

# How Managers and HR Leaders Can Reduce Mental Health Stigma in the Workplace

## Mental Health at Work

Despite the fact that talking about mental health has become much more accepted and commonplace these days, many workers still feel the impacts of mental health stigma at work.

According to a 2019 poll by the [American Psychiatric Association](#):

- 50% of workers are uncomfortable discussing their mental health with their supervisor or coworkers
- 40% don't feel comfortable accessing mental health care through their employer
- 35% are worried about retaliation or being fired for seeking mental health care

This mental health stigma is particularly challenging in workplaces because it can cause issues like:

- Increased or worsened mental health symptoms
- Problems with social relationships
- Difficulties in the workplace
- A reluctance or resistance to seeking treatment

## Stigma prevents employees from treating and prioritizing their mental health.

Stigma at work prevents employees from seeking treatment for mental health and from prioritizing their mental health, which can negatively affect an employee's well-being.

But failing to make mental health a priority doesn't just negatively impact individual employees, **it's also bad for the workplace.**

## The cost of mental health stigma

When mental health isn't prioritized, workplaces see:

- Decreased productivity
- Increased absenteeism
- Increased costs in healthcare
- Higher rates of employee turnover

This can have a high financial cost. A study from [The Analysis Group](#) estimates that the economic burden of untreated depression reaches over **\$200 billion per year**.

At an organizational level, mental health issues can also have a high financial cost for organizations. As an example, a committee from the [American Heart Association](#) estimates that untreated depression costs companies \$9,450 per employee every year, highlighting the very real financial and human cost to mental health stigma.

## Untreated depression can cost companies **almost \$10,000** per employee per year

Thankfully, there is something that organizations can do about this. Organizations can make strides to support employee mental health, which can both improve employee wellbeing and create financial returns for organizations. In fact, an analysis by NORC at the University of Chicago and the National Safety Council found that companies see a [return of \\$4 per every \\$1 they invest](#) in supporting employee mental health.

## 6 Ways to Create a Supportive Workplace Culture

Considering the landscape of mental health stigma and its impacts in the workplace, what can managers and HR leaders do to create a culture that supports mental health?

### 1. Lead by example

Managers and HR leaders can create a culture that supports mental health by working to support *their own* mental health and wellness. This will support your employees in doing the same!

Maintain good work/life boundaries and have clear communication expectations with your employees, which can include sharing explicit information around communication and your expectations for their availability.

As an example, managers might set clear expectations with employees regarding how frequently they check their email and how quickly they expect employees to respond to emails. If you're a night owl or tend to work over the weekend, employees might think that you also expect them to work during those hours or that you want them to respond to your emails as soon as they receive them. Be clear in your communication expectations.

Leading by example can also be something as simple as taking breaks from work and using your allotted vacation time, as well as making an effort to fully disconnect during breaks or

vacations. Make an effort to truly disconnect and lead by example with the kinds of boundaries you want your employees to feel empowered to make.

## 2. Offer flexibility

Offering flexibility to your employees is an important way to create a culture that supports mental health and overall well-being.

HR leaders and decision makers can create policies that allow employees to have flexibility over where and when they work, such as hybrid or remote work arrangements. While remote work can have a negative impact on mental health for some employees, for other employees it can provide [massive benefits to their mental health](#). Allow your employees to decide what work arrangement will be most supportive to their mental health.

Other options for providing employees flexibility might include:

- Providing flexible schedules
- Letting employees use work time to go to therapy or seek other mental health support
- Allowing employees to take mental health days when they need it. In fact, letting your employees use sick days for their mental health can be a great way to reinforce the idea that mental health has the same priority and need as physical health.

## 3. Address discrimination directly

For members of marginalized groups, experiences of [discrimination can worsen mental health](#).

Racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, fatphobia, ageism, and other forms of discrimination can all have a negative impact on mental health, no matter how big or small an individual experience might seem. In fact, small everyday instances of discrimination - called [microaggressions](#) - can be just as impactful on an employee's mental health as more overt discrimination.

Managers and HR leaders can address discrimination by:

- Evaluating how your company supports people from marginalized groups.
- Developing organizational policies, systems, and trainings to reduce discrimination.
- Disciplining and educating employees who have engaged in discrimination, whether they realize it or not.

## 4. Use language intentionally

Unfortunately, there are a number of words in our standard vernacular that can be highly stigmatizing to people with mental health conditions.

Consider how often many people use the words “crazy” or “insane” in their everyday speech. Those words can be harmful and can perpetuate mental health stigma. These might seem like very small things, but once you start to pick up on how frequently we use these kinds of words in our vocabulary, you can see the impact they might have on someone who's dealing with mental health challenges.

Instead of calling something “crazy” or “insane”, use a more accurate or specific descriptor.

- Instead of “that’s so crazy” you can say “how surprising”
- Instead of “This will be an insane amount of work” you can say it’ll be a “huge undertaking”
- Instead of referring to yourself or someone else as “OCD” you can say that you’re detail oriented or you really enjoy having things organized a particular way.

Being intentional with the language you use can go a long way in reducing mental health stigma in the workplace.

## 5. Start a conversation

If you notice that something seems off with one of your employees or a coworker, don’t be afraid to say something.

You might notice that someone doesn’t seem like themselves lately, or that one of your employees is letting things slip in a way they usually don’t, or changes in their mood or level of productivity

Starting a conversation with an employee who might be struggling can be a moment to create connection and let them know that you can be a support. Reaching out a hand of support to someone who’s struggling can go a long way in reducing isolation, making them feel supported, and letting them know that you’re there to work collaboratively with them to find solutions.

If you feel unsure what to say, consider the following options:

- You could share that you’ve noticed a change in the way an employee is behaving, such as arriving at work late when they were previously very punctual. Instead of addressing this as a performance issue, share the observation without judgment. Simply stating that you’ve noticed a change and asking them if everything is alright can be a great way to start a conversation.
- You might ask an employee what support they need, or what you can do to support them as a manager or leader in the organization. If they ask for something that you can’t provide, you might be able to connect them to helpful resources.
- You might also find yourself in a situation where someone shares with you and you’re not quite sure what to say. In that case, you can always thank them for sharing with you, tell them that you’re there to support them, and offer to connect them to resources, such as employee mental health benefits.

## 6. Invest in comprehensive mental health benefits

[CTA redacted]

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