



**Navigating Workplace Mental Health:
A Guide for Managers**



What comes to mind when you think of “employee wellness”?

Many managers tend to concentrate on the basics of exercise and nutrition when thinking about employee wellness, especially in the context of

wellness programming. However, another component to overall employee wellness is often missed: mental health.

Far from being “all in the mind,” issues with mental health can manifest in a number of physical and behavioral changes which may affect the employee’s ability to

function at work and at home.

Thankfully, many managers are beginning to recognize the importance of employee mental health and how it can result in happier, more engaged, and more productive teams. Overall, though, there’s still a lot of work to be done.

The Current State of Workplace Mental Health

- » Depression and anxiety [cost the global economy](#) USD 1 trillion per year in lost productivity.
- » Two-thirds of Americans have experienced [some kind of mental](#) health problem in the past year.
- » One in four Americans [say](#) work is a source of anxiety.
- » Nearly 50 percent of Americans diagnosed with an anxiety disorder [find it interferes](#) with their relationships with coworkers.
- » Only [one-fourth](#) of workers with an anxiety disorder have told their employers. The others remain silent primarily due to fear of repercussions.

The fact that a full three-quarters of people with an anxiety disorder do not feel comfortable telling their employers about their mental health struggles indicates that workplaces have a long way to go to creating accepting and supportive environments.



“I was suffering from depression but didn’t realize it. I just thought I was tired of my job. I avoided my coworkers and would sit in my office with the door closed for most of the day. And while I got my work done, I was only going through the motions. Eventually, I got fired. It was only after I was diagnosed that everything clicked into place. I wish I had spoken up about how I was feeling – maybe my manager would have seen what I didn’t and would have urged me to get help sooner.”

– Christopher*

*Names have been changed to protect privacy.



Why Is This Happening?

You're not imagining it: Anxiety and depression ARE [markedly higher](#) than they were a few generations ago. One study found that between 1938 and 2007, rates of certain mental illnesses increased five-fold.

A large causal factor in mental illness is stress. Multiple [studies](#) have shown a link between stress and mental health issues.

Laurie Warren, wellness expert and creator of the Unlock Workforce Potential™ curriculum, believes our constantly-connected world is contributing to our stress and the destruction of our mental well-being. Companies are expecting more of employees, demanding they be “always on” both at work and outside of working hours. This cuts into the time people need to refresh their bodies and minds with relaxation or enjoyable hobbies.

The result, Warren says, is disheartening:

“The level of stress has amped up. When I talk to employees, they express the feeling of being overwhelmed, that they are drowning in their lives and all of their obligations. There seems to be a common despair about feeling completely out of control.”



How Are Managers Handling This?

So, employees are incredibly stressed, which is contributing to mental health issues that both endanger their health and affect their work and home lives.

Because of this, managers are sounding the alarm and are doing everything in their power to reduce workplace stress and support employees with mental health issues. Right?

Ahem ... maybe not.

While we wish every workplace was emotionally supportive, old-school thinking still exists. “I spoke with an employee at a company who wanted to go to a lecture on stress management,” says Warren. “An upper manager was overheard saying, **‘if you have time to go to a talk on stress management, you obviously don’t have enough work.’**”



Unfortunately, too many employers expect employees to be able to “push through” mental health issues. Or employers may believe emotions should be dealt with at home, not in the workplace.

And yet, there are also promising signs of improvement. As people become more open about mental health, some managers and workplaces are listening and responding by providing more nurturing working environments that help strip the stigma from mental illness.

“My current manager is excellent. He encourages mental health breaks and openly discusses his own struggles to help ease the stigma. Our team is very close and supportive—it’s been a really incredible year professionally, to be honest!”

—Audrey

Why Workplace Mental Health Is Vital



As mentioned, mental health issues in the workplace cost billions of dollars in lost productivity. It bears repeating that when employees are mentally well, they tend to be happier, more creative, more relational, and more engaged at work.

What are some additional reasons to prioritize employee mental health?

Retention: How many talented, dedicated, experienced people have left their workplace, either short-term or permanently, because of untreated mental health issues? When they leave, their expertise and experience leaves with them, and companies must go through the time-consuming and expensive exercise of hiring their replacement.

“I had one manager tell me ‘Well, so-and-so has asthma and doesn’t need to take time off work for it’ while talking to me about my mental health issues. I got so mad and upset, I quit. It was the absolute favorite job I’ve ever had too.”

–Maria

Morale: Employees suffering from untreated mental illness at work may become negative and disengaged with their jobs, which can affect the morale of coworkers. These coworkers may feel helpless and angry if they realize management is doing nothing to support the struggling individual, or they may feel resentful if these issues prevent the individual from performing key job duties, particularly if coworkers are then forced to pick up the slack.

Because employees matter: Simply put, the holistic well-being of employees is important for its own sake. Employees are people, not widgets in a machine or a means to an end. Managers *should* want their employees to be happy and well because it’s the right thing to do, regardless of the impact to the bottom line.



What Managers Can Do

Many managers may not realize the amount of influence they have on their employees' mental health. Their actions and decisions can make things much better—or much worse. Because of this enormous level of responsibility, managers have an obligation to work with their entire team to create an environment that is supportive and conducive to good mental health.

“As a manager, I hope that I’m helping my team when they come to me. I’d like some more training with regards to mental health, to make sure that I’m helping instead of harming.”

– Seth

To be most effective, managers can apply a two-pronged approach: teach employees how to take care of their own mental wellness, and support employees in the pursuit of better mental health.

What Managers Can Teach Employees

Wellness program initiatives, like coaching, educational sessions, and challenges, can help teach employees vital stress-management skills, including:

Healthy habits—When stressed, it may be tempting to reach for a bag of chips or a bottle of wine and curl up on the couch. However, these habits contribute to poor physical health, which can exacerbate stress and make things worse. Instead, show employees how to choose healthier responses to stress habits. For example, if a project is stressing everybody out, suggest a quick walk to blow off some steam and refresh the mind.

Handling emotions—Suppressing emotions is a surefire recipe for disaster, as the stress and strain eventually erupts. Moreover, wallowing in negative emotions can create a spiral of negativity. “I encourage people to recognize their emotions as messengers,” says Warren. “They’re important, so don’t blow them off. Realize they’re telling you that something is wrong, and that it’s something you either need to fix on the outside or process on the inside. From there, you can start to take action.”



Setting boundaries—It does feel good to help people, to feel like you make a difference. However, some employees can't (or are afraid to) say "no" to a new project. This can result in the employee feeling resentful and as though they have no control over their lives. Managers should monitor employee workloads, working together with staff to make sure nobody is biting off more than they can chew.



How Managers Can Support Employees

While it's important to teach employees how to manage their own stress and mental well-being, the environment managers create has a major effect on how much stress is created in the first place. Managers need to take a good look at their own practices to see if they're a helpful or harmful factor in employee well-being:

"I have two pieces of advice. First, refrain from judging. It's the only way to create a safe environment where the employee feels comfortable coming forward to ask for help, and it's the only way you'll be able to deliver that help in a way that truly does help.

Second, don't assume you understand what's going on. In our case, I noticed performance issues with an employee. It would have been easy for me to assume the problems were because she wasn't dedicated or focused, or that she was lazy, or something like that—but I would have been completely wrong. When I did discuss things with her, I simply—non-judgmentally—pointed out the concerns I had ... and then I waited. I didn't want to assume anything, and I didn't want to put words into her mouth. In hindsight, that pause helped her realize I wasn't going to yell at her or shame her or fire her. And it gave her the opportunity to be honest with me about all the turmoil she had going on inside that I had no idea about. And that was enough to help her get started on a path to recovery."

— Claire



Have a plan—Too many managers pay lip service to supporting mental wellness but then reprimand employees who don't have the mental energy to handle their full workload. Instead, proactively think about the best ways to support these employees. It's wise to create a plan to address what happens when a mental health challenge (or any health challenge, really) prevents an employee from handling a full workload—even if it's simply having a temp agency on call to delegate some of your own administrative tasks so you can ease your employee's burden.

Don't be the problem—Although some forms of short-term stress can be productive (e.g., “My boss needs me to get this finished before my deadline”), long-term stress is directly negative (e.g., “My boss is never happy with my work but won't tell me how to improve it”). Commit to honing your own management skills to ensure you are inspiring and motivating your team, not making them miserable and chronically stressed.

Cultivate openness—Not every employee will feel comfortable speaking up when they're struggling with their mental health. However, it's important to create an environment where they will at least feel *safe* doing so. For example, if you have dealt with mental health issues in the past (or still are), feel free to mention it in conversation as easily as you'd mention having had the flu or a broken limb—if you are comfortable doing so, of course. Even something as simple as telling your staff, “I've had a lot on my plate and don't want to burn out, so I'm going to take a mental health day tomorrow and de-stress,” is incredibly powerful. Why? It lets employees know you value your mental wellness and recognize the importance of taking time for yourself. It also sends a clear message of “We're all human, here. We get tired, we get stressed, and it's okay to talk about it.”



“My current managers are fantastic. I had a couple in government that were horrible and assumed I was just lazy, not suffering mentally because you know ... 20-somethings can't possibly be going through things.”

– Hannah



Be flexible—Employees who are suffering from mental health issues *want* to contribute and do their work, but they may simply lack the wherewithal to do so. If possible, adapt their role to help make things work. Perhaps they can work from home on flexible hours, which will allow them to save the energy that would normally be required to come into the office and be “on” for everybody. Conversely, there may be a lower-stakes but time-consuming project that they can be reassigned to, helping reduce some of the pressure on them.

Let them know you care—The most important thing you can do for your employees’ mental wellness is show them you care about them, no matter what they’re going through. Ask about their weekend, their upcoming move, how their son’s school play went. Get to know them as people: their hopes, their fears, what they care about. Ask them to text you if they’re driving home in terrible weather or after a late-night event.

When you show employees that you genuinely, truly care about them as people, you create a culture of trust and let them know they’re safe showing you their vulnerabilities.



Healthy Mind + Healthy Body = Healthy Organization

No matter how efficient and skilled people are, they're still people, with bodies and minds that can present challenges. And while managers typically have a good grasp on how to handle physical health issues in their workforce, mental health issues still tend to throw even the most well-intentioned managers for a loop.

However, with the increase in people suffering from mental health issues, managers cannot afford to keep their head in the sand, thinking it'll never affect *their* team. It can. And it may already be happening.

Fortunately, as a manager, you have a unique and important role, and can make a significant difference in the mental wellness of your employees. By demonstrating thoughtfulness, leadership, and true caring for the well-being of your staff, you can bring out the best in people while helping them through any bumpy times that may occur.

The results—and your team—are worth it.



*Ready to start making your workplace a healthier and happier place to be?
Contact us today to find out how WellRight's programming and platform can make
workplace wellness fun and effective.*

*Thank you to Laurie Warren for contributing to Navigating Workplace Mental Health: A Guide for Managers.
Ms. Warren is the founder and vibrant living advocate of Warren Wellness (www.LaurieWarren.com).*



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