



Mental Health in the Workplace Guide



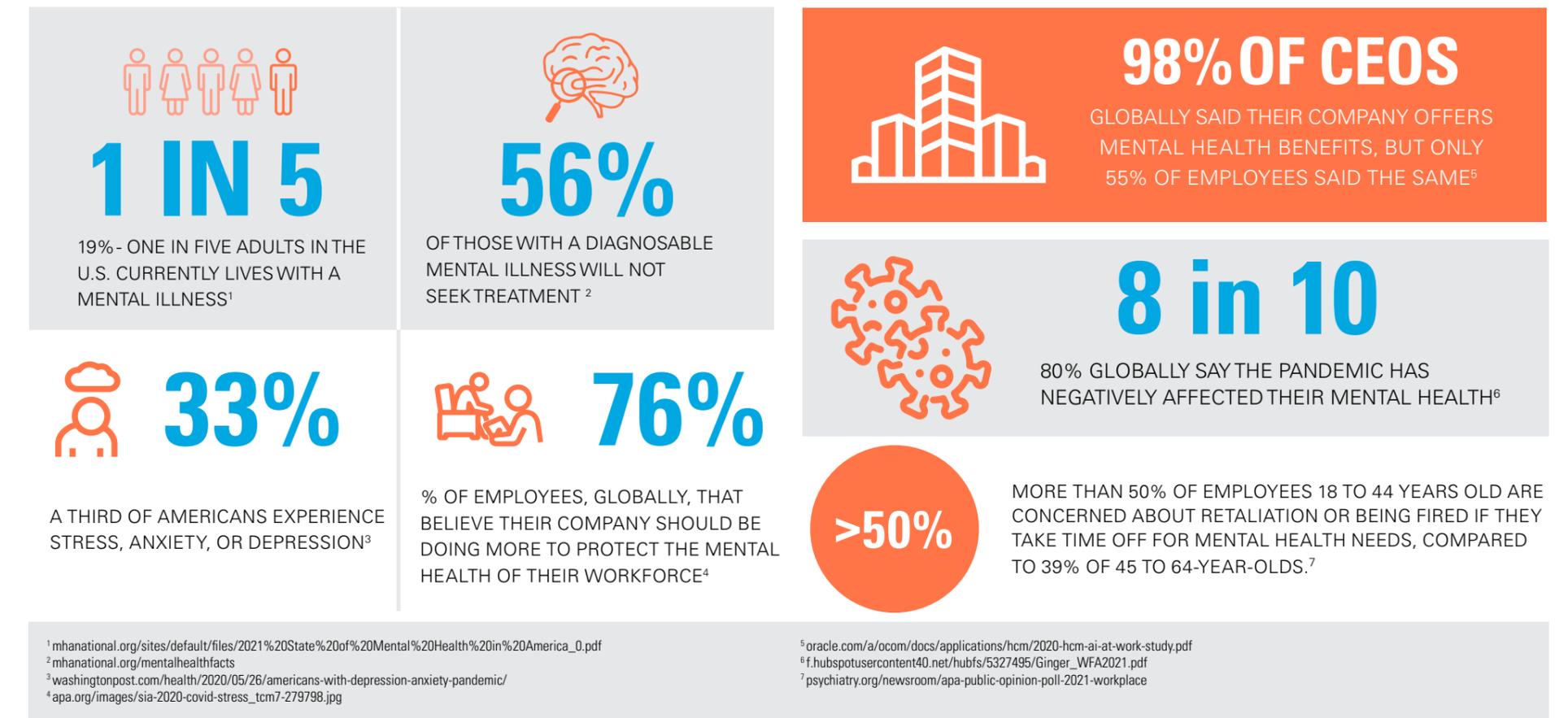
Employees are increasingly looking to their employers for resources and support services for Mental Health. It's no surprise given that 1 in 5 Americans will manage a diagnosable mental health condition this year¹ and up to 80% of Americans will manage a mental health condition at some point in their lifetime². On top of those statistics, many more employees may not have a diagnosed condition, but may be struggling with overwhelm, stress, parenting, post-pandemic fatigue, sleep deprivation, burnout and other challenges.

Historically, we have viewed the issue of mental health as an individual concern. However, the barriers to mental healthcare access in our society are abundant and make it more of a broader concern. Some of the most common barriers individuals face when seeking care are financial challenges, lack of mental health professionals, the stigma related to seeking mental health care and disparities in mental healthcare access for different racial and ethnic groups.

Additionally, our workplace culture also plays a critical role in the mental health of our employees. This provides organizations with an extraordinary opportunity to make an impact. Whether an organization focuses on developing a mentally healthy culture, eliminating stigma, increasing transparency and empathy, offering high-quality benefits, improving workplace practices, improving social connection or any combination of these, it can make a difference.

Defining Our Workplace Community

As we look to create a mentally healthy workplace, it's important to consider that the needs of employees may differ based on their role in the organization. For most organizations, it is helpful to look at senior managers and leaders as one grouping and then separately consider the needs and roles of all employees. There is overlap between these two groups but also many areas of uniqueness. Below is a list of considerations for these two distinct populations. This may serve as a starting point to assess some areas for development, support and education within your organization. Keep in mind that depending what industry you are in; your workplace community could vary. Variables like shift work, language barriers, workplace environment and employees' access to technology should be considered.



Senior Leadership/Managers:

A focus on senior leaders and managers is important as leaders must treat mental health as an organizational priority, not just a Human Resources issue.

Reducing Stigma and Establishing Normalization

- Creating a culture of psychological safety
- Understanding myths about mental illness
- Being conscious of language
- Engaging in open dialogue around mental health
- Showing vulnerability

Creating Openness

- Speaking more openly about mental health
- When comfortable and appropriate, sharing their own experiences with mental health

Enhancing Communication Skills – Examples include:

- How to open the door for employees to be honest about their current wellbeing
- How to express care and support
- How to be aware of your own emotions and thoughts while supporting others
- How and when to do check-ins, following up as needed

Modeling Healthy Behaviors

- Taking time off
- Managing work hours
- Setting boundaries
- Being forthcoming about their own mental health needs/challenges
- Taking advantage of wellbeing benefits
- Finding opportunities for recreation

Building Knowledge on Available Tools & Resources

- Understanding available benefits, resources and avenues for support
- Knowing where to refer an employee in need

All Employees:

Reducing Stigma and Establishing Normalization

- Understanding myths about mental illness
- Being conscious of language and terms used
- Feeling safe accessing resources and talking to colleagues
- Engaging in open dialogue around mental health with peers and leaders
- Recognizing internal and external stigmas around mental health

Enhancing Communication Skills

- How to communicate your own needs to peers and supervisors
- How to express care and support for peers that may share their challenges with you

Providing Knowledge on Available Tools & Resources

- Understanding available benefits, resources and avenues for support
- Knowing who to contact when an individual needs support
- Feeling safe to use and/or access benefits



Creating a Framework

There are many elements you can consider as you develop your mental health strategy. Each organization’s needs, goals, and culture are different, therefore the elements that are important to each organization will also differ. Please review the various elements below to determine which items might be important areas of focus for your organization.

Policies

- Do you have a policy that explicitly addresses mental health concerns?
- Do you have a policy that supports and encourages team members to use PTO for mental health needs?
- Do you have policies that support management training to learn how to identify and respond to employees' mental health needs?
- Do policies support employees adopt more focused work time or minimize overuse of virtual meetings?

Benefits – Examples include:

- EAP Programs – for some clients, this could include adding an EAP program if they feel this would be valuable. For others who already have an EAP program, this could include a re-branding of your existing program.
- Benefit plan designs to remove cost barriers to mental health (including drug costs related to mental health diagnoses).
- Comprehensive Mental Healthcare Platforms designed to improve access to healthcare (Ex. Spring Health, Lyra, Modern Health, etc.)
- Paid time off
- Mental health days
- Mental health reimbursement accounts

Note: Benefits related to mental health should consider the spectrum of needs associated with mental and behavioral health needs. Low acuity to high acuity solutions (education and self-help to therapy and facility-based care) should be considered when reviewing your benefits offerings.

Education

• **Leader and Manager Training** – Managers play an important role in setting the tone for a mentally-healthy workplace. The way managers talk about mental health, how they build trust with employees and how they listen are important factors in making employees feel safe and thus, more open to accessing appropriate resources and care. Leader and Manager Training can encompass a wide variety of topics, but here are some examples:

- How to be aware of your own emotions and thoughts while making difficult decisions and balancing competing needs
- Building positive relationships with employees to increase trust
- Opening the door for employees to be honest about their current well-being
- Modeling self-care and work-life integration for employees
- How to express care, compassion, and support to employees if/when they share something sensitive or personal
- How to validate/normalize their responses
- When to be concerned about employee wellbeing

• **Employee Training** – Employees also play an important role in setting the tone for a mentally-healthy workplace. Learning how to normalize conversations about mental health and how to support one another can be important factor in helping to beat mental health stigma. Additionally, employee training is an opportunity to arm your employees with tools, strategies and resources to build resilience, manage stress and more. Employee training can cover a wide variety of topics but here are some examples:

- What is mental health stigma?
- How to best support our colleagues and peers?
- How to manage relationships while also asking for what we want/need?
- How to manage burnout?
- Parenting tools



Workplace Norms and Practices

- **Workplace Norms** – This could include things such as guidance on after hours emails, no-meeting days, boundaries on texting or after-hours calls, etc.
- **Other workplace factors** – This could include things such as communication practices, how employees feel about their work (drained or engaged), workload, quality of work/life balance and quality of social connection.

Communications

- **Clarity** – Make it clear that mental health is a priority and openly promote all the mental health supporting programs, tools and resources that are available.
- **Sincerity** – Speak from the heart, show vulnerability and share personal stories if appropriate. If employees see leaders that are comfortable talking about mental health, they may be more comfortable talking about mental health.
- **Make it Routine** – Ensure managers are regularly checking in with the employees on their team. If needed, consider the manager training referenced above to support managers with these check-ins.
- **Listen** – Acknowledge that the thoughts and feelings your employees share with you make sense and are understandable. You do not necessarily need to agree with them to validate them. This helps to strengthen relationships, provide closeness and sometimes even opens the door for them to problem solve.

Employee Engagement

- **ERGs** – Many companies are creating Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) that specifically focus on mental health. These groups help build community among people with shared experiences at work and they can be a helpful resource for your organization. Here is some further information on how to form a [mental health employee resource group](#).

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI)

- DEI is closely linked with Mental Health. Employees from diverse backgrounds can face a variety of stressors, biases and inequities that can impact their mental health. Initiatives for DEI and mental health can have reciprocating effects on each other. It is important for organizations to support both DEI and mental health in tandem to create a safe, inclusive and supportive culture.
- It is important to include diverse leadership as the voice for mental health as well.



Ensuring and Evaluating Success

Like any successful wellbeing program, it's important to define what success looks like and then determine how you can measure and achieve it. Here are some things to consider in developing a successful program.

- **Objectives** – Do you have a clear idea of what outcomes you would like to see and what you would like to achieve?
- **Rollout** – How can you think strategically about adopting or rolling out solutions in a stepwise fashion based on priority?
- **Accountability** – Do you have a clear owner(s) of your mental health program?
- **Leadership** – Does your leadership team support your mental health initiative and openly promote it?
- **Metrics** – What metrics, soft or hard, do you have in place to help in assessing the merits of your efforts? Examples of metrics could include pulse surveys, engagement level in benefit offerings (EAP, mental health platforms, etc.), quality metrics related to your benefit offerings, number of Short Term Disability (STD) claims related to mental health, etc.
- **Inclusivity** – Do your programs provide support equally to the many diverse populations within your organization? Do your programs provide support for individuals across the entire mental health spectrum (from sub-clinical to clinical)?
- **Workplace Factors** – As discussed earlier in this document, it is critical that your mental health program addresses not only individual needs but also workplace factors. An organization's culture, ways of working and workplace norms all may impact an employee's mental health. Do you have some specific workplace factors that you would like to target? Could you evaluate the impact of these changes via a pulse survey or as part of a broader engagement survey?

While formalizing a mental health program for your workplace may feel overwhelming, it is also an exciting opportunity to make a positive impact in the lives of your employees and their families. If you are looking for support with your mental health program or would like to [learn more about how Alera Group partners with organizations on their wellbeing strategies](#), please contact your Alera Group office or email us at info@alergroup.com.



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