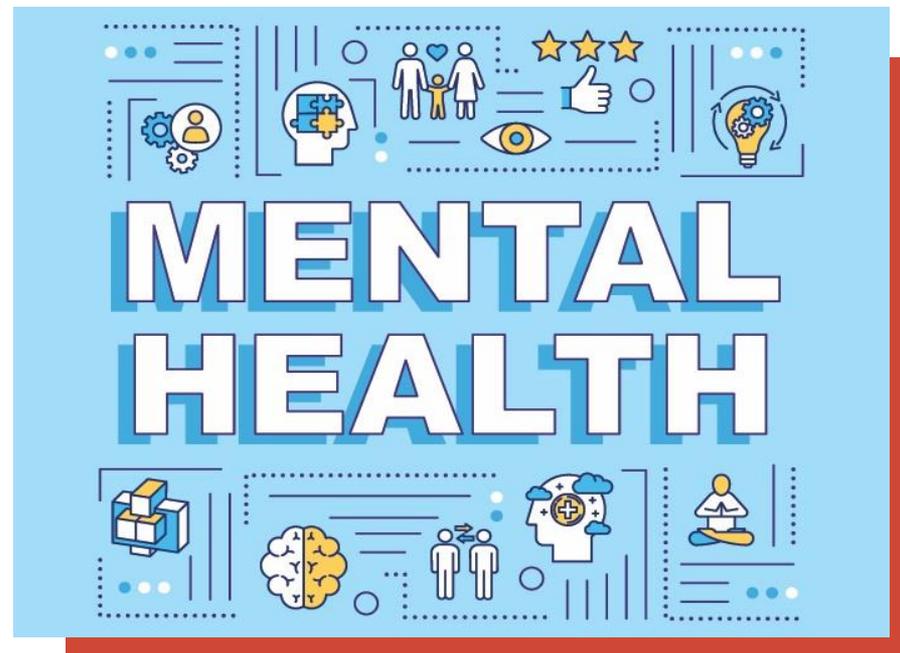


Leading the Way: Promoting Positive Mental Health at Work

Mental health conditions are increasing worldwide. The World Health Organization reports that there has been a 13% rise in mental health conditions and substance use disorders in the last decade. Mental health conditions have a substantial effect on all areas of life, including school and work performance and the ability to participate in the community. [A 2021 study by Mind Share Partners](#) found that 75% of full-time US workers reported experiencing at least one symptom of a mental health condition in the past year—up from 59% in 2019. The most common symptoms reported were burnout, depression and anxiety. 80% of those surveyed reported symptoms lasting a month or more, and over a third said their symptoms lasted five months to a year. They also found that mental health issues are not just a problem for lower-level employees. In 2019, mental health symptoms were equally prevalent across all seniority levels, and in 2021, executives and C-Level respondents were more likely to report at least one mental health symptom. The data is clear—the global pandemic has significantly impacted mental health at work, making an already serious issue even more complex.

The Cost of Mental Health Issues at Work

These mental health issues come at a serious cost to organizations. The World Health Organization estimates that depression and anxiety cost the global economy an



estimated \$1 trillion (USD) each year. The 2021 Mind Share Partners study found a 26% increase in employees who reported a productivity loss due to mental health symptoms in 2021 compared to 2019. Respondents reported avoiding social activities, increased difficulty concentrating or reasoning, being less responsive to email and other communications, and taking longer to do tasks. There has also been a serious increase in attrition for mental health reasons. Younger workers are especially affected, with 68% of Millennials and 81% of Gen Zers reporting that they have left roles voluntarily or involuntarily for mental health reasons. A TINYpulse State of Employee Engagement Q2 2021 survey of more than 700 leaders and HR professionals found that more than 80% of hybrid and remote workers report suffering from emotional exhaustion “somewhat to a great deal.” Mental health issues are no longer the exception. They are the norm.

Some Good News About Mental Health at Work

While it is clear that mental health issues are increasing around the globe, there have been some positive changes in how employers approach this problem. There is evidence that people are becoming more open to discussing mental health at work. 65% of the Mind Share Partners survey respondents reported having talked about their mental health to someone at work in the past year, a 63% increase from 2019. Likewise, workers reported being more comfortable talking about mental health with colleagues, managers and HR departments. Employers are also investing more in mental health, providing more time off, mental health days and mental health training. There is evidence that employees are taking advantage of these accommodations more frequently. A national employer survey by McKinsey & Company found that a majority of employers (60%) plan to expand behavioral health benefits, especially telehealth and digital tools.



Organizations around the world are beginning to embrace prioritizing mental health, helping to end the stigma around mental health issues. Recently, several large organizations, including prominent brands like Unilever, Salesforce, HSBC and BHP, have joined [The Global Business Collaboration for Better Workplace Mental Health](#), a global business-led initiative to advocate and accelerate positive change for mental health in the workplace. They have joined forces to encourage leaders around the globe to pledge to develop and deliver an action plan to support mental health in their organizations and proactively promote a positive culture that empowers and supports employees in prioritizing mental health.

How Leaders Can Do More to Support Workplace Mental Health

Managers at any level can play a role in supporting employees' mental health. Many of the [skills that make an effective manager](#) also create a positive mental health culture.

Communication is Key

Employees who feel their managers are not good at communicating are more likely to experience mental health declines, especially since the onset of the pandemic. Prolonged periods of uncertainty greatly increase stress and anxiety. Managers can help ease that stress by communicating more frequently and with as much transparency as possible. Keeping employees informed and up to date about organizational changes is more important than ever. Ambiguity can cause anxiety, so remember that even bad news is better than no news in some situations. In addition, setting clear expectations about workloads and deadlines can help employees know how to prioritize tasks

appropriately. This is especially important in the era of remote work, where lines between work and home are blurred. Communicating priorities and expectations will prevent re-work, overwork and burnout caused by misunderstandings.

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Managers should also check in with employees frequently about their workload to make adjustments as needed. Managers who check in often are more likely to notice if an employee feels overwhelmed or is struggling with mental health. Intentionally checking in with direct reports is critical and must become part of the organizational culture. It is important to go beyond a surface-level “how are you” and ask specific questions and listen to the answers. However, if this is a new practice in the organization, be clear about your reasons for increasing check-ins to avoid being perceived as a micro-manager.

Offer Flexibility and Inclusivity

To further promote mental health, managers must expect that their team’s needs and situations will continue to change. Especially in the ever-changing circumstances of the pandemic, there will be unexpected challenges to schedules due to personal and family health issues, care-taking responsibilities and government-issued restrictions or shutdowns. Don’t make assumptions about what employees need, but encourage open communication about stressors like challenges with childcare, eldercare or health problems of a family member.

A great example of offering flexibility was when the CEO of Basecamp, Jason Fried, announced early in 2020 that employees with any care-taking responsibilities could set their own schedules, even if that meant working fewer hours. Importantly, he also emphasized that this did not mean that workers without kids or relatives living at home were expected to work longer or harder. Flexibility doesn’t mean lowering standards, but it does take open communication and a willingness to try new ways to get things done. It also requires being realistic about changing circumstances. Stacey Sprenkel, a partner at Morrison & Foerster, set an example by proactively sharing that she would work odd hours due to childcare responsibilities. She then invited her team to share what accommodations they might need to work throughout the pandemic.



Model Healthy Behaviors

One of the most powerful tools of leadership is modeling behavior. Any manager that wants employees to practice healthy habits must lead by example. When employees see their manager taking a walk in the middle of the day, setting boundaries around appropriate work hours, or taking their vacation or mental health days (without checking email), they will feel empowered to do the same. Being vulnerable in conversations about mental health is also helpful. When the boss can admit feeling stress or anxiety, it will be easier for employees to share that as well.

Kelly Phillips-Henry, PsyD, MBA, is the CEO of the [Aurora Mental Health Center](#), a client of Crestcom International's management training program. She emphasizes the need for self-care to her staff, especially when working remotely. She explains, "With the pandemic, most of our employees have worked remotely from home. This creates new challenges for mental health balance. The home is no longer a respite from the stress of the work environment, so it's especially important to practice self-care. Begin and end the workday on a schedule. Take a lunch break. Go outside and walk around. Play with the dog. It's easy to get Zoom fatigue, so we encourage our employees to take a 5-10 minute break every hour." She also encourages her staff to be alert to the indicators of stress and trauma such as "fatigue, depression, short temper, and difficulty concentrating—the list goes on. It makes it all the more important to practice good mental hygiene during the workday: taking regular breaks, staying well hydrated, getting some fresh air and exercise, or listening to some music when possible." Practicing these healthy behaviors can help anyone experiencing stress while working remotely.



Managers can also set healthy workplace practices like fixed "no-meeting days" or set a certain time each day that all staff is expected to focus on their own tasks and not email, call, or request meetings with their colleagues. Crestcom subject matter expert and international best-selling author, [Paul Weston](#) refers to this as a "Focus Zone." In a recent episode of [The Leadership Habit podcast](#), he explains, "Focus Zones are about creating a sanctuary, and sending out a do not disturb signal to the community. In other words, tell others to leave you alone. Communicate that this is what you're doing, why you're doing it, what the benefits will be. And funny thing, if you tell your team that I'm going to be working on something important, like gathering leads for a new sales incentive that's coming up, they'll go, okay, that's good. We need that. We're going to leave you in peace to do it. So there's a reason why you're creating this sanctuary. It's building communication, and setting standard operating procedures like turning off email, and using your Out of Office message to say, today I will not be available between 10 and 11 to answer emails."

Prioritize Leadership Training and Development

One of the best things an organization can do to support the mental health of its workers is to invest in the development of its leaders. Improving skills like emotional intelligence, communication, employee motivation and team engagement will give leaders the tools to create a culture that supports mental health for their employees. [The NHS suggests](#) that learning new skills also promotes mental health by boosting self-confidence, raising self-esteem, creating a sense of purpose and fostering connections.

Leadership is Needed Now

Mark Sanborn says, "Anyone, anywhere, can make a positive difference." Leaders today must step up to the challenge of mental health and face these problems with openness and candor. The global pandemic has revealed the extent of mental health issues but can also be viewed as an opportunity to create meaningful change. Leaders who make mental health a priority improve the performance of their organizations and the quality of life for its employees and the greater community.



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