The Ultimate Workplace Mental Health Toolkit

Contents

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Mental Health and the COVID-19 Outbreak

Before jumping into our Workplace Mental Health Toolkit, we want to take a moment to acknowledge the profound impact that the COVID-19 crisis has had on mental health for individuals and communities, both inside and outside of the workplace. The virus and the social isolation measures to address it have completely disrupted both work and private life. Just about everything in our lives has had to change because of the outbreak. Which presents unique workplace mental health challenges.

Employees face a set of new stressors on their mental health and wellbeing. Not only are the isolation, disconnect, and powerlessness of quarantine intense mental health stressors, but even just the changes themselves present an almost existential mental health threat. Every routine, habit, and coping mechanism that we have developed to live full, balanced, and meaningful lives has changed because of the outbreak. The emotional labor of developing new habits and getting used to them is a tax on our mental wellness. And without proper replacements for old foundations of mental health, the disruptions will cause even greater strains on our mental health.

Employers need to recognize, normalize, and move to address these mental health stressors during the COVID-19 outbreak. Stand by your employees to provide them with proper resources, much-needed flexibility to set routines that work for them during this time, and meaningful remote work that provides a constant and a community.

But in addition to providing specific support for COVID-19 related stressors, there has never been a better or more important time to invest in building a mental health-friendly workplace. There are tools to use and steps that employers can take to recognize the importance of mental health in the workplace, always. When a workplace fosters an environment of care and support for the mental health and wellness of its employees, the impacts can be significant. Not just for the employees' mental wellness but also the health of the team and the success of the company. These same steps are all that more important during the COVID-19 crisis. Adapt the tools from this kit for remote work as necessary and you will be a long way towards fostering mental wellness at your company during COVID-19 and beyond.

Most employers know why their employees' physical health matters. Employees and employers alike often see it as the employer's duty to care for their employees' health. Many employers simply see taking care of their employees' physical health as the right thing to do. But they also know that they will see a return on their investment in employee physical health. Healthy employees are more productive and less likely to miss work. Moreover, taking care of employees' physical health improves team member retention and prevents costly compliance issues.

Slowly but surely, employers are starting to recognize that mental health, and healthcare, is just as essential as physical health. Mental health is going mainstream and modern human resources teams need to be up-to-date on workplace mental health and how they should be approaching it.

In this guide, we will explore the key concepts of workplace mental health and how to optimize your workplace to foster positive mental health. So whether you are well-versed in the language and concepts of mental health or are trying to fill what you see as a knowledge gap, this toolkit will provide you with clear explanations and actionable steps to improve your workplace mental health approach.

As you read through the rest of the toolkit, we invite you to remember the comparison between mental and physical health. Use this comparison to challenge your preconceptions and move past potential internalized stigma towards mental health. If you are having difficulty with a concept or even reacting negatively to the suggestions, try simply replacing mental health with physical health in the text and see if the concept makes sense. Mental and physical health are the two aspects of overall health and as such are more-or-less equivalent—two sides of the same coin.

Take, for example, the simple term: mental health. Society tends to talk about mental health only in the frame of illness. Mental health, it seems, only exists when it is a problem. But this is, on the face of it, absurd. Does physical health only exist when someone is ill? When they face a physical challenge?

Of course not. You can foster physical health so that it helps you lead a fuller, happier life. Eat healthily. Exercise. Go outside and get fresh air. These are components of wellbeing, not just prescriptions to avoid or treat illness.

Why not apply these same common-sense concepts towards mental health? Historically, physical and mental health have been treated differently, making it more difficult to talk about and properly address mental health concepts. But that is starting to change and employers need to be leading the charge. You can help your valued team members live their life to the fullest by cultivating positive mental health as well as avoiding and addressing mental health challenges.

In this toolkit, we'll show you how.

Key Concepts

Everyone will come to this toolkit with a different set of preconceptions and a different level of knowledge about workplace mental health. And even if you understand an issue, you may not know how it applies to your specific workplace.

So, let's take a look at the key concepts underpinning workplace mental health, some common pitfalls that employers make, and actionable steps that you can take to integrate each concept into your workplace.

Mental Health

What is it?

You probably have some sense of what mental health is. But let's all get on the same page. What exactly is mental health?

The US Department of Health and Human Services gives the following definition: *"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"*[1].

Essentially, it is the health of your mind: your thoughts, feelings, and relationships. *Everyone* has mental health – not just those with perceived "challenges" – just like everyone has physical health. Your mental health can be a source of strength and wellness. Or, it can present challenges to your overall wellness. Often, it does both!

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's recovery model, four key factors support positive mental health:[2]

Home: a safe and stable home

Community: relationships that give meaning, hope, support, love, and connection

Purpose: meaningful daily activities including jobs, school, volunteerism

Health: living in a physically and emotionally healthy way

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[1] **https://www.mentalhealth.gov/basics/what-is-mental-health**
[2] **https://www.samhsa.gov/brss-tacs/recovery-support-tools-resources**

As an employer, you cannot control an employee's mental health any more than you can control their physical health. Ultimately, they are the stewards of their mental health. But you can do for mental health what you do for physical health: provide employees with comprehensive mental healthcare, mental health resources, and a supportive work environment free of mental health hazards (just as you provide them a workplace free of physical hazards!).

All of an individual's efforts to foster their mental health will only do so much if the systems around them are working against their mental health. As an employer, you are responsible for one of the systems that will have the greatest impact on an employee's mental health.

Mental Health

Common Issues & Pitfalls

The first pitfall to avoid when approaching workplace mental health is a **deficit mindset**. In other words, only thinking of "mental health" with "problem" at the end of it.

Another issue is **thinking of mental health as a "personal" issue** that employers should not get involved in or that carries a stigma. These attitudes prevent an open and honest discussion of mental health that is necessary to create a mentally healthy workplace and can directly harm employee mental health by perpetuating stigmas.

It's also important to recognize that employers can create a workplace that is not conducive to mental health without knowing it or meaning to. If you do not have a strong understanding of mental health and have not been intentionally fostering workplace mental health, odds are that some aspects of your workplace present mental health hazards or are not supporting employee mental health. There will be areas for improvement. But that is no reason for concern and is expected given the historical disparity between attitudes and policies around physical and mental health. Discovering those areas for improvement is the first step to improving and shows that you care for your employees' mental health more than most employers.

Another pitfall that employers are starting to encounter comes from **the shift towards remote work**. For many people, the workplace can be a source of community, support, and meaning. Especially if you prioritize employee wellness and mental health in the workplace, then working from home can mean that your employees are missing out on what has become a major support system. So, it is important to try to extend your mental health initiatives into the remote workplace -- especially during the COVID-19 crisis. Think about how you can support your employees' mental wellbeing remotely just as they support your business' success remotely.

Mental Health

Action Items

Educate Yourself

The first step to tackling workplace mental health is to educate yourself on the topic. Since so much of the harm can be done unintentionally due to a lack of awareness, simply fostering that awareness goes a long way towards improving workplace mental health. You are reading this toolkit, so you're well on the way towards accomplishing that first step.

Lead with vulnerability and compassion

As you tackle workplace mental health, you should lead with vulnerability and compassion. This kind of empathetic leadership is a huge component of an authentic workplace mental health initiative. It will also make it easier to identify employees' needs and areas for improvement to create a more effective approach to employee mental wellness.

Optimize your workplace

The next step is to optimize your workplace for the other key concepts that we will explore shortly. Each concept has the potential to foster employee mental health or could present barriers for employee wellness. The concepts include:

- **Physical Wellness**
- **Environmental Wellness**
- **Stigma**
- **Toxic Stress**
- **Employee Burnout**

Create a game plan

Finally, create a game plan for your new intentional approach to workplace mental health and launch a mental health awareness campaign that engages team members from every level of your organization, enlisting the help of an experienced mental health partner if possible. Later in the toolkit, we will take a look at how to put together your new approach to workplace mental health and how to choose a mental health partner.

Physical Wellness

What is it?
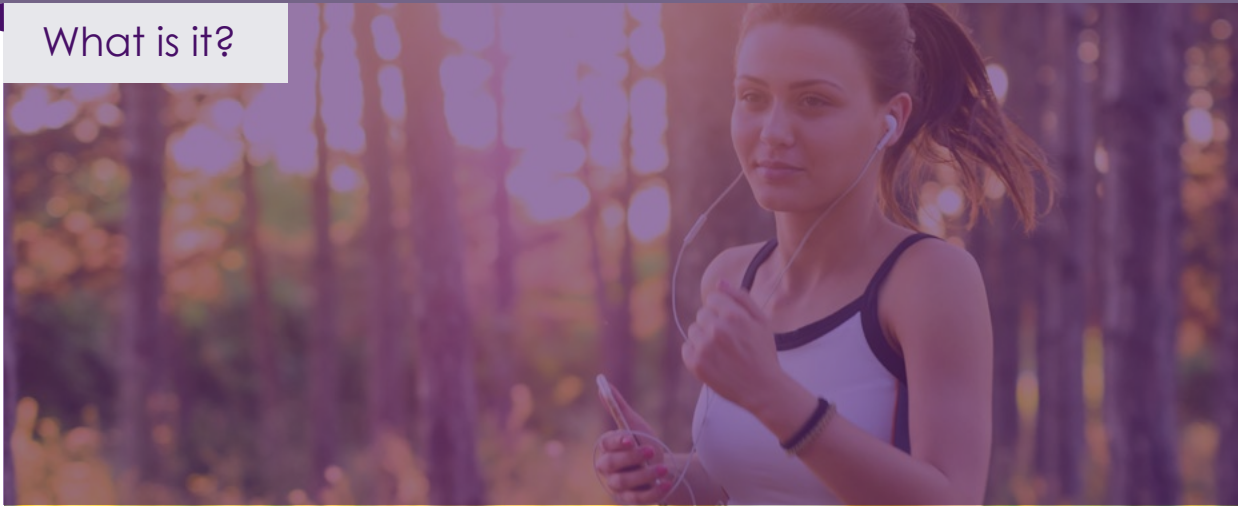
Physical wellness involves a commitment to physical self-care through healthy eating, physical exercise, drinking plenty of water, and getting adequate sleep[3].

Physical and mental wellness are intricately linked and ultimately rely on one another. Strong physical health habits such as proper nutrition and regular exercise can help balance energy levels, lift mood, and even balance brain chemicals. This can have positive effects on mental health.

Physical Wellness

Common Issues & Pitfalls

While people more often approach mental health with a deficit mentality, they can fall into the same trap with physical wellness. Many employers invest in comprehensive healthcare coverage and understand the importance of keeping employees from falling ill and helping them recover from physical ailments. But many also overlook the importance of preventative wellness: positive, proactive physical health through healthy lifestyle habits. Which matters, as physical health can either support or drain mental health.

As with mental health, physical health is ultimately not something an employer can control. But employers can make it easier or more difficult for employees to tackle their physical wellness effectively. And with the modern workplace contributing to the spread of an increasingly sedentary lifestyle, it's our responsibility to create workplaces that encourage rather than hinder physical wellness.

[3] **http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.1006.856&rep=rep1&type=pdf**

Physical Wellness

Action Items

Physical wellness benefits and initiatives are essential components of a modern human resources approach. As the continued push for preventative care grows, people are starting to shift from a "sick care" system to a "health care" system. And employers would do well to lead the charge when it comes to employee physical wellness.

There are a lot of things that employers can do to foster workplace physical wellness. Some of these include:

Providing access to multimedia resources regarding fitness and nutrition

Helping employees connect with certified fitness professionals and licensed dietitians

Ensuring employees have access to nutritious, affordable meals

Fostering a community where employees can create a wellness support system

Providing access to exercise facilities

And your physical wellness initiatives will support employee mental health.

Environmental Wellness

What is it?

Environmental wellness means that the physical work environment is conducive to mental wellness. This means that you are creating an environment in which people feel physically and mentally safe, supported, and stimulated in a way that leads to good work and positive feelings.

Essentially, does the physical environment at your workplace support mental health? Or does it add stressors and drain energy?

Environmental Wellness

Common Issues & Pitfalls

In recent years a lot of time, energy, and money have gone into designing workplaces that maximize employee productivity and creativity. But employers are starting to adopt a different mentality towards their employees – one which we will explore in greater detail later in the toolkit. Instead of trying to squeeze every ounce of productivity out of their employees, they are cultivating the employee relationship and helping their employees live meaningful, complete lives. By supporting their team members rather than exploiting them, these employers maximize employee engagement, retention, and yes, even productivity.

The biggest environmental wellness pitfall that employers can fall into, then, is getting stuck in that productivity mindset. Start thinking of your workplace as a place for employees to thrive rather than produce and you will be a long way towards improving workplace environmental wellness.

Environmental Wellness

Action Items

To truly take control over your workplace environmental wellness you need to make changes in the workplace, not just in your mindset. Some of the steps that you can take include:

- Adjusting light levels throughout the day to match circadian rhythms
- Maximizing access to sunlight and windows
- Providing comfortable, ergonomic chairs
- Offering standing desks and other personalized work setups
- Spacing individual workstations in a way that makes people comfortable
- Offering peace of mind with clear emergency/evacuation plans
- Creating spaces for dedicated break time and encouraging employees to make use of those spaces

Environmental wellness for remote employees

Also, don't forget about environmental wellness for remote employees. Remote work can blur the lines between personal and work spaces in a way that is harmful to mental wellbeing. If your employees are increasingly working from home, then you should help them foster environmental wellness in their homes. The biggest step you can take is to help them delineate workspace and personal space by giving remote employees (or partial-remote employees) a budget to outfit their home office. You'd be surprised what an improvement a desk and office chair is compared to working from the kitchen counter. Next, think about how you can help your employees meet the action points above when working from home.

> If your employees are increasingly working from home, then you should help them foster environmental wellness in their homes.

Stigma

What is it?

The Mayo Clinic defines Stigma as follows:

> *"Stigma is when someone views you in a negative way because you have a distinguishing characteristic or personal trait that's thought to be, or actually is, a disadvantage (a negative stereotype). Unfortunately, negative attitudes and beliefs toward people who have a mental health condition are common.*
>
> *Stigma can lead to discrimination. Discrimination may be obvious and direct, such as someone making a negative remark about your mental illness or your treatment. Or it may be unintentional or subtle, such as someone avoiding you because the person assumes you could be unstable, violent or dangerous due to your mental illness."[4]*

But when it comes to workplace mental health, there are two kinds of stigma. The Mayo Clinic accurately described the first: stigma against someone else with mental illness or mental health challenges due to perceived disadvantage or negative stereotypes. This type of stigma can cause workplace discrimination and contribute to a harmful work environment or toxic work culture.

The second type of stigma that employers need to address when it comes to workplace mental health is internalized stigma. Employees may view themselves more negatively due to their mental health or may feel shame about discussing their mental health. Not only does this stigma directly harm employee mental health, but it also stops employees from seeking mental healthcare or asserting their mental health needs.

In sum, it's important to understand:

- Stigma is built on negative stereotypes and unfairly grouping people together
- Stigma is the first step on the road to discrimination; if you have any institutional stigma, you could be at risk of falling into discriminatory practices
- Stigma can present itself in unintentional and direct ways
- Stigma leads to self-judgment, which makes it harder to get help
- Stigma often leads to treatment and coverage gaps for mental health needs

If you're hoping to build a powerful, positive culture that values mental health, it's important to start by taking a long, hard look in the mirror through the lens of these five main ideas about stigma.

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[4] **https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/mental-illness/in-depth/mental-health/art-20046477**

Stigma

Common Issues & Pitfalls

Stigma generally operates under the surface. Some stigmas and discrimination are overt but most go largely unnoticed, quietly harming employee relationships, engagement, and company culture. And if you haven't taken any steps to address workplace mental health stigma, there's a good chance that you are unintentionally perpetuating it.

Take employee stigma into account

But one common pitfall that employers fall into when trying to address workplace stigma and discrimination is that they fail to take employee stigma into account. It is a good start to tackle stigma and discrimination in your top-down practices, positions, and values as an employer. But as much as you take a stand as a stigma-free employer, your workplace will still have a stigma problem unless you try to address the internalized stigma that your employees hold against themselves or others.

When addressing workplace mental health it's important to tackle the following types of stigma:

- Stigma held by individual employees against others with mental health that is different than their own

- Stigma around discussing mental health

- Stigma held by employees regarding their own perceived mental health

- Stigma that is perpetuated by existing systems within the workplace environment, even if unintentionally

> Your workplace will still have a stigma problem unless you try to address the internalized stigma that your employees hold against themselves or others.

Stigma

Action Items

At its core, stigma is about something being perceived as "not normal". To combat this, you have to normalize characteristics or behaviors to remove the stigma.

Education combined with open and honest dialogue is a great place to start. But the responsibility falls on you as an employer to lead the charge. Educate yourself first and initiate those necessary conversations before asking your team members to do the same. Then provide comprehensive employee education around mental health to normalize the subject as well as provide valuable information to help employees steward their mental health. And encourage open mental health dialogue between teammates, employees and HR, and managers and their teams.

Foster a culture of open conversation, collaborative problem solving, empathetic leadership and collaboration, and vulnerability. As a leader, you have the power to set an example and make it easier for others to share themselves and shed their stigmas. You just have to be the first one to take the leap. And encourage your leadership team and managers to do the same.

But at the same time, do not expect employees to share more than they are comfortable with and be careful not to overstep. The goal is to normalize the concepts that everyone has mental health and may struggle with mental health challenges at times, as well as to share valuable resources. Not to make employees share private health information or violate their privacy.
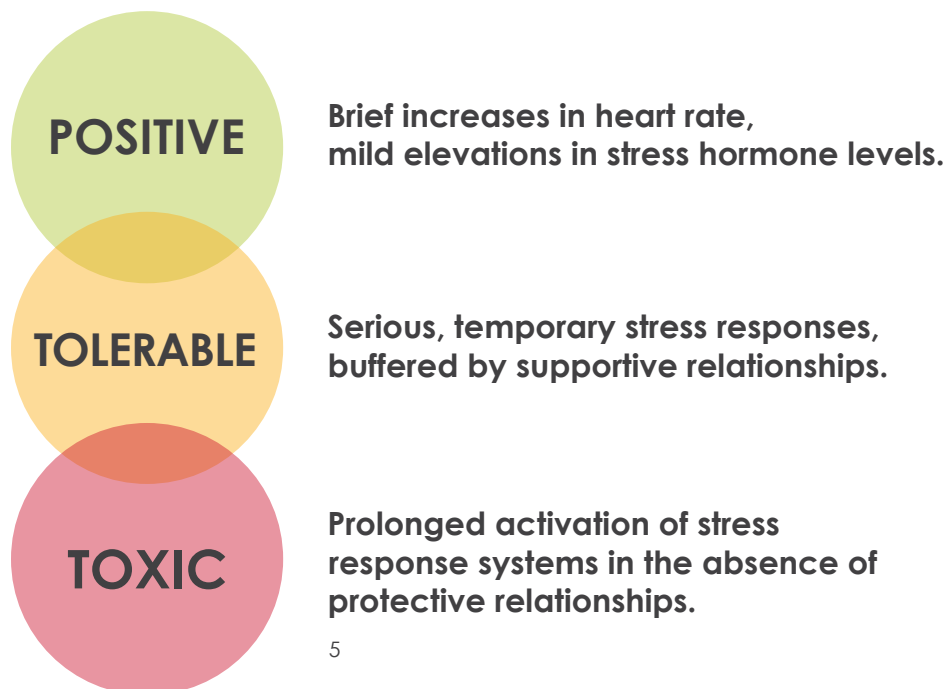
Stress & Toxic Stress

What is it?

Everybody experiences stress on some level. Manageable stress can be a valuable motivator – that's part of why deadlines exist. As manageable stressors pile up or unexpected new situations present themselves, that can evolve into what's known as a "tolerable" stress level.

When you're experiencing a tolerable level of stress, you can function, but it's easy to feel overwhelmed during vulnerable or frustrating times. Generally, we can manage ourselves through tolerable stress through reflective practices, coping mechanisms, and positive social and communal relationships.

But if too many stressors pile up and are not balanced out by supportive relationships and a healthy, supportive environment then tolerable stress can become toxic stress. Prolonged toxic stress takes a physical and mental toll, making it difficult to function and causing spirals of anxiety, depression, and self-doubt.

In other words, stress is a fact of life and at low levels and in a positive environment with proper support systems can even have a beneficial effect on wellness and mental health. But unregulated stress combined with a lack of support or a harmful environment can result in toxic stress, with serious mental health ramifications.

Here is a visual representation of what the different levels of stress look like:

POSITIVE
Brief increases in heart rate, mild elevations in stress hormone levels.

TOLERABLE
Serious, temporary stress responses, buffered by supportive relationships.

TOXIC
Prolonged activation of stress response systems in the absence of protective relationships.
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5 https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/toxic-stress/

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Stress & Toxic Stress

Common Issues & Pitfalls

One common issue when it comes to toxic stress and the workplace is that employers often think that the onus falls on the employee to manage the amount of stress that their employees are under. The concept of "self-care," while important, can make it too easy to dismiss the role that employers can play in helping their employees cope with stress.

The fact of the matter is that an individual has very limited power to control or reverse toxic stress on their own. Effective stress management is only possible within a supportive environment with meaningful relationships. If an employee is experiencing toxic stress it means that the system has failed, not that they have failed. And it is on you as an employer to fix the systems at your workplace.

> Effective stress management is only possible within a supportive environment with meaningful relationships.

On the flip side, employers can put a lot of effort into educating their employees on coping mechanisms and establishing workplace support systems while failing to realize how much stress they are putting on their employees, essentially undermining these otherwise good-faith efforts.

Stress & Toxic Stress

Action Items

So what can you do as an employer to prevent and manage employee toxic stress? Here are a few steps that you can take:

- Create a positive, open, and supportive work environment and company culture through proactive communication, community building, values-oriented goal setting, clear and consistent feedback, and more

- Educate yourself and your managers on recognizing the warning signs of toxic stress and offering support

- Set reasonable expectations and workloads

- Strive to provide a positive work-life balance by encouraging employees to prioritize their families, friendships, and personal goals along with workplace priorities

- Normalize and support employee boundary setting (off-work hours, vacation time, weekends, etc)

- Encourage employees to assert their needs and strive to meet those needs

- Respect off-hours time and encourage breaks throughout the workday

- Provide education and resources to empower employees to leverage coping mechanisms: yoga, meditation, mindfulness, breathing exercises, etc.

- Foster meaningful relationships in the workplace and encourage socialization

When an employee is experiencing toxic stress, it will often result in employee burnout: our next key concept.

Employee Burnout

What is it?

Many of us have some conception of employee burnout. A top-performing employee unexpectedly tells you that they are quitting. Or their performance drops off suddenly and without warning. Or a team member seems stressed, overwhelmed, and defensive, hurting performance and team morale.

But just to make sure we are all on the same page, the trusty Mayo Clinic defines employee burnout as:

> *"...a special type of work-related stress — a state of physical or emotional exhaustion that also involves a sense of reduced accomplishment and loss of personal identity.*

> *"Burnout" isn't a medical diagnosis. Some experts think that other conditions, such as depression, are behind burnout. Some research suggests that many people who experience symptoms of job burnout don't believe their jobs are the main cause. Whatever the cause, job burnout can affect your physical and mental health."*[6]

Employee Burnout

Common Issues & Pitfalls

The number one mistake that employers make when it comes to employee burnout is that they do not realize that employee burnout hits their best performers the hardest. After all, to burn out you have to be on fire in the first place – otherwise, it is disengagement, in which an employee has too little to do and is under-invested in their work. The employees who are the most susceptible to burnout are those who are too invested in their work and performance and so they can't turn work "off".

This is also the reason behind the much-feared phenomenon of suddenly losing a top performer to burnout. Unless you are hyper-vigilant you often don't notice burnout until it is too late, because the employee puts all of their energy into their work until they have no energy left.

Employee burnout is also exacerbated by a lack of boundaries between work and personal life. If an employee is constantly working or thinking about work, then they are at a high risk of burnout. Unfortunately, remote work can break down the already fragile border between work and home. So as employees increasingly shift towards a work-from-home model, especially due to the COVID-19 crisis, employers will have to take a more proactive approach to address, preempt, and combat employee burnout.

[6] **https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-depth/burnout/art-20046642**

Employee Burnout

Action Items

The good news is that there are several things you can do to effectively combat employee burnout and improve workplace mental health. And if you follow the steps we outlined earlier to address toxic stress, you will be a long way towards addressing potential employee burnout issues too.

Balance productivty and wellness

First, encourage yourself and your managers to recognize that a productivity mindset must be balanced by employee wellness to retain good staff long term. A top performer at risk of burnout will likely not speak up if they are being overburdened but will instead continue to deliver more and more. That means that leadership and managers have to facilitate open communication so that they know what is actually on an employee's plate and how much stress each employee is under. While you can try to serve as a control-valve and set reasonable expectations, that only means so much if your employees are suffering in silence. Employers need to help their top performance balance performance measures with their own wellness and speak up when the workload is too much.
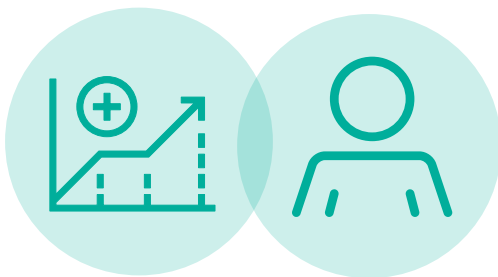
> Encourage yourself and your managers to recognize that a productivity mindset must be balanced by employee wellness to retain good staff long term.

Prioritize off-time

Next, prioritize off-time and encourage your team members to recharge. From breaks during the day and social activities at the end of the week to vacation time, time off can make all the difference when it comes to employee burnout. Because again, the problem is not just the amount of work. It is that "off" switch. If an employee can't turn work off, you will have to do it for them. That includes honoring their off-work hours rather than encouraging them to worry about work 24/7. Respect employee time over weekends and after the workday ends unless there is an emergency. And fight the urge to define every task as an emergency.

Once again, this last step is particularly important if your business is increasingly operating on a remote work model due to COVID-19 or other factors.

The Components of an Overall Approach to Workplace Mental Health

By now, you have the building blocks of knowledge and concrete steps to address each key concept underpinning workplace mental health. But you need to put them together to create a comprehensive approach to employee wellness and mental health. Let's take a look at the four essential components of a comprehensive mental health program:

- Assessing your current culture
- Assessing your benefits program
- Operational policy review
- Engaging your leadership

Assessing Your Current Culture

Before you can design your workplace mental health program, you need to understand what employees and leadership on all levels already know, how they feel, and what they feel they need in terms of support or education.

To benchmark your current culture effectively, you need to assess:

- Baseline knowledge level among your team members
- What/how much do they already know about mental health?
- Do they have a strong working definition of what "workplace mental health" looks like?
- Are they aware of the wellness opportunities available through your benefits program and how to access them?
- Baseline attitudes among your team members
- Where does stigma exist?
- How seriously does the team as a whole take mental health?
- Do they consider themselves (and everyone) to have mental health needs?
- Is there a culture of acceptance and empowerment?
- Is there a culture of denial/minimization?

Later on in this toolkit, we'll provide you with some sample surveys you can use to assess these areas effectively.

Assessing Your Current Culture

Benefits are an essential part of any employee wellness program, and that includes mental wellness. To build an ideal support system you need to understand what you're already doing, how and if it's working, and whether there are any gaps in coverage, accessibility, or employee education for mental health. In fact, federal law requires that mental health coverage through an insurance plan be 'on par' with the physical health benefits under the same plan. Gaps in coverage could include access to all levels of mental health treatment, an inadequate number of treatment providers, or lower limits on mental health-related visits than physical health-related visits. That means that gaps in coverage can be a legal/compliance issue on top of hindering employee wellness efforts.

> Federal law requires that mental health coverage through an insurance plan be 'on par' with the physical health benefits under the same plan.

Your best resources in this work are your HR team's benefits specialist(s) and your employee benefits broker. Your broker should be able to help you understand exactly what mental health care services are included in your employee health insurance offerings and other benefits programs. Robust mental healthcare is a must-have component of a modern benefits package. And your HR team can take a proactive approach in engaging your benefits broker to create a truly comprehensive employee wellness package.

As you review your current approach, it can provide jumping-off points for planning and improvement and make the work much more real. If you start to find there are a lot of holes in your current approach, it's important not to get discouraged. The fact that you're taking this challenge seriously and self-assessing with an eye towards improvement is what's most important.

Later on in this toolkit, we'll provide you with a checklist you can use to figure out if mental healthcare is visible and accessible enough for your team members.

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Policy Review

What do your official HR policies and procedures say about employee mental health? How are you training supervisors to approach employee mental health? As you review policies, check-in with your HR colleagues, other leaders, and a sampling of individual team members to have non-punitive conversations about if existing policies and training materials are effective as written and as executed day to day within your organization.

Engaging Leadership

Your team-level leaders and department supervisors are at the front lines of your employee mental wellness program. If they are on-board with the plan and invested in improving workplace mental health then they will ensure that the program succeeds. But if you fail to get manager buy-in then all of your top-down messaging will likely fail to provide meaningful support for employee mental wellbeing.

Even before you start developing your new approach to employee mental health, you need to get leadership involved in the planning process and invested in employee mental wellness. And you need to provide your managers with education, professional development, and authentic opportunities to explore your new policies and procedures as you implement your new mental health initiatives.

Your benefits broker, HR partner, or expert consultant will be an invaluable asset here. They should be able to provide you with both written materials and virtual/in-person learning opportunities to get your team ready for their new responsibilities, new policies, and new ways of thinking.

Later on in this toolkit, we'll provide you with a roadmap for starting important conversations about mental health and five ways to start a dialogue that supervisors and department leaders can use to help ease themselves and their team members into a new culture with an increased emphasis on mental health.

With those four considerations addressed, you'll be just about ready to launch an impactful, future-facing approach to employee mental health. Now you just need the right partner at your side.

Don't Do it Alone: Enlisting the Help of a Trusted Partner

As we've already laid out, there is an incredible variety of considerations when it comes to crafting a successful approach to employee mental health.

With that in mind, one of the best things any business can do to guarantee success is to work with a trusted partner who focuses on providing great mental health education and supporting your employees in innovative ways. Getting this right requires expertise that you might not have yet, but the right teachers and tools can simplify and accelerate the work while creating something that's built on a track record of success and best practices rather than starting from scratch.

A third-party trainer, consultant, or subject matter expert provides you with a new voice and honest opinion that can help you understand your team, their needs, and your approach to HR in new ways. At the same time, bringing in outside experts means fewer of your internal team's work hours are tied up in planning these policies and driving your mental health initiative, minimizing disruptions to your day-to-day operations.

How to Assess the Strength of a Partner

Before you sign on with a partner to help you design your approach to employee mental health, it's important to be sure you're working with the best possible team! Given the importance of what you're doing, you should be able to ask them some challenging questions and expect clear answers before beginning an official relationship.

Here's a list of questions you can use to help you assess potential partners' general approaches and quality of communication and consultation:

- What is your experience helping companies improve workplace mental health and employee mental wellness?

- What role do you see employers playing in supporting their team members' mental wellness?

- How will you engage stakeholders in our organization to get buy-in for a mental health initiative?

- What does the ideal workplace look like to you? What do ideal employers do to support workplace mental health?

- What educational materials do you provide clients for their employees, managers, and leadership team?

- How do you get leadership and management invested in mental health initiatives?

- How many other companies have you successfully implemented similar mental health programs for in the past?

- Do you have case studies about these customer stories we can review?

- Do you have any current or previous clients we can contact to get their perspective on your work improving their workplace mental wellness?

- How will you provide support or resources that help us implement a mental wellness initiative while minimizing the disruption and workload for our internal HR team? We understand that the initiative will take significant work on our end, but how do you plan to make the project run as smoothly as possible?

- How can you help us conduct mental health and wellness education for employees, managers, and leadership to build buy-in and success for what we're doing?

- How does what you do translate to gains for my team members' wellness and my business?

Even before you start reaching out to potential partners, it's important to build a baseline understanding of what you need to get done, what information/data you currently have at your disposal, and what you don't know yet that you need to figure out. Our next section will provide an outline of what you need to know or be ready to discuss to have a meaningful conversation with a supportive partner or solution provider.

Rolling out your new approach to mental health involves more than passing out brochures before open enrollment; it's an organization-wide exercise that needs to be executed correctly at every level.

Here are a few examples of considerations you need to ensure you've addressed as you go live:

- How will you announce your new commitment to mental health in an authentic way?

- How will you break the stigma of talking about mental health for your team members?

- How will you augment or leverage aspects of your existing culture to bring them into line with your mental health initiative?

- How will you ensure senior leadership, team-level leadership, and individual employees all feel enfranchised by this new approach?

- What kind of training will you provide supervisors and employees to help them understand the value, goals, and power of what you're doing?

- How can you encourage employees to see themselves as a whole-person and care about wellness?

- How can you leverage or improve upon elements of your existing culture to create a thriving, supportive community?

The more specifically and fully you can answer those questions ahead of your program rollout, the better you'll be able to serve employees and strengthen overall organizational culture through employee mental health awareness and support.

And it is important to remember that your commitment to supporting workplace mental health and employee mental wellness has to be ongoing and evolving. Anything you do now is great but will have limited long-term impact if you do not follow up on it and continue to adapt your workplace to foster employee mental health. It will take conscious effort to keep mental health a priority and stop your workplace from backsliding and becoming less conducive to mental health.

Continue to reevaluate your workplace and your efforts to support employee mental health. Prove that your dedication is authentic by maintaining it.

The Ultimate Workplace Mental Health Toolkit

The Tools

TOOL #1
Employee Survey to Assess Your Team's Knowledge & Feelings About Mental Health

Purpose

This survey is designed to help you assess your employees' current knowledge, understanding, and feelings about key workplace mental health issues. This survey can be used independently or in conjunction with Tool #2 to assess your organization's current approach to mental healthcare and employee perceptions of current support services offered.

Using This Tool

You can upload this quiz to a service like SurveyMonkey or use a survey tool that's built into your ERP or employee portal, if possible. The survey should be anonymous and reinforce to your team members that honesty is crucial to ensure the most accurate data and the best results.

The Questions

What general level of leadership/responsibility do you hold at the company? (entry-level, supervisor, manager, department head, etc)

_____

1. Do you believe physical health and mental health are equally important?
    a. YES
    b. NO
    c. I DON'T KNOW

HOW SO?_____

2. Do you believe the majority of people experience challenges with their mental health at some point in their lives (distress or excess stress, grief, and/or symptoms of a diagnosed or undiagnosed mental health condition)?
    a. YES
    b. NO
    c. I DON'T KNOW

HOW SO?_____

3. Do you believe that someone's experiences at home can impact their mental health and ability to do the best possible work?
    a. YES
    b. NO
    c. I DON'T KNOW

HOW SO?_____

4. Do you believe stress and other experiences from work can affect your (or other employees') mental health and ability to fully engage at home?
    a. YES
    b. NO
    c. I DON'T KNOW

HOW SO?_____

5. Are you comfortable with the idea of using the healthcare benefits you receive as an employee here to seek care or support for mental health needs?
    a. YES
    b. NO
    c. I DON'T KNOW

HOW SO?_____

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The Questions (continued)

6. Would you think less of a colleague who disclosed that they were experiencing mental health challenges or had experienced them in the past?
- **a.** YES
- **b.** NO
- **c.** I DON'T KNOW

HOW SO?_____

7. Do you believe colleagues would think less of you if you disclosed that you are experiencing mental health challenges or had experienced them in the past?
- **a.** YES
- **b.** NO
- **c.** I DON'T KNOW

HOW SO?_____

8. Do you believe someone who sought treatment for a mental health condition or challenge while employed at this company would be risking their opportunities for advancement here?
- **a.** YES
- **b.** NO
- **c.** I DON'T KNOW

HOW SO?_____

9. Do you think supervisors, managers, or team leaders here stigmatize (view negatively due to perceived weakness or negative characteristic) team members in a way that could be hurtful to people with mental health challenges?
- **a.** YES
- **b.** NO
- **c.** I DON'T KNOW

HOW SO?_____

10. Do you think team members stigmatize peers or leadership in a way that could be hurtful to people currently experiencing mental health challenges or living with a mental health condition?
- **a.** YES
- **b.** NO
- **c.** I DON'T KNOW

HOW SO?_____

The Questions (continued)

11. In general, do you believe you are able to achieve a proper work-life balance in your current role?

    a. YES

    b. NO

    c. I DON'T KNOW

HOW SO?_____

12. If you were experiencing what felt like a significant work-life imbalance, would you feel comfortable talking to your team leader or direct supervisor about it?

    a. YES

    b. NO

    c. I DON'T KNOW

HOW SO?_____

13. Do you believe leadership here cares about team members' work-life balance?

    a. YES

    b. NO

    c. I DON'T KNOW

HOW SO?_____

14. Do you believe our current employee culture promotes a healthy work-life balance?

    a. YES

    b. NO

    c. I DON'T KNOW

HOW SO?_____

15. If you were experiencing a work-life imbalance, do you believe you have the ability to speak out and correct the imbalance?

    a. YES

    b. NO

    c. I DON'T KNOW

HOW SO?_____

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The Questions (continued)

16. Do you think it would improve overall stress levels, work-life balance, and employee mental health if we designated time for people to talk and learn more about these issues?
    a. YES
    b. NO
    c. I DON'T KNOW

HOW SO?_____

17. Do you think it would improve overall stress levels, work-life balance, and employee mental health if we provided more education about mental health and whole-person wellness for team members at all levels of our organization?
    a. YES
    b. NO
    c. I DON'T KNOW

HOW SO?_____

18. Do you think it would improve overall stress levels, work-life balance, and employee mental health if we did a refresher on mental health resources available through our employee benefits?
    a. YES
    b. NO
    c. I DON'T KNOW

HOW SO?_____

19. Do you think it would improve overall stress levels, work-life balance, and employee mental health if we started sharing best practices for self-care and mental health maintenance in a formalized way?
    a. YES
    b. NO
    c. I DON'T KNOW

HOW SO?_____

20. Do you think it would improve overall stress levels, work-life balance, and employee mental health if we started having more frequent supervisor-employee check-ins? What if those supervisors had received mental health-specific training?
    a. YES
    b. NO
    c. I DON'T KNOW

HOW SO?_____

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Scoring Your Survey

Even though your assessment quiz has a wide range of questions, all of them have the same three answer choices, which makes calculating and analyzing your data straightforward. You can leverage the following system:

For questions 1-5

- Think of each **"YES"** response as "+1" points

- Think of each **"NO"** response as "-1" point

- Think of each **"I DON'T KNOW"** response as "-1" points

- These questions measure your team members' collective understanding of basic ideas about mental health. Ideally, the answers to all these questions in a healthy, high-functioning organization should be "Yes"
  - If you scored well here, your team has a modern, positive view of total wellness and is ready to engage with a great employer-sponsored mental wellness program.
  - If you scored poorly here, your team requires general education and professional development to help them gain a richer understanding of what mental health really is and why it's important.

For questions 6-10

- Think of each **"NO"** response as "+1" points

- Think of each "**YES**" response as "-1" point

- Think of each **"I DON'T KNOW"** response as "-1" points

- These questions measure your team members' feelings about mental health stigma in the workplace. Ideally, the answer to all these questions should be "No."
  - If you scored well here, your employees generally accept that mental health should not be stigmatized and your workplace is usually free of overt stigma. And you can use the level of leadership & responsibility answer to see stigmas and attitudes regarding mental health differ between levels of your organization.
  - If you scored poorly here, you should think seriously about professional development and education, starting with your leadership team and supervisors and eventually encompassing your entire team. You may also want to review your HR policies and onboarding procedures to ensure these topics are explicitly addressed.

Scoring Your Survey (continued)

For questions 11-15

- Think of each **"YES"** response as "+1" points

- Think of each **"NO"** response as "-1" point

- Think of each **"I DON'T KNOW"** response as "-1" points

- These questions measure your team members' general sense of work-life balance and feelings about balance within your organization and culture. Ideally, the answer to all these questions should be "Yes."
  - If you scored well here, your team feels generally supported in terms of work-life balance.
  - If you scored poorly here, you need to take some time to think about specific ways your new approach to total employee wellness and mental health can provide better balance for team members.

For questions 16-20

- These questions aren't designed to be "scored;" they're supposed to help you figure out what base-level interventions your team members believe might be valuable to your mental wellness initiative.
  - Think about which suggestions got the most "YES" votes.
  - A high percentage of "I DON'T KNOW" votes could also represent opportunities that people have never thought of – which can often be some of the greatest areas of opportunity.

Let's think about what TOTAL SCORES tell us…

- If you're averaging **12-15** points per quiz, your team has a strong, modern baseline understanding of workplace mental health issues, feels they work in a healthy environment, and is open-minded about positive change.

- If you're averaging **6-11** points per quiz, focus in and see which sections you received the most negative answers in. If there's one consistent area where it seems like you're not doing well enough or have gaps that need to be shored up, make those focus areas for planning.

- If you're averaging **0-5** points per quiz, you've got some work to do to prepare your team for your mental health push, but at least you have some successes you can build upon. Study the sections or questions where you scored the highest and think about how you can use those wins as jumping-off points to strengthen your overall approach.

- If you're averaging **less than zero** points per quiz, it's important not to get discouraged because at least you've created a roadmap for action areas moving forward. Reflect on the work ahead, take pride in your strengths, and roll up your sleeves to make positive changes moving forward.

TOOL #2
Employee Quiz to Assess the Current State of Mental Healthcare Accessibility in Your Organization

Purpose

This survey can be used independently or in conjunction with Tool #1 to assess your organization's current approach to mental healthcare and employee perceptions of current services offered. These results will help you understand your employees' awareness of/comfort level with your current approach.

This quiz is based on several leading mental health assessment quizzes, including:

- https://www.workplacementalhealthassessment.com/
- https://www.mhanational.org/sites/default/files/Mind%20the%20Workplace%20-%20MHA%20Workplace%20Health%20Survey%202017%20FINAL.PDF
- https://thriveglobal.com/stories/11-questions-to-evaluate-mental-wellness-in-the-workplace/
- https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/NQDCQYP

Using This Tool

You can upload this quiz to a service like SurveyMonkey or use a survey tool that's built into your ERP or employee portal, if possible. The survey should be anonymous and reinforce to your team members that honesty is crucial to ensure the most accurate data and the best results.

The Questions

1. When you were hired, were you made aware of mental health resources available as part of your employee benefits?
- **a.** YES
- **b.** NO
- **c.** I DON'T KNOW

HOW SO?_____

2. Does your organization provide training to help employees build awareness of and manage their own mental health?
- **a.** YES
- **b.** NO
- **c.** I DON'T KNOW

HOW SO?_____

3. Do managers, supervisors, and team leaders within your organization check in with employees regularly about mental health?
- **a.** YES
- **b.** NO
- **c.** I DON'T KNOW

HOW SO?_____

4. Does your employer treat physical and mental health needs the same?
- **a.** YES
- **b.** NO
- **c.** I DON'T KNOW

HOW SO?_____

5. Is the mental health of employees a priority for this organization as a whole?
- **a.** YES
- **b.** NO
- **c.** I DON'T KNOW

HOW SO?_____

6. Is openness about mental health part of the employee culture at your job?
- **a.** YES
- **b.** NO
- **c.** I DON'T KNOW

HOW SO?_____

The Questions (continued)

7. Does your employer have a formalized system for connecting employees who are looking to talk about workplace mental health issues?
    a. YES
    b. NO
    c. I DON'T KNOW

HOW SO?_____

8. Does your employer provide yearly reminders of mental health benefits during the open enrollment window?
    a. YES
    b. NO
    c. I DON'T KNOW

HOW SO?_____

9. Is the phrase "mental health" stigma- and judgment-free at your workplace?
    a. YES
    b. NO
    c. I DON'T KNOW

HOW SO?_____

10. Have managers, supervisors, and team leaders within your organization been trained specifically about mental health needs facing their team members?
    a. YES
    b. NO
    c. I DON'T KNOW

HOW SO?_____

11. Does your employer offer support to employees experiencing mental health challenges through an Employee Assistance Program (EAP)?
    a. YES
    b. NO
    c. I DON'T KNOW

HOW SO?_____

12. Has your employer provided you with stress management strategies and daily practices to support mental health (meditation, yoga, etc.)?
    a. YES
    b. NO
    c. I DON'T KNOW

HOW SO?_____

The Questions (continued)

13. If you were experiencing a mental health challenge at work, would you feel comfortable telling a close colleague about it?

    a. YES

    b. NO

    c. I DON'T KNOW

HOW SO?_____

14. If you were experiencing a mental health challenge at work, would you feel comfortable telling your manager/supervisor about it?

    a. YES

    b. NO

    c. I DON'T KNOW

HOW SO?_____

15. If you were experiencing a mental health challenge at work, would you feel comfortable talking to an HR representative about it?

    a. YES

    b. NO

    c. I DON'T KNOW

HOW SO?_____

16. If you went looking for mental healthcare resources available through your employer right now, would they be easy to find?

    a. YES

    b. NO

    c. I DON'T KNOW

HOW SO?_____

17. In a scenario where you'd be up for a promotion in the near future, would you feel comfortable talking honestly about your own mental health?

    a. YES

    b. NO

    c. I DON'T KNOW

HOW SO?_____

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The Questions (continued)

18. Does your employer use regular employee surveys or check-ins to gauge mental health company-wide?

    a. YES

    b. NO

    c. I DON'T KNOW

HOW SO?_____

19. Do you trust your employer to address, manage, and support your mental healthcare needs in a respectful, confidential, professional way?

    a. YES

    b. NO

    c. I DON'T KNOW

HOW SO?_____

20. Do you believe senior leadership will analyze the results of this survey in good faith and adjust their approach to mental health and benefits accordingly?

    a. YES

    b. NO

    c. I DON'T KNOW

HOW SO?_____

Scoring Your Survey

Assessing Your Overall Success

Even though your assessment quiz has a wide range of questions, all of them have the same three answer choices, which makes calculating and analyzing your data straightforward.

For each question on each survey:

- Think of each **"YES"** response as "+1" points
- Think of each **"NO"** response as "-1" point
- Think of each **"I DON'T KNOW"** response as "-1" points

Let's think about what approximate scores tell us…

- If you're averaging **15-20** points per quiz, you're doing a terrific job demonstrating your commitment to workplace mental health, and your employees know it. Review your most common "I don't know" responses and think of ways you can make your approach even better.

- If you're averaging **10-15** points per quiz, it's crucial to go back and think about ways you can clarify those most common "I don't know" questions. You probably have a philosophical commitment to employee mental health assistance, but you're either struggling to walk the walk or just not communicating in a way that makes things as accessible as they should be.

- If you're averaging **5-10** points per quiz, your mental health offerings are either out-of-alignment with employee needs or you're doing a poor job communicating your true, authentic commitment to mental health and connecting employees with resources. If you're just getting started, don't get scared; but if you're seeing these scores and think you're doing a great job, it should indicate misalignment.

- If you're averaging **0-5** points per quiz, you need to take a look at your approach to mental health benefits. You need to get serious about showing a commitment to your employees, communicating, and creating pathways to mental healthcare accessibility. As your scores get closer to zero, it's important to understand that you're likely not providing the support your team needs.

- If you're averaging **less than zero** points per quiz, there are significant gaps in your philosophical commitment to employee mental health, your employee mental health benefits, your overall employee benefits communication strategy, and perhaps all of the above.

Scoring Your Survey

Getting Granular

It's also useful to pool your data and see how your employees ranked you on a question-by-question basis. Ask yourself:

- What are our major successes?
  - **Where did we see "YES" across the board?**
  - **What thematic connections can we see between those successes?**
  - **Which initiatives, communication strategies, etc. are working?**

- How can we build on these successes?

- How can we cross-apply these strategies to new areas?

- Where are our gaps in employee education and communication?
  - **Where did we see "I DON'T KNOW" across the board?**
  - **What are the "correct" answers to those questions?**

- Why didn't employees know?

- How have we attempted to package/present that information in the past?

- How can we communicate this information in a new authentic, engaging way that sticks in people's heads?

- What does our team perceive as our organizational shortcomings in this area?
  - **Where did we consistently see "NO" across the board?**

- Were those NO's "correct?"

- If the answer is actually "YES," why didn't employees know or feel that answer was authentic to their experience?
  - **What are the biggest areas of need we have to address?**

- Which NO's are most frustrating, disturbing, or surprising to you?

- Which NO's show you're not living up to your culture/goals as an employer brand?
  - How can we show we authentically care about employee mental health and healthcare accessibility in a way our employees will hear?

TOOL #3
Mental Health Visibility & Accessibility Checklist

Purpose

This checklist is designed to help HR & business professionals determine at a glance if they are providing enough visibility and accessibility for employee mental health resources.

Using This Tool

You can use this checklist independently as a self-assessment, but it's most powerful when combined with the results of Tool #1 and Tool #2. Another useful way to use this tool to identify gaps in your program in a powerful way for leadership is to have managers go through the checklist, answering questions based on their assumptions, and then compare those results to the overall workforce data you've gathered. The disconnects tell a compelling story about areas for improvement.

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The Checklist

Do you as an organization:

- Maintain a visible, ongoing discussion of the need for mental healthcare in a stigma-free way?
  - Hold frequent and normalized check-ins where personal wellness is a normal, de-stigmatized topic?
  - Make sure that every team member knows about the mental health resources available?
  - Talk about mental healthcare in a deficit-oriented way (only discussing mental health challenges) or do you talk about opportunities to cultivate positive mental health?
  - Conduct ongoing initiatives and training related to mental health and mental wellness

- Ensure all employees know where to find mental health resources they can use to get help?

- Provide an Employee Assistance Program to help address mental healthcare?

- Offer plans that provide equal coverage for mental healthcare as they do for physical healthcare?
  - Look specifically at mental healthcare copays and deductibles, number of sessions covered, required preauthorizations for services or medications

- Provide a broad spectrum and adequate number of outpatient services, providers, and care settings to address potential needs you've identified and provide maximum accessibility for current and future issues? Assess this at least annually.

- Maximize accessibility for medications by making them affordable and easy to get?

- Have an active employee wellness program that makes supporting mental health one of its pillars?

- Train your managers and supervisors in mental wellness leadership, empathetic management, communication, and conflict resolution strategies that address a wide variety of situations and needs?

- Have established guidelines and toolkits for helping managers plan and provide reasonable accommodations for employees with healthcare needs?

- Offer a clear, non-punitive route to short-term disability for those who need it due to mental health?

- Provide a clear, welcoming, non-punitive path back to the workplace for employees returning from mental health-related leave?

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TOOL #4
Regulatory Quick Reference for Mental Health Requirements

Purpose

This quick reference guide is designed to inform and remind you of key regulatory considerations related to mental health.

Using This Tool

As you review your policies and procedures, this reference guide can help you determine if you're meeting current compliance targets. As your program continues to grow and evolve, you can always refer back to this guide to maintain a strong understanding of your core responsibilities.

The Reference Guide

EEOC Guidance

This quick reference guide is designed to inform and remind you of key regulatory considerations related to mental health.

The Reference Guide

EEOC Guidance

- You **cannot** fire an employee because they have a mental health condition.
- Your employees are within their rights to keep their mental health conditions private unless they ask for accommodations.
- You can ask new employees if they have mental health needs, **but only if you ask every new employee as part of your regular new employee questionnaire.**
- You must make reasonable accommodations for employees with mental health needs who ask for them, just like you do for employees with physical disabilities (both short-term and long-term).
- If an employee's mental health issue prevents them from doing their job, even with accommodations, you should transition them toward medical leave (short term) or reassign them to a role they can complete.
- You cannot allow any employee harassment based on mental health conditions and must take action based on your HR policies and procedures as quickly as any harassment is reported
- If an employee feels their rights have been violated, they have 180 days to file a claim with the EEOC.

The Reference Guide

ADA Guidance

- The ADA treats physical and mental disabilities **exactly the same**.
- Applicants and employees with mental health needs have **two** key rights under the ADA:
  - The right to **privacy** (to only disclose their condition and discuss symptoms on their terms when requesting an accommodation)
  - The right to **accommodations** that will not cause undue strain for the employer
- Employees and applicants are **not** "lying" by not disclosing their diagnosis/treatment; they're within their rights and should not be punished.
- A job offer can only be rescinded from an applicant with mental health needs if a pre-employment physical determines the applicant's disability **can't be accommodated** or poses a **threat to safety**.
- You **can** ask for documentation when an employee asks for an accommodation, but that is private healthcare information that must be kept absolutely confidential.
- As an employer, you have more latitude to take immediate/decisive action if you feel **employee/workplace safety** is in question, but your concerns should be documented.

Purpose

This worksheet is designed to help managers and their team members have better, more productive conversations. This tool can also help managers determine if their team members may be experiencing burnout or toxic stress, so these situations can be addressed. Be clear about your intentions when conducting these check-ins: make it clear that you are not intending to use these surveys in a punitive way and inform employees of how and if you are intending to store or record their answers.

The Worksheet

"How are you feeling today?"

O Good

O Great

O Frustrated

O Overwhelmed

O Angry

O Demotivated

O Anxious

O Bummed out

O Worn out

O Other: _____

"What are you working on right now?"

_____

"What do you feel like we need to talk about?"

O Motivation

O Anxiety

O Trouble focusing

O Team function

O Feeling overwhelmed

O Feeling under-supported

O Feel like I'm spiraling

O Struggling with work-life balance

O Really having trouble working in light of_____

"How do you feel I can support you?"

O Let's just have a chat

O Can we try to lighten or modify this work in light of my current situation?

O Can you step in or referee to help me manage this problem?

O I need you to connect me with some resources to get through this time.

O I need to step away and take some leave.

O I don't know – that's the problem!

Behavioral Health:
A state of mental and emotional wellbeing and choices or actions that affect that wellbeing.

Behavioral Healthcare:
An umbrella term that covers the assessment and treatment of mental and/or addictive disorders.

Bias:
Prejudice in favor of or against an individual or group due to a certain characteristic. This can include feelings towards an individual due to perceived mental wellness or known mental disorders.

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM):
The standard guide used by behavioral health professionals to classify mental health conditions.

Discrimination:
Prejudicial treatment of different categories of people or of an individual due to their perceived category. Often caused by bias, stigma, or prejudice.

Illness Self Management:
Individual education on symptoms and factors that exacerbate or reduce symptoms to manage risk factors and remediate symptoms without professional intervention.

Mental Health:
A state of mental, emotional, and behavioral wellbeing. Mental health is not mutually exclusive with a mental health disorder or mental illness.

Mental Health Challenge/Issue:
A broad term encompassing mental distress, mental suffering, or a mental disorder. It has no clinical meaning.

Mental Health Disorder (also Mental Disorder):
A disturbance of brain function as categorized by the DSM.

Mental Illness:
A health condition that affects thinking, mood, or behavior and is associated with distress or impaired functioning.

Metacognition:
Reflection on and awareness of one's thoughts and thought processes. It can be a useful part of managing the symptoms of a mental illness or disorder as well as promoting mental health.

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Mental Health Glossary (continued)

Recovery:
A process of change through which individuals improve their health and wellness, live a self-directed life, and strive to reach their full potential.

Remission:
When an individual's symptoms decrease or return to their normal state after an active phase of a disorder.

Risk Factor:
Something that increases a person's chance of getting a disorder. These can include genetics, relationships, environment, and more.

Self-care:
The practice of taking action to preserve or improve one's own health, wellbeing, and happiness, especially during times of stress.

Serious Mental Illness (SMI):
A mental disorder that interferes with some area of social functioning.

Severe Mental Illness (SMI):
A term that applies to more seriously affected individuals and illnesses, including schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or severe depression, anxiety disorder, or obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Stress:
The body's reaction when outside forces disrupt homeostasis. Psychological stress is the mind's reaction to a perceived threat, real or imagined, and is necessary to adapt. But a buildup of stress and a lack of support and/or coping mechanisms can result in toxic stress that can harm mental health.

Stressor:
Something that causes strain, tension, or stress.

Substance Abuse and Addiction:
An unhealthy pattern of drug, alcohol, or other chemical use that may lead to relationship, education, work, mental and/or physical problems.

Trigger:
External events or circumstances that cause uncomfortable emotional or psychiatric symptoms.

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"Toxic Stress." Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, www.developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/toxic-stress/.

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NAMI Chicago is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization that provides hope and improves the quality of life for those whose lives are affected by mental health conditions.

NAMI Chicago is one of the nation's largest, most active affiliates of the National Alliance on Mental Illness. We promote community wellness, break down barriers to mental health care and provide support and expertise for families, professionals and individuals in Chicago and beyond.

NAMI Chicago is an industry leader on wellness in the workplace. We offer professional development opportunities for companies from all sizes and sectors in Chicago that are interested in increasing their knowledge of mental health. This includes in-person trainings, webinars, and policy consulting, each customized to meet the company's needs. For more information, visit this page or email info@namichicago.org.

NAMI Chicago also operates a free Helpline seven days a week, where live mental health counselors provide a listening ear and connection to vetted social service referrals. This line can be reached at **833-NAMI-CHI (833-626-4244**) from 9am-8pm on weekdays and 9am-5pm on weekends.