental health. Employers and HR leaders should review their health plans to ensure that there are ample providers in their networks who are skilled in psychiatry, psychology, addictions treatment and other specialities. In areas with a lack of qualified providers, offering access to telemedicine or telepsychiatry can be helpful. Benefits available to employees should also provide adequate coverage for mental health and addictions treatment. Support should be extended to immediate family members, whose struggles with mental illness will have an impact on the employee's own well-being and productivity.

Mental health should be integrated into holistic corporate wellness initiatives that emphasize valuing work-life balance and decreasing financial stressors. Creating a mental health ERG can provide a safe space for conversation and education. Just offering these programs is not enough; a strong communications plan is vital to ensure employees are aware of all the resources available when they need them. Leaders can also increase the visibility and reduce stigma by being forthcoming about their own mental health in a way that is authentic and can open doors to new conversation. All of these actions can serve to support those in the workplace with mental health conditions and ensure that the workplace culture is not contributing to problems, but rather providing a favorable environment for achieving better mental health.

Selected resources

American Heart Association (2019 Mental Health: A Workforce Crisis Report)
American Journal of Health Promotion (2019 Mental Health Report)
American Psychiatric Association (Center for Workplace Mental Health)
Mind Share Partners (2019 Mental Health at Work Report, Toolkit for Mental Health ERGs)
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration (SAMHSA)
National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)
National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)
World Health Organization (WHO)