

Your employees may be struggling: Here are 10 ways to foster mental health in the workplace



If you have employees, you probably have employees who struggle with their mental health. Few workplaces are likely untouched when about 1 in 5 Americans have a mental illness—and that statistic is from *before* the pandemic.¹

The impact is staggering and tragic, and business leaders witness the human consequences every day. When you make a purposeful commitment to the emotional wellness of your staff, you'll see positive results for employees, their families, workplace culture and the bottom line, too. (Depression alone is responsible for 200 million lost workdays a year, costing employers \$17 billion to \$44 billion.²)

Take these steps to help support your employees and bolster their mental health.

1. Embrace flexibility.

Throughout the pandemic, remote work, flex time, and taking care of kids and pets during work hours have been normalized—and productivity hasn't suffered.³ These accommodations can help employees feel more in control, which can reduce stress.

2. Prioritize workloads.

When someone is going through a difficult time, a heavy workload can be debilitating. Communicate clearly with employees about what parts of their jobs are most important and what can wait.

3. Talk openly and often about mental health.

Mental health struggles are too often stigmatized, especially in the workplace. When leaders share their own stories, it sends a message to the entire team that mental illness isn't something to be ashamed of. When one major accounting firm launched a mental health awareness program that featured a leader talking about her postpartum depression, calls to the firm's counseling line went up by nearly a third.⁴

4. Provide many access points to mental health services.

Mental health coverage is critical, but that shouldn't be the only avenue for people to get help. Not everyone is ready or able to see a therapist in person; that's where telehealth appointments and digital mental health platforms can be useful. Some employees might prefer using a website or app with resources to support emotional well-being; others



might call a confidential employee assistance hotline. Larger companies may be able to offer on-site therapy. Aflac offers access to MeMD telepsychiatry and teletherapy services, which includes consultations with licensed behavioral specialists for nonemergency concerns.⁵

5. Spread the word about your EAP and make the terms more generous if possible.

Employee assistance programs often go unused because employees don't know about them or don't understand how they work.⁶ Make sure your staffers are aware of EAP benefits and enhance them if you can by adding more free appointments or extending benefits to dependents, for example.

6. Advocate for your employees with your insurer.

Less than half of people with mental health problems received treatment in 2019.⁷ Two of the biggest barriers to obtaining treatment are availability and cost.⁸ Only about 1 in 5 employers offering health benefits said they were very satisfied with the availability of mental health providers in their networks, according to a Kaiser Family Foundation survey.⁹ Businesses can stress to insurance companies that mental health coverage and access is important. It might not change anything in the short term, but the more that businesses make their needs known, the more insurance carriers can respond to those needs.

7. Train managers to spot trouble.

If an employee's performance changes in a negative way, don't assume he or she must lack initiative or has checked out. Consider that a mental health issue could be at play, especially if the person's behavior is out of character. Train managers to spot [symptoms of depression and anxiety](#), as well as [warning signs of suicide](#).

8. Don't forget financial health.

People dealing with financial fallout from COVID-19 are experiencing more psychological distress, according to the Pew Research Center.¹⁰ Anything you can do to help reduce employees' financial concerns — more pay, more benefits, more education — is going to be a positive for their mental health. Supplemental insurance coverage can help your staff members with unexpected health care costs not covered by health insurance.

9. Be upfront.

In the wake of the pandemic, employers are reorganizing and implementing other structural changes. Speaking openly and directly about personnel changes can help reduce catastrophic thinking among the workforces.



10. Respect boundaries.

If your workplace culture is that emails sent after hours must be responded to immediately, that's going to increase stress and burnout. Some people like to work at odd hours; others believe evenings are sacred. Encourage your employees to share their preferences about when they work and how they like to be contacted, then encourage everyone to respect them—and model both of those behaviors yourself.

Want to learn how Aflac can help support your workforce's mental health? Contact your Aflac benefits advisor or [visit Aflac.com/business](https://www.aflac.com/business).

¹ National Institute of Mental Health. "Mental Illness." Last updated January 2022. [Accessed 4.5.2022](#).

² Forbes. "Mental Health In The Workplace: The High Cost Of Depression." Published 1.20.2021. [Accessed 4.20.2022](#).

³ Society for Human Resource Management. "Study Finds Productivity Not Deterred by Shift to Remote Work." Published 9.16.2020. [Accessed 4.5.2022](#).

⁴ Forbes. "Mental Health in the Workplace: Leading in the COVID-19 Context." Published 3.20.2020. [Accessed 4.5.2022](#).

⁵ Aflac. "Behavioral Health Services—A Health Benefit for the Modern World." Flyers Z191214R2. Last updated June 2021.

⁶ CBIZ. 2020 Employee Benchmark Benefits Report. "5 Ways to Increase Utilization of Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP)." [Accessed 4.19.2022](#).

⁷ National Alliance on Mental Illness. "Mental Health by the Numbers." Last updated February 2022. [Accessed 4.5.2022](#).

⁸ McKinsey & Company. "Mental Health in the Workplace: The Coming Revolution." Published 12.8.2020. [Accessed 4.5.2022](#).

⁹ Kaiser Family Foundation. "2020 Employer Health Benefits Survey." Published 10.8.2020. [Accessed 4.5.2022](#).

¹⁰ Pew Research Center. "People Financially Affected by COVID-19 Outbreak Are Experiencing More Psychological Distress Than Others." Published 3.30.2020. [Accessed 4.5.2022](#).

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