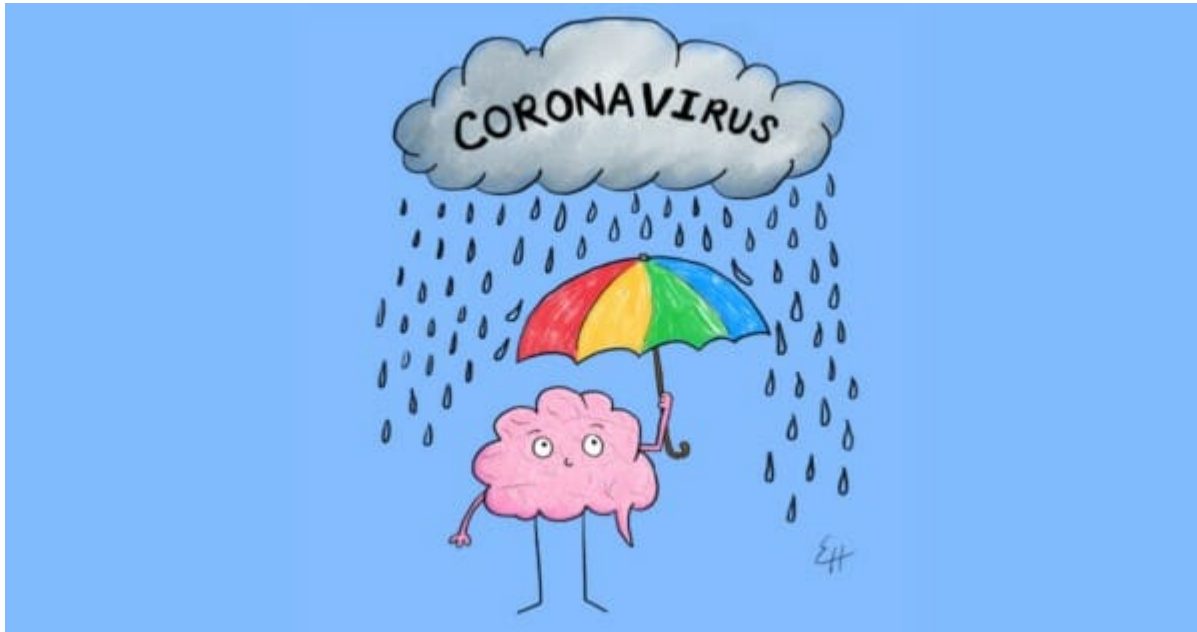# Mental health awareness at work: Warnings signs to look for

Mental health among workers is essential not only for employee wellness but also for the welfare of your company. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), nearly 1 in 5 U.S. adults reported a mental illness in 2016, and 71% reported at least one symptom of stress, like a headache or feeling anxious.

Mental health awareness programs in the workplace can help mitigate stress and improve employees' wellness by identifying issues early, and providing support through things like Employee Assistance Programs.

The state of the world is impacting employees

Amid the global COVID-19 pandemic and racial tensions in the country, the incidence of depression, anxiety, and other mental health concerns have increased exponentially. This unprecedented time makes it even more critical for employers to know how they can support employees facing challenges.

COVID-19 has profoundly impacted the majority of employees through life disruptions, uncertainty, social isolation, family issues, financial concerns, and illness.

Racial tensions have emotions on high - there's anger, sadness, fear, frustration - yet when employees come to work, they typically have to behave as though everything is fine.

If employers do not provide the right support, this psychological stress can lead to burnout, depression, and impact work. Often, those who have a mental illness fear discrimination and conceal their status because of the stigma associated with mental health concerns.

Now is the time to implement programs for early intervention, remove the shame, and ensure access to treatment.

Why mental health awareness matters at work

Mental health can affect job performance and productivity. Employees with mental health concerns such as depression and anxiety may be less productive, less able to complete physical job tasks, more likely to call in sick from work, result in higher turnover, more disability claims, and more.

By creating a more supportive workplace, these effects can be reversed – and employees can recover quicker from mental health issues. There is sometimes a stigma attached to identifying and talking about mental health issues, but enabling workplace mental health is good for business and good for employees.

Training for managers and employees may be necessary so that communication lines about mental health can be opened up and the stigma about discussing these issues at work overcome. Leaders can provide employees with reassurance, show empathy, provide resources, and highlight the support available to employees.

Managers can also be aware of the stress being placed on their employees – ensuring that workload, deadlines, and projects are not overwhelming them. Workplace stress is proven to affect physical and mental outcomes. Being aware of employees' circumstances, even if they are working remotely, can go a long way in reducing stress.

Especially now, with more people than ever working at home, regular check-ins with employees can help managers be aware of the health and wellbeing of their team. Connect with employees weekly, ask how they are feeling, and determine if they have any problems or concerns that you can help with. Encourage employees to take breaks, to step away when they need to deal with their personal life, and support work-life balance.

MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS

Mental health warning signs

A colleague who needs mental health support may exhibit these signs in the workplace:

- Lacks motivation for tasks they used to enjoy.
- Seems irritable, angry, or upset.
- Becomes isolated and withdrawn from the team.
- Lacks interest or seems indifferent.
- Misses deadlines, has more accidents or procrastinates more.
- Seems forgetful or scattered.
- Is indecisive or less productive.
- Arrives late, seems fatigued or exhausted.
- Exhibits a lack of confidence or self-assurance.
- Sudden changes in appearance.

Recognizing that mental health symptoms are not related to a lack of willpower, personal weakness, laziness, or imperfect character can reduce the stereotypes that exist about mental illness.

What to do to provide mental health support

Businesses can provide training to enable managers to support employees and ensure a psychologically safe workplace. Managers and Human Resource departments can encourage open conversations about mental health, wellness, and available resources to help employees.

Some ways to help employees include:

- Raise awareness of mental health issues and Increase awareness of available support.
- Talk about mental health regularly – eliminate the stigma around this topic.
- Encourage work-life balance.
- Create employee support networks.
- Provide training in self-care topics.
- Ensure policies are in place to support mental health and wellness.
- Provide health care that includes support for mental illness.
- Develop programs that promote health and wellness.
- Value diversity.
- Encourage teamwork.
- Provide training for employees and managers about mental health in the workplace.
- Keep employee data confidential.
- Ensure that work is a safe space.
- Support employees who need time off to seek treatment or need disability leave.
- Be flexible about employee needs and personal situations.
- Keep an open-door policy and be clear that you want to help.
- Listen without judgment.
- Offer incentives through health and wellness programs to encourage healthy behaviors.
- Check-in often with those who may need support.
- Refer employees to the Employee Assistance Plan or professional services when needed.
- Regularly survey employees to understand engagement levels.
- Offer clinical screenings at low or no cost.
- Include access to lifestyle coaches, counseling, and self-management programs.
- Create dedicated space in the workplace for relaxation activities and quiet time.
- Provide training on resilience and growth mindset.
- Emphasize social connections.
- Provide mentors for new hires.
- Offer flexible work schedules.

Employee engagement is linked closely to employee mental health. Those who are more engaged are more productive, have better morale, and are more loyal. All of this benefits the company and increases profits. Listening to employees and implementing changes based on their feedback can have a positive impact on employee mental health. When employee wellbeing is supported, employee engagement increases.

Create a culture of mental health awareness

To create a culture of mental health awareness, companies may have to take a multi-pronged approach to drive change. Implementing and communicating a plan around mental health at work can support employees and encourage an open culture.

- Educate senior management so they understand the need for mental health and wellness resources and tools.
- Ensure that senior leaders are on board and willing to talk about mental health.
- Implement practices and policies that support overall employer wellbeing.
- Use supportive language when discussing mental health concerns.
- Offer support if you notice that someone seems different.
- Challenge misconceptions about mental health conditions if you see or hear them.
- Create a culture of trust and communication.
- Develop a zero-tolerance policy for harassment and bullying.
- Develop company values that encourage respect, civility, and empathetic behavior.
- Encourage employees to take a full lunch break, work reasonable hours, rest after especially busy times,

avoid working weekends, avoid email and business correspondence outside of work hours, and take vacation time.

There are many ways to educate, inform, and support employees in the workplace to ensure that their mental health and wellbeing is taken into account. Allowing employees to bring their whole, authentic self to work without fear of stigma or backlash is vital in a supportive workplace.

Creating a culture that openly discusses mental health and provides resources to support those who need it is the right thing to do for employees and the business.