



5 Steps Employers Can Take to Ensure Mental Health and Wellbeing in the Workplace

Insights

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It is a welcome development that employers are getting behind their employees to provide mental health support during this unprecedented time – because people absolutely need the assistance. However, employee mental health has been an issue in the workplace long before COVID-19, and will continue to be an issue once the pandemic is behind us. The current public health crisis has only exasperated the issue of employee mental health, leaving employers with no choice but to address this separate, but equally concerning, pandemic. In fact, 41% of 2,000 employees surveyed say that their mental health has declined since the COVID-19 outbreak started.

Mental Struggles Impact the Workplace

Pre-pandemic numbers show that approximately 1 in 5 Americans experience mental illness in a given year on any given day. Think of five people you work with and imagine that, at any given time, one of those individuals is working under the umbrella of a mental illness. This likely does not include those that are dealing with life-changing events who do not even identify they are suffering from mental health issues: those going through a divorce, a personal financial strain, struggling to care for elderly parents or sick children, supporting a loved one with a drug or alcohol use issue, or trying to handle the death of a loved one. In fact, some studies suggest that there is a median 11-year delay between the onset of depression and when a person actually seeks help.

Putting the above pieces of information together with the fact that employees spend a majority of their day at work and/or working remotely means that these issues can affect your workplace. Employees do not drop their personal issues at the proverbial door every morning. They bring to work all the stress of their lives. This, in and of itself, causes issues with retention, productivity, creativity, absenteeism, and presenteeism (the ability to concentrate or achieve outcomes).

Now add in the last piece of the puzzle — the work environment. It can either foster mental health and wellbeing or it can make it fester. In a recent post-pandemic survey, 76% of employees believe their company should be doing more to protect the mental health of their workforce.

A 5-Step Plan For Employers

You can respond to this outcry by making the workplace a psychologically safe place for your employees, but you need to do something more than provide an EAP and offer leaves of absence

(although those are absolute necessities). The time to act is now, but it can be difficult to know where to begin. Below are five concrete action steps that you can take to start working towards a workplace that supports employee mental health and illness.

1. **Create an employee mental health workplace safety plan.** There is no right or wrong employee mental health safety workplace plan. The key to this plan is input from employees and support from all levels of the organization. The input can be gathered through surveys, roundtable discussions, or one-on-one meetings. The way you collect employee feedback should be tailored to your employees.
2. **Include employee mental health as a part of your workplace health and safety initiative.** You can create a subcommittee on employee mental health and safety in the workplace. This subcommittee can review and provide suggestions on policies, education, and training on employee mental health and how to make the workplace a psychologically safe place.
3. **Prepare a workplace mental health safety policy.** The policy can define mental health and illness, identify causes of mental health issues in the workplace, explain how the company will raise mental health awareness, and encourage employees to speak up.
4. **Emphasize the importance of mental health in the workplace.** One of the biggest obstacles an organization will have to overcome is the stigma associated with mental illness, stress, and related issues. Employees may be hesitant to come forward to discuss what stressors in their personal or work life are impacting their work for fear they will be viewed as unable to perform their job. This is heightened given the current climate of layoffs, furloughs, and high unemployment. Keep in mind that communication regarding mental health and illness is most effective when it comes from company leadership.
5. **Educate and train your managers** on ways they can help.
 - They should know how to have discussions with employees who approach them with mental health concerns or issues. For example, something as simple as the manager saying to the employee “thank you for sharing this with me” can go a long way. Active listening and empathy are elements that should be highlighted.
 - They should be familiar with the resources you have available for your employees, including referral to the EAP, HR, and outside sources.
 - They should know how to spot workplace hazards such as harassment and bullying – including cyberbullying. Training should also include a review of all policies that are relevant to employee mental health.
 - They should also understand that it is not their job to diagnose a potential mental health issue nor proactively raise the possibility that an employee struggling in some way might have a mental health problem. Doing so could backfire in a number of ways, including opening up the company to legal liability.

Conclusion

Employers are not responsible for providing mental health counseling or fixing an employee's issues, just as they are not responsible for fixing an employee's broken leg. However, if an employee broke their leg at work, an employer would transport them to the hospital and provide support along the way. Similarly, employers should be prepared to aid employees in getting the mental health resources they need and supporting employees along the way. Importantly, this should all be done in compliance with current laws and in consultation with your attorney. If you are interested in learning more about an employee mental health workplace safety initiative and policies, please contact your Fisher Phillips attorney.

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