



The Complete Guide to Supporting Employee Mental Health

How mental illness is costing your employees and your business, and what you can do about it

Mental illness is a problem in your workforce.

It can seem invisible, but 1 in 5 people experience a diagnosable mental illness each year. Imagine 1 in 5 of your workers coping with mental illness, and the cost to your business is staggering.

The Cost of the Problem

The WHO has deemed depression a leading cause of disability, and depression often occurs with other expensive chronic conditions including obesity, diabetes and heart disease. One study estimated that workers who meet criteria for depression without receiving treatment use 2–4x the health care resources of their coworkers.

Indirect costs from absenteeism and lost productivity are harder to measure. More workers miss work due to mental health issues than physical illness or injuries. Untreated mental illnesses like depression and anxiety can also impact performance and productivity. A person might have an inability to concentrate or screen out environmental stimuli, less stamina, difficulty handling time pressures or multiple tasks, or trouble receiving negative feedback or responding to change.

If you have a highly diverse workforce, the picture gets worse. People who are black are 20% more likely to report serious psychological distress than people who are white. They're more likely to have feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and worthlessness. They're more likely to be victims of serious violent crime, making them more likely to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Yet they're less likely to seek treatment, less likely to have access to treatment, more likely to receive poor quality of care, and more likely to end treatment early. Approximately 86% of psychologists are white, and less than 2% of American Psychological Association members are black. Many people of color experience racism from the mental health professionals they go to for help.

The good news is that treatment works: One study found that after three weeks of mental health treatment, the number of employees suffering from a diagnosable mental illness decreased by 50 percent. After four months of treatment, more than 75 percent no longer experienced any work-related impairment. Studies have found that when depression is treated, companies reduce sick days, employee turnover, and job-related accidents and improve attendance and employee productivity. Many evidence-based treatments have an **ROI of \$2 to \$4 for every dollar invested in prevention and early intervention.**

This guide will walk you through the steps you can take to support individual employees, to strengthen your company's culture, and **to keep employee mental health from costing your business.**

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How mental health shows up at work

Being able to recognize when someone is struggling with their mental health at work can be critical, because most people won't volunteer it. Many of us feel afraid or ashamed to admit when we're suffering, especially when it comes to mental health. We're all told that we need to stay professional at work and to not let our personal problems affect our performance. Employees may fear judgment, being vulnerable, or even that their job will be at risk. If you learn to recognize early signs that someone may need greater support, you can get them connected sooner, preventing more serious problems down the road.

Symptoms of mental illness can be very different for different people. You may guess that an employee who often looks like they've been crying is hurting or depressed, but for someone else, depression might show up as anger or irritability. One of the most important things to recognize is simply a sudden change in behavior. If an employee who has always been reliable and conscientious and is becoming sloppy and absent minded, it's likely there is something pulling their focus and making it hard to keep up at work.

When you see problems like the ones below, you can choose to treat it as a standard performance problem, issuing warnings and setting expectations, and ultimately letting the employee go if they can't get back on track. But with that approach, you risk losing that great employee for good. In many situations, looking beyond the behavior at work to find the root cause is much more likely to solve the performance problem, getting you back a hard-working employee you value.

Common signs an employee might need mental health support

- Lack of motivation
- Lack of focus
- Arriving late/leaving early
- Falling asleep
- Complaining
- Irritability
- Confrontational
- Withdrawal from others
- Losing focus
- Frequent personal calls/texting
- Crying
- Missing work

How to talk to an employee in crisis

So when you've noticed some of the symptoms of a problem, what do you say? Reaching out to a person you see struggling comes naturally to some, but for many, it feels stressful or overwhelming. You might be afraid to say the wrong thing or to make things worse. You might be afraid to open yourself up to too much of their personal life and take on too much responsibility or worry.

Finding a balance is the key. It's possible to acknowledge what you're seeing in someone's performance and check in on how they're doing without asking for the private details of their situation. Here's how that can sound:

I've noticed _____ behavior lately, and it seems to be getting in the way of doing your job fully. This isn't consistent with what I've seen from you as an employee. I'm wondering if there is something going on in your work or home life that might be contributing to this situation?

”

If the employee reveals some of what they're going through, you can affirm their feelings or their pain, but draw boundaries and not probe deeper. It's a common instinct, but it's best not to promise things like "it's going to be okay" because that's outside of your control, and it can hurt trust later on.

When making a plan for what steps they can take next to address the problem, allow the employee to collaborate in what would be the best approach for them. If you have a helper personality, you may feel like you can solve the problem for them, but setting their own goal and plan does more to build their confidence and resilience.

It sounds like there you have a lot going on right now. I want you to get the support you need. What are the steps have you taken so far? What do you know about the employee benefits we offer?

”

What you can do to help

Validate their feelings

They may feel guilt or shame that they're struggling, and it can mean a lot to hear a boss say that sounds hard, and everyone needs help sometimes.

Brainstorm a plan for self care

Explore what self care can look like for them to cope with stress or burnout. Looking to hobbies, interests, and socialization are important.

Review their personal support system

Many people withdraw from loved ones and fear being a burden. Encourage them to reach out to friends or family they trust.

Connect them to a resource

If they have an employee benefit that might help, ask if they know it's available. Having some key community resources for the issues common in your workforce lets you connect employees to help without taking on too much yourself.

Continue to check in

Following up to see if that resource helped or to ask them how they're doing goes a long way to making someone feel supported at work.

Where to refer employees for support

There are many national and state helplines that offer mental health support. These services aren't only meant for people in crisis. They can offer support in many situations, and they can help connect employees to low-cost mental health care.

SAMHSA National Helpline

A free, confidential treatment referral and information service for individuals and families facing mental and/or substance use disorders.

1-800-662-HELP (4357)

24/7/365—IN ENGLISH AND SPANISH

National Alliance on Mental Illness Helpline

The NAMI HelpLine is a free, nationwide peer-support service providing information, resource referrals and support to people living with mental health conditions and to their family members and caregivers.

1-800-950-NAMI | TEXT "NAMI" to 741741
info@nami.org

M-F, 10 AM-6 PM ET

Options for Affordable Therapy

It's not easy to find a therapist you trust, and it can feel near impossible when your income means most providers are too expensive to consider. But there are options out there for people to find low cost, quality counseling. [This article on finding affordable therapy](#) is a great resource you can share to point employees in the right direction.

[Open Path Collective](#) is a nonprofit nationwide network of mental health professionals dedicated to providing in-office mental health care—at a steeply reduced rate—to individuals, couples, children, and families in need.

Community Mental Health Centers are government funded to provide essential mental health care to people who would not be able to access services otherwise. Most take all commercial insurance. You can suggest employees search for Community Mental Health Centers in your local area, or [use the SAMHSA locator to find sliding scale treatment](#).

[National Domestic Violence Hotline](#)

Get help without saying a word—online chat available 24/7/365. Trained advocates are available to talk confidentially, at no cost, with anyone experiencing domestic violence, seeking resources or information, or questioning unhealthy aspects of their relationship.

1-800-799-SAFE (7233)

[Live chat](#)

24/7/365 — IN MORE THAN 200 LANGUAGES.

[Find an inclusive therapist](#)

Finding a good mental health provider can be harder for people from marginalized communities. These sites offer directories of inclusive providers.

[inclusivetherapists.com](#)

[therapyforq poc.com](#)

How to make a resource referral that sticks

People want to be capable and independent. For most of us, it's hard to admit when we need help. That means getting someone connected to a resource is not as simple as suggesting it could help them. Here's what you can do to make it easier for your employees to accept help, and more likely they'll follow through.

Normalize the need

To be vulnerable, people need to feel safe. The key to a conversation that feels safe for an employee is approaching it without judgment. To avoid making them feel singled out, reassure them that everyone has tough times when they're struggling and needs help at some point. If at all possible, try to separate this conversation from their performance, which will likely make them feel worried or defensive. If you want to suggest they take advantage of one of their employee benefits, remind them it's something they earn as part of the compensation your company provides to attract and retain great employees.

Respect their privacy

The hardest balance to strike may be understanding the problem enough to help while respecting their privacy. Be clear up front that they don't need to give you any personal details, and keep the conversation open-ended so they're able to share as much as they're comfortable with. For most people, their employer is the last person they want to be aware when they're having a hard time. Let them know that you understand they may not want to talk to their manager, but it might help to have someone else to talk to.

Build trust

Because the referral is coming from their employer, people often worry that connecting with a resource will affect their employment. The most important thing you can say about a referral is that it's completely confidential. The resource is for them, it's an independent third party, and nothing they say will be shared with you or the company.

To build trust, it's also helpful to build a personal connection. You can share why you recommend the resource, or talk about a specific experience where they helped you or another staff member. If you know the person they'll be connecting with, share their name and your experience with them.

Make the connection

If it's possible, making a direct connection can make the difference when someone is feeling overwhelmed or unsure:

Can I introduce you to _____ the next time they are in our office?

Can I give _____ your number so they can reach out?

Would it be okay if I followed up with you to see if you got the support you need?



Check in and encourage

Following up later on to be sure your employee got help does a lot to build trust and make your employees feel supported. Tell them you don't need details, but ask if they got what they needed. As you see an improvement in their work, let them know and encourage them to continue. It takes courage to reach out for care, and it can mean a lot to have that effort appreciated.

Respect their decision

No matter how helpful and respectful your referrals are, not everyone will decide to reach out. It can be helpful to remember that you won't ever know the full situation, and the person's decision may be the best one for them. Be mindful of how one's experiences, culture, or identity may impact their ability to access certain resources. It can be so difficult to reach out for help or to face a hard situation, and it's important not to judge if the person isn't ready.

Don't know of a resource that could help?

WorkLife Partnership offers free access to the WorkLife Resource Connection, where employees can search thousands of local resources by need.

Request access at worklifepartnership.org/resources

Building a supportive workplace culture

One of the most critical pieces of supporting individual employees' mental health is creating a culture where people feel safe. When the income you and your family depend on is at stake, it takes a tremendous amount of trust to admit when you need help. Even if you know your performance hasn't slipped, you wonder—will people still see me the same way? Will they think I'm less capable or stop relying on me? Will I be given less work? Will my hours be cut? Will my position be eliminated? It takes time and commitment to develop the kind of culture that allows people to be open and brave.

Lead by example

In the same way that employees may hesitate to ask for time off if they never see their boss take a break, people will resist asking for help if their company's leaders never show their own vulnerabilities. Be intentional about repeating the message that everyone deals with issues outside of work and at some point everyone needs understanding and support. If you're comfortable, talk about your own experiences of a time when you struggled with something personal that followed you to work, and how you got help.

Train managers and supervisors to help

One of the most impactful ways to shift your culture is to train managers and supervisors in how to recognize and respond to symptoms of mental illness. [Mental Health First Aid](#)

is a nonprofit program offered nationwide to train people in how to identify, understand and respond to signs of mental illnesses and substance use disorders. Training managers in how to respond appropriately and effectively takes the fear and hesitation out of starting conversations about mental health. It can teach them to ask the right questions and connect someone with the best resources to get them the help they need.

Consider your policies

Supportive company policies are a meaningful way to stand behind your words, and there are simple policies that can make all the difference.

Adjusting your paid time off policy to include mental health is one of the most critical changes a company can make. The stigma around mental health is prevalent, and most employees won't assume their sick time can be used for mental health needs unless they're given explicit permission. Some employers also choose to offer a few days specifically as mental health days. This can make a powerful statement about your company's understanding and support for mental health needs, though you might also consider whether your employees would feel too embarrassed to take them.

Along with the time off itself, review your process for requesting time off. Does the process require people disclose a reason when taking sick time? Or provide burdensome documentation? Could that be preventing people from taking the time they need? Do your managers know how to handle requests without unintentionally pressuring people to share more than they're comfortable with? Do managers know how to handle a concern with someone taking too much time off? Simple changes to the process can make a big difference in how it feels to employees.

You can also take a look at your disability and accommodations policies. You likely know that mental health is included in disability laws and protections, but do your employees know? Making sure they're informed about their rights has an additional benefit of helping them trust that you will respect those rights. If an employee feels safe from discrimination or retaliation, they're much more likely to speak up and ask for an accommodation they need before it becomes a bigger issue.

Understanding the role of the EAP

EAPs can be a valuable support for employee mental health, but it's important to know what they can do—and what they can't. An EAP's main function is to provide short-term counseling services to employees and their families. Many also offer education programs on topics like quitting smoking and stress management.

Most EAPs are limited to 3–8 sessions, so they're most effective for short term issues. For deeper needs, the EAP will refer the employee to an outside provider, potentially disrupting their care. There's also a challenge of awareness, with average utilization hovering about 5%. A good EAP can be a valuable resource for your staff, but it's important to ask thorough questions about the service they'll provide. Offering more sessions can improve continuation of care.

Recommended employee benefits

The employee benefits market is expanding and doing much more to meet the needs of workers. These new benefits reflect a greater understanding of the importance of an employee's total wellness—physical, mental, emotional, and financial—and the way they are interconnected. Here are a few options to consider that can expand your support for employee mental health.

Direct mental health coverage

The most direct option to consider is covering the cost of mental health treatment for your employees. Investing in mental health treatment has been shown to be cost effective. Many evidence-based treatments can save \$2 to \$4 for every dollar invested in prevention and early intervention.

Making the Case

For all the data you need to make a smart business case for mental health benefits, download the American Heart Association CEO Roundtable report [*Mental Health — A Workforce Crisis*](#)

However, when it comes to mental health, one size won't fit all. People have different needs, different levels of comfort, and come from different cultures that think about mental health in very different ways. To offer benefits that will successfully reach a diverse population, flexibility is key.

Telehealth or text therapy are affordable and flexible options you can provide directly to your employees. Here are a few companies to consider:

[Teledoc Online Therapy and Counseling](#)
[Talkspace](#)
[Betterhelp](#)

Disability insurance

Disability coverage is not something most employees plan to use, but it's comforting to know it's there. We hear from employees that they need mental illness and substance abuse coverage as a part of their disability plans. Recently, benefit companies have heard this feedback as well, and many are offering new plans that treat these illnesses like any other claim, with no reduction in benefits, lifetime maximum or separate benefit period. If you offer your employees disability coverage, find out from your provider how they treat disability due to mental illness, and let your employees know what their coverage includes.

Hospital indemnity insurance

When it comes to health care, one of the biggest challenges people face is fear of the unknown cost. Hospital indemnity insurance provides employees with the choice and control they need to avoid gaps in medical coverage and help cover deductibles. This can reduce worries and fears about coverage that contribute to workplace stress and mental anxiety. Stress over medical bills often prevents people from seeking treatment early, when a condition is most treatable and affordable.

WorkLife Resource Navigators

Resource Navigators can be a key support for employee mental health because of their **interconnected approach**. For some employees, just having someone to listen when you're coping with a lot can **make the difference**. When an employee needs counseling or treatment, WorkLife Navigators are **community resource experts**, and they can connect your employees to Community Mental Health Centers and sliding scale providers. They can refer employees to benefits like an EAP or an employee resource group. They can help employees **access their medical benefits**, understand their co-pays, or find an in-network provider. They can coach employees through disclosing a condition and asking for an accommodation so they can **stay successful at work**. Navigators go far beyond the EAP model by understanding how issues like mental health intersect with limited financial resources, their environment, their work, and their relationships. They work alongside your employees to understand the root causes of their distress and make meaningful changes so they don't end up back in the same place later on.

If you or your team needs support with employee mental health,

Schedule a
Conversation

sales@worklifepartnership.org
303.298.1625
worklifepartnership.org

Sources

- <https://ct.counseling.org/2020/05/the-historical-roots-of-racial-disparities-in-the-mental-health-system/>
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- <https://www.passporthealthusa.com/employer-solutions/blog/2018-12-how-does-mental-health-affect-work-performance/>
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