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## Safe Space to Support Employee Mental Health

The pandemic increased anxiety and stress. But it also brought mental wellness to the forefront.

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Even before the pandemic, workers were stressed and depressed: 71% of adults reported at least one symptom of stress, and nearly 20% had a mental illness, according to the CDC. This mental health crisis has been exacerbated by COVID-19—but it has also ushered in a new era in which thinking and talking about psychological safety is encouraged.

“The pandemic has impacted our mental health and well-being in many ways,” says Jen Fisher, Deloitte’s chief well-being officer and author of *Work Better Together: How to Cultivate Strong Relationships to Maximize Well-Being and Boost Bottom Lines*. “It’s caused stress and anxiety from the uncertainty and disruption to our lives. We’ve had to mourn the loss of so many things: from family and friends to the loss of basic normalcy. On top of this, we had to quickly adjust to an all virtual world where our human connections have been interrupted and our work-life boundaries have been erased.”

The personal and business consequences are severe. Poor mental health leads to loss of productivity, absenteeism and presenteeism (lost productivity when workers are not fully engaged), according to McKinsey & Company. The need for increased support is so profound that McKinsey has predicted a mental health revolution in which organizations change the way they address such issues. This shift is vital for employees and businesses alike: When companies

invest in their employees' health and well-being, their staff performs better—and so does the business as a whole.

Here are some steps companies can take to create a culture where employees feel their well-being is prioritized.

## **Consider your workers' total wellness.**

Well-being can be divided into five categories: career, financial, physical, social and community (a sense of engagement in the area where you live), according to Jim Harter, chief scientist of workplace and well-being at Gallup.

“If you are engaged in work but not thriving overall, you have a 61% higher chance of always or often being burned out,” says Harter, co-author of *Wellbeing at Work: How to Build Resilient and Thriving Teams*. “Companies need resilient employees, but they have to realize the personal consequences blend into the business consequences.”

Organizations that support their workers' mental health use those five areas as an organizing structure for providing programs and services. Rather than seeing mental wellness as a check-the-box topic of providing an employee assistance program, or EAP, these companies rigorously monitor which programs employees are using and how effective they are, Harter says.

“Younger workers, in particular, expect their workplace to improve their overall life,” he says. “They expect their workplace to provide resources for their mental well-being.”

## **Don't assume what your employees need.**

Employees need different things at different times, and the solution to stressors—like child or older person care or feeling the need to always be working—vary from person to person.

Even vacations, one of the most common antidotes to stress, aren't straightforward. “Our research finds that people who get one week of vacation but are highly engaged are less stressed than people who get six weeks of vacation but have low engagement,” Harter says.

## **Realize that the manager role is key.**

The most important thing organizations can do is help managers develop the skills to act like coaches and understand the right kind of conversations to have with employees. “The manager is in the best position to understand each person's needs and help them through their individual situation,” Harter explains. Manager training, he adds, should be a continuous journey rather than a one-off event.

## **Check in with teams often.**

Take a cue from best-selling author Brené Brown: Start virtual team meetings by having all the participants name two emotions they're feeling.

“It allows employees to think about what they're feeling, and it gives leaders and colleagues a way to understand where everybody is, emotionally speaking, without asking anybody to divulge personal details,” Fisher says. “If a team leader sees that people are down, they can pivot and have a different kind of meeting. If a leader sees one particular person is having a hard day, he or she can circle back and see if the person needs support in some way.”

## **Ask workers how they feel.**

One-on-one check-ins aren't the only way to determine the wellness needs of workers. Rahul Vij, CEO of WebSpero Solutions, offers his employees an anonymous survey that is open 24/7. This is especially helpful for those who don't like to be vocal about their mental stress or illness.

“Feedback from such surveys helps us measure the level of job satisfaction at our workplace and frame effective strategies to eliminate the existing mental stress,” Vij says.

## **Provide mental health assessment tools.**

The American Medical Association considers a mental health disorder to be a treatable, chronic disease like high blood pressure or diabetes. “To promote mental wellness, employers should make a mental health assessment tool available to all employees,” says Cheryl Brown-Merriwether, VP and executive director of the International Center for Addiction and Recovery Education (ICARE). “Data collected gives companies a baseline to determine the health of their employee base and time to offer treatment options before a calamity occurs. Providing a health assessment brings awareness of the importance of mental health throughout the organization, which helps to destigmatize the issue and create safe conversations.”

## **Remove the mental health stigma.**

A Deloitte survey found 31% of millennials and 35% of Gen Zers have taken time off work due to stress and anxiety since the beginning of the pandemic. However, nearly half of this group gave their employer a different reason for their absence.

In fact, only 38% of millennials and 35% of Gen Zers have felt comfortable enough to speak openly with their supervisors about the stress they're feeling. And more than 4 out of 10 say their employers have done a poor job supporting their mental health during the pandemic.

“This reflects the need for leaders to focus on destigmatizing mental illness in the workplace and creating a psychologically safe environment where all employees feel comfortable speaking up about mental health,” Fisher says. “Policies and programs only go so far when you don’t have the culture to support their use.”

## **Praise workers for self-care.**

High burnout rates will be inevitable in corporate cultures where people are expected to regularly work overtime, skip weekends and vacations, or be on call to answer work communications during their time off.

“Rather than praising employees for working late or working from home after office hours, encourage your employees to develop a work-life balance,” says Justin Nabity, founder and CEO of Physicians Thrive. “Let them know that they have every right to live a fulfilling life outside of work and that you don’t expect them to answer emails around the clock.”

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— Justin Nabity, founder and CEO, Physicians Thrive

## **Communicate more. A lot more.**

Employees who feel that their managers are not good at communicating have been 23% more likely than others to experience mental health declines during the pandemic, according to a study by Qualtrics, SAP and Mind Share Partners.

“In burnout and high-stress situations, people often feel they have a lack of control,” Harter says. “Managers can alleviate some of that stress by communicating clearly why changes were made. In too many cases, people feel like they are siloed and kept in the dark, creating an us-versus-them situation.”

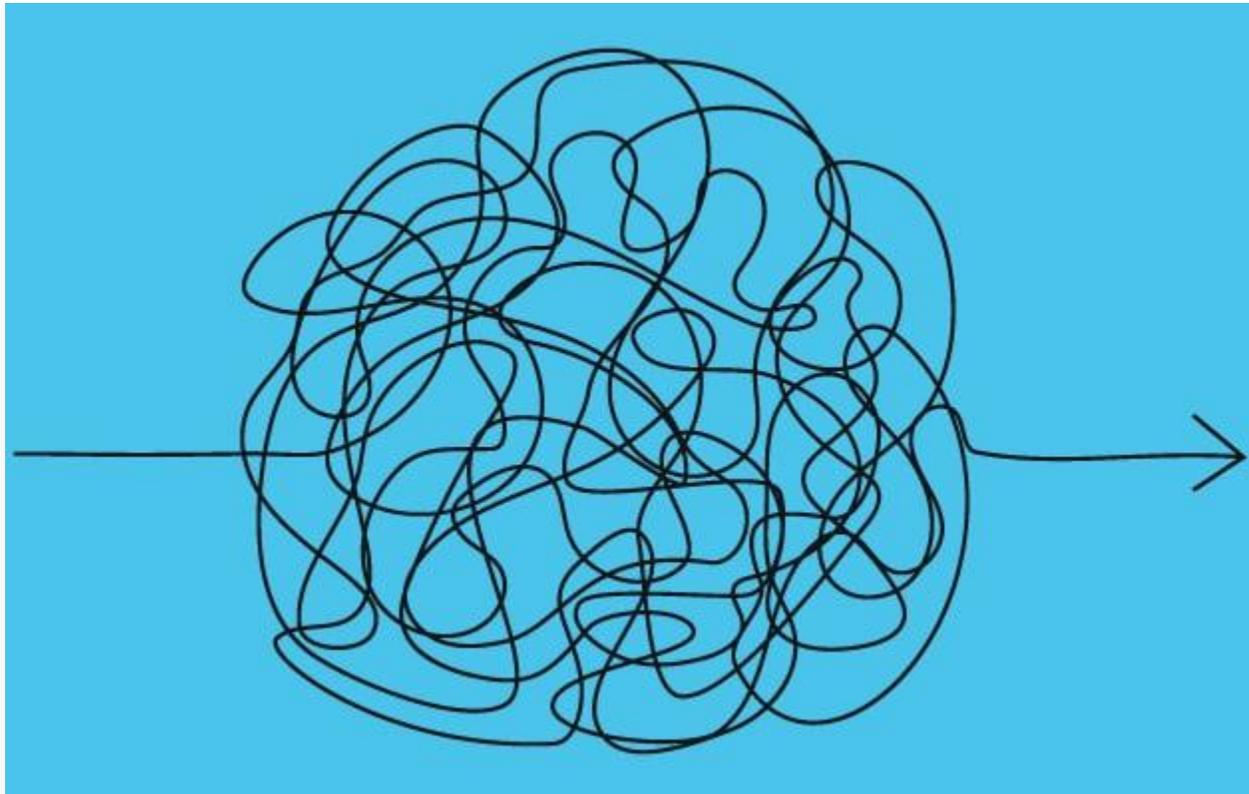
Organizations that share mental health resources are 61% more likely to have employees who feel they have the information they need to look out for their own well-being, according to the Qualtrics study. Yet nearly half of all workers (46%) say their company has not proactively shared what mental health resources are available.

## **As a leader, show your own vulnerability.**

One of the most powerful ways to support mental health in the workplace is for team leaders to share stories about their own mental wellness.

“The pandemic has already normalized lots of things, especially challenges on mental health,” says Rengie Wisper, outreach consultant at Indoor Champ. “I was one of those who experienced a great deal of discomfort mentally. And I know that most of my staff felt the same. When I shared what I’ve experienced, most of them became transparent and shared their struggles, too. It leads us to address all of their pains accordingly and emphasize the importance of mental wellness at work.”

Following these tips helps address employees’ mental health— all the more essential during times of uncertainty, which increase anxiety and stress.



## **The Hidden Stress of Managers**

Managers have the potential to be more stressed out than individual contributors, but they may feel uncomfortable admitting it. And that’s bad for everyone.

In fact, 86% of managers say they are extremely or moderately stressed, according to a poll by ZenBusiness.

Yet while nearly a quarter of managers said they are extremely stressed, only 14% of non-managers believed their supervisors to be extremely stressed.

Many team leaders feel they have to hide their feelings at work because they don’t want their emotions to affect their direct reports. “Managers are particularly vulnerable to mental health issues because of added pressure they have to manage others who may also be struggling,” says Cheryl Brown-Merriwether, VP and executive director at ICARE. “Companies must intentionally create a culture of

psychological safety for management wherein they are encouraged to share their own feelings. By destigmatizing mental health issues, managers will feel comfortable to be open about their own challenges. This will enable them to be better managers by being more empathetic and attuned to the emotional needs and potential problems of those who report to them, which would otherwise go unnoticed and untreated.”

Managers say their three most common techniques for reducing stress are taking breaks or going for walks (27%), taking vacation days (24%) and establishing boundaries (18%), according to the ZenBusiness poll.

One of the best things managers can do is model self-care behavior. A manager can help themselves and their direct reports by sharing if they are going to a therapy appointment or taking a walk in the middle of the day.

“If you’re a leader, you should also be an example,” says Liz Fosslien, author of *No Hard Feelings: The Secret Power of Embracing Emotions at Work*. “Make sure PTO isn’t ‘pretend time off.’ Stay off your email as much as possible during vacations and encourage others to do the same.” Everyone will be the better for it.