EAP
8 Simple Ways to Create a Mentally Healthier Workplace

EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE OF THE PACIFIC, LLC

Many business leaders assume an employee's mental health is none of their business. But the way employees think, feel, and behave impacts everything from productivity and communication to their ability to maintain safety in the workplace.

Helping employees improve their mental health could be one of the most important steps an employer can take to improve an individual's well-being, as well as the health of the entire organization.

The cost of mental illness

In a world where one in five Americans has a diagnosable mental illness, it's important for business leaders to take action.

Mental illness and substance abuse issues cost employers between $79 and $105 billion each year, according to the Center for Prevention and Health. Absenteeism, reduced productivity, and increased health care costs are just a few of the ways mental health issues cost employers money.

Clearly, a healthy workplace won't prevent or reduce all mental health problems. Genetics, life experience, and past trauma all play a role in the development of mental illness. But, employers can take steps to help employees build mental strength so they can stay as healthy as possible.

Here are several strategies business leaders can use to create a mentally healthy workplace:

1. Promote a work/life balance.

Praising employees who work late and arrive early, or expecting them to work from home in the evenings hurts your company in the long run. Without a healthy work/life balance, productivity is likely to decline, and employees are more likely to burn out.

Insist employees take regular vacations where they are able to unplug from the office. Don't expect everyone to answer email around the clock. Encourage everyone to develop a rich, full life outside of the office. People who engage in hobbies, spend time with loved ones, and take time to care for themselves make better employees.

2. Discuss mental health in the workplace.

Don't be afraid to bring up issues related to stress, depression, anxiety, or other mental illness. Make it clear everyone struggles to stay mentally healthy sometimes. Educate managers about the signs of mental health problems and train them to respond appropriately. A caring conversation between a supervisor and an employee could be instrumental in encouraging an individual to get help.

3. Offer free screening tools.

Most mental health issues are left untreated because employees don't recognize the signs and symptoms. They may pass off their issues as "stress" or they may try to convince themselves their problems will go away on their own.

Mental Health American offers free screening tools that can help employees anonymously assess their risk factors. Employees who recognize they're at risk for certain issues, like depression or anxiety, are more likely to seek treatment.

4. Talk about EAP benefits often.

Offering an EAP benefit that allows employees to access a handful of therapy sessions for free is important. But, many companies don't spend enough time reminding employees that they should access these services. Remind your employees to use the EAP and remind them of their benefits often. Whether an employee is experiencing marital issues or insomnia, EAPs can help employees deal with the issues that detract from their performance. But they need reassurance that it's free of charge and completely confidential.

5. Make wellness a priority.

Exercise, healthy eating, and participation in leisure activities are a few simple ways to build mental strength and improve mental health. So make it a priority to help people develop good habits. Whether you offer incentives to employees who participate in wellness programs, or you offer free gym memberships, make wellness a top priority for your organization.

6. Provide in-service events.

Provide employees with in-service trainings on self-care, stress management, and resilience. Hiring a therapist to provide half-day workshops a few times a year could go a long way toward preventing problems and emphasizing the importance of building healthy strategies into your daily life. These in-service trainings could save the company money in the long-term while also helping employees reach their greatest potential.

7. Support employees' efforts to get help.

While most employees don't hesitate to take time off to go to the dentist, many of them are likely to be shy about addressing their mental health needs. Make it clear you support employees' efforts to take care of their minds in the same way you want them to take care of their bodies. Whether that means allowing an employee to take a mental health day or offering a flexible work schedule so an individual can attend therapy appointments, make it clear you won't penalize anyone for taking care of their mental health.

8. Reduce the stigma.

Talking about stress management, self-care, and mental health in meetings and in email communications can reduce the stigma associated with mental illness. When employees trust you won't call them "crazy" for having a panic attack or fire them when they're struggling with depression, they'll be more willing to seek treatment. And fortunately, most mental health conditions are very treatable.

Make strides one step at a time.

It will likely be a while before we begin to treat mental illness similarly to the way we treat physical illness. But until then, you can begin promoting psychological wellness one small step at a time.

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