Managing Mental Health
in the Workplace

PageGroup

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Understanding mental health has always been important, but because of the challenges we have all faced as a result of the coronavirus, we are currently seeing how vital it is in the workplace. Whether you are a line manager, HR manager, or someone trying to manage their own mental health while at work, having conversations on this topic and eliminating the stigma around it is key for our personal and professional success.

In this eBook, we have compiled our advice around coping with specific mental health concerns, psychological safety, our responsibility as leaders in a business, and more. We believe that this information can help people at any level in any business better navigate their own mental health and interact with their coworkers, but believe it is most essential for managers.

Much of this content was created in partnership with BHS, an organization which provides workplace well-being and employee assistance programs. We collaborated with these experts because we are an organization that is invested in the mental health of our employees. We would encourage you to do the same for yourself and for your business if you would like to learn more about mental health programs and their effects. We have included some such resources at the end of this eBook.

This topic can be very nuanced and individual, so please treat the information in this eBook as the start of a conversation. On behalf of all of us at Michael Page, I hope this is helpful for you and your organization.

Creating an Inclusive Workplace
with **Mental Health Awareness**

Mental health concerns are wide ranging, and some are more manageable than others. Therefore, employees need support from leaders and colleagues.

So, how can leadership make workplaces more inclusive to those living with mental health concerns? The first step is education and understanding.

Understanding Mental Health.

There has been a stigma around mental health for a very long time and it absolutely affects treatment. Most of the time, people do not hesitate to consult a doctor if they have broken a bone or think they have the flu. However, this is not the case with mental health treatment.

Even though mental health is not well understood, it is incredibly common. The National Institute of Mental Health estimates that one in five Americans will experience mental health issues at some point in their life. But for whatever reason – fear of repercussions, cost, or simply going undiagnosed – only one third of these people will receive treatment. This is because there is a tendency for those who admit that they have a mental health challenge to experience negative reactions ranging from fear to denial. These reactions can have a direct impact on their livelihood, especially if they leave a job as a result.

Therefore, many are ashamed to seek treatment or talk about their mental health struggles. They fear judgement and often think they are alone in their struggle. They are often in good company, though, as you can see from the following additional statistics, provided by BHS:

About **20%**
of adults in the US live with mental illness in any given yaear.

About **5%**
of adults in the US have a serious mental illness that negatively impacts at least one aspect of their life.

42 million
adults in the US live with an anxiety disorder of some kind.

Even with all these people having similar experiences, some still feel like they are alone and therefore try to cope on their own. Leaders in businesses have an opportunity to decrease the stigma and help employees to seek the assistance they need. There are many ways to do this, some more complex than others.

Adjusting Our Language

Words have power, and some words can be used to further the stigma around mental illness regardless of the intention. The good news is that adjusting our language can have the reverse effect – it can help to normalize mental health.

Here are some small changes we can make to help us use more inclusive language:

Use person-first language:

Simply put, this means using mental illness as a noun and not an adjective. Instead of saying, "That person is bipolar," you would say, "They have bipolar disorder." This means that the person is not defined by their mental illness, but it is a part of their life.

Refrain from using inaccurate language:

In many cases, society has usurped language around mental health to describe unrelated things. For example, some call unpredictable weather "bipolar," or describe themselves as "OCD" because they like to keep things tidy. This can minimalize, and sometimes trivialize, actual mental illness.

Avoid using "crazy" or similar adjectives:

Similarly, calling someone "crazy," "insane," or "psychotic" can contribute to the stigma around actual mental illness. It can also deeply hurt someone who is battling their mental illness symptoms.

Do not dismiss the struggle:

If an employee is telling you about their experience with mental health, do not say things like, "We've all been there," or, "Just push through it." Instead, be supportive and use understanding language such as, "I'm here if you need anything," or, "How can I help?" This will help you to give the employee the aid they need.

Provide Resources

Managers are not going to be able to directly help every employee who needs mental health treatment, nor should they try. A manger's responsibility is to provide emotional support and create an open environment. Actual treatment and further support will come from professionals.

Leaders who want to be helpful can point employees in the direction of resources. This means managers should be well-educated about EAPs (Employee Assistance Programs), what mental health options are included in company insurance, and any other resources the company may have available.

Once this is in place, leaders should continue to offer emotional support. They can check in with employees and make reasonable accommodations if they need time for therapy or other treatment.

Understanding Anxiety and Depression in a Work Setting

Each individual circumstance is different, but it is useful to take a look at a couple of the mental illnesses you are most likely to experience or come across. Therefore with guidance from BHS, we will be taking a closer look at anxiety and depression in this section.
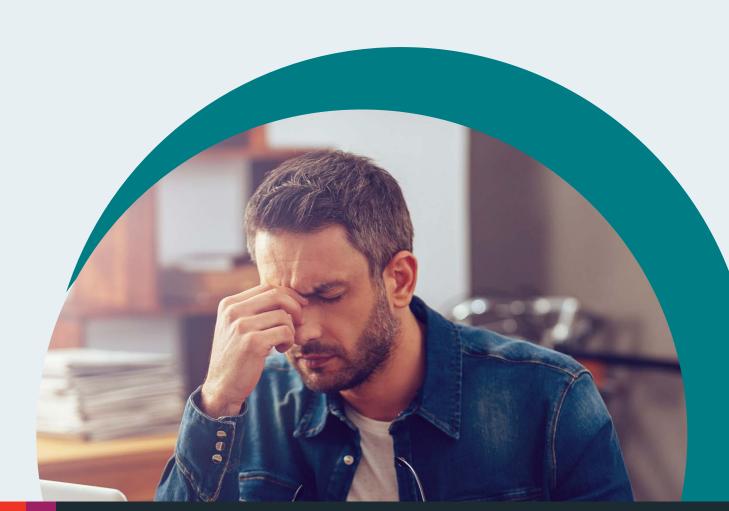
Even though anxiety and depression are two of the most common mental health challenges people face, they are far from simple. Depression is more than being sad, and anxiety is more than being stressed out.

That is why it is so important to understand anxiety and depression and how they manifest in the workplace. Whether you are working with these conditions, or have a coworker who is, it is key that we know how to have constructive, helpful conversations about this topic.

What Do Depression and Anxiety Look Like at Work?

In the workplace, depression could manifest as a lack of motivation or engagement in the workplace. It could also result in a dip in performance during a particularly bad episode. Expressing concern for a coworker or direct report in a respectful manner could be helpful, but bear in mind that the person experiencing these symptoms may be reluctant to talk about it.

As for anxiety, this can look like an abundance of sick days, a dip in performance, emotional outbursts, and more. Flexibility and a manageable work-life balance can help someone to manage their anxiety while working. Patience and understanding are key when working with someone with anxiety.
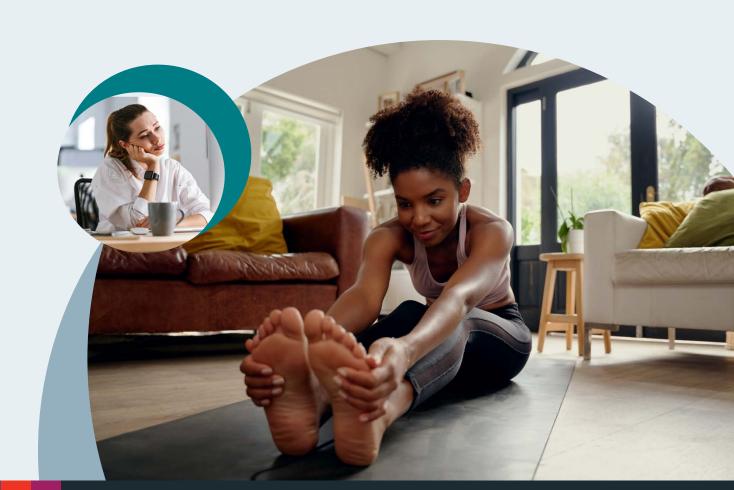
How to Manage Anxiety and Depression

There is no one cure or treatment for either of these conditions, but there are ways one can manage them. Different tools and strategies work for different people, but here are some common treatments:

- **Counseling:** Therapy can be a big help with many mental illnesses such as these. Even if you are having a good day, therapy can still be useful so avoid cancelling sessions.

- **Medication:** Though not for everyone, there are a series of medications available for depression and anxiety. According to the **Anxiety and Depression Association of America**, these are generally safe and effective, especially when someone is also in therapy.

- **Self-Care and Patience:** Be kind to yourself. Often, anxiety and depression can yield negative thoughts about oneself. Remember to practice self-care (whatever that means for you) and allow yourself to have bad days while continuing to work towards better ones.

- **Avoid Stress-Inducers:** It sounds simple, but it is not. Find those things that trigger stress and do your best to avoid them. Substances like caffeine and nicotine can contribute to anxiety, as well. Monitor your intake of these things.

- **Exercise:** Many people find exercise and physical activity helpful in managing anxiety and depression. It gets your mind on physical activity and centers you in the moment, while also getting your blood flowing and releases endorphins which, "enhance your sense of well-being," according to **Mayo Clinic.**

These are not the only ways to manage anxiety and depression and finding what works for you may take some time. Remember that asking from help and finding a professional to go to are signs of strength and could be immensely helpful for you. Please reference your company EAP for more assistance and resources.

Coping with Loss
and Isolation at Work

Bear in mind that chronic mental illnesses like anxiety and depression are not the only mental health concerns that we need to understand. Some mental health factors are situational. This does not mean that they should be taken any less seriously or approached with a different level of empathy.

For example, someone who is dealing with grief in the workplace also needs our acknowledgement and support.

Although grief is not a mental health disorder, the passing of someone in your life is one of the most palpably painful experiences one could have. Therefore, the process of coping with grief is a mental health concern.

Grief is potent and an extremely personal process. It could take years to grieve properly, as there is no set timespan and every situation is unique. Because of this, grieving people must at some point return to their "regular" lives. This often means returning to work before they are fully ready, putting them in contact with people who are not experiencing a loss. This can lead to feelings of isolation, making it harder to go about daily activities.

To understand how to help someone coping with grief, it is important to understand a bit more about the process they will be going through yourself.

The Complexity of Grief

As noted, the grieving process is extremely personal. You may have a hard time understanding what you are feeling and that may become even harder when balancing a workload. Though everyone has individual experiences, there are some common symptoms people might go through after a loss. These can be emotional, behavioral, and even physical. This includes the following:

Emotional symptoms:

Shock, numbness, sadness, anger, anxiety, fear, guilt, panic, loneliness, depression.

Behavioral symptoms:

Denial, forgetfulness, slowed thinking, listlessness, hypersensitivity, preoccupation, isolation.

Physical symptoms:

Trouble sleeping, stomach aches, tightness in chest, exhaustion or fatigue, headaches, muscle tension, decreased resistance to illness.

Helping Others with Grief

If a coworker is experiencing a loss, it may be difficult to know what to do to help. Unfortunately, there is not a specific thing you can say or do that will make it better. However, there are some ways you can make work less isolating for those who are grieving.

Here are some suggestions:

- **Do not ignore the loss:** For those who are grieving, it sometimes feels like the world is moving on while they are stuck in this one terrible place. Things are far from normal for them, but others are going about their days as if nothing has changed. You can assuage this by simply asking how they are doing and listening to what they are comfortable saying. Saying, "I'm so sorry for your loss and I am here for whatever you need," can go a long way. It is also okay to talk about the person that they lost if they are open to it. Others mean well when they try not to bring up a memory about that departed person, but it can sometimes be cathartic to share a fond memory and acknowledge the impact they had.

- **Listen, do not share:** A good rule of thumb is to listen for 80% of the conversation and only talk for 20% when speaking about someone's loss. Sharing your own experience or trying to say the right thing is often more harmful than helpful. Everyone goes through grief differently, so you truly may not know what the other person is going through or what symptoms they are experiencing. The best way to help them cope is to make them feel heard.

- **Include them:** If your friends or coworkers are having a conversation or going out somewhere do not exclude the member of the group who is grieving. They very well could decline the invitation or say very little but give them that chance to do so. They may need a distraction, or they may need to be alone. Either way, a simple gesture can help them feel less isolated.

- **Embrace emotions:** When talking about a loss, the grieving person may cry. This may be outside the norm for the workplace but let them release their emotions. Make sure they know it is okay by being a good listener and maintaining your empathetic demeanor. If you are moved emotionally, let that show. It is important to be genuine with your emotions in this situation, so be transparent with your own feelings. This will make it easier for them to do the same.

- **Give them time:** Grieving takes a long time and it varies by person. Be receptive to the cues a grieving person gives and do not expect them to be okay within a certain timeframe. Give them the space they need and do not pressure them to do more work than they are capable of, even if some time has passed. Remember, they cannot, "snap out of it," or, "get over it," so never ask that of them. Be patient as they work through their grief.

At the end of the day, counseling is one of the most effective ways to deal with grief and loss. Explore what options are available through your workplace EAP or health insurance. If it is a coworker dealing with loss, gently encourage them to do the same if they so choose.

Psychological Safety
in the **Workplace**

Environment also plays a key role in our mental health. If a workplace is hostile or negative for someone, they are likely to feel that in a number of ways. Their mood, personality, and performance may all be affected by this. So, let us take a look at psychosocial safety and what that means in the workplace.

A two-year long team performance **study from Google** revealed that psychological safety is the one thing all high performing teams offer their top performing members. With the impact of the pandemic, it is crucial for employees to feel that the work environment is psychologically safe.

The problem is most organizations are not inherently designed with psychological safety in mind. Hierarchy structures, performance expectations, and personality clashes can often inadvertently result in workers feeling a lack of empowerment to share their thoughts and feelings openly.

The long-term effects of a workplace where employees do not feel accepted or respected can be incredibly detrimental. Work quality lowers, attrition rises, and the overall culture is hurt. With so much on the line by ignoring psychological safety, it is important to be aware when it is not implemented.

Is Your Workplace Psychologically Safe?

Consider your own view of your workplace culture:
- Do we feel safe voicing our opinions or perspectives to our leaders?
- Are we able to have candid and open conversations with our managers or C-suite leaders?
- Are we free to pursue ideas without micromanagement from leadership?
- Do our leaders trust us, and do we trust them?

If you are a leader, there are some questions you can ask yourself to do a quick analysis of your team's sense of safety:
- Is it safe to ask questions and propose new ideas?
- Is everyone free to take risks and take the lead on projects?
- Can everyone openly bring up any potential conflicts or disagreements?
- Is there trust to get tasks accomplished?
- Is everyone encouraged to think creatively and try new avenues of problem solving?

If you are not 100% sure of the answers, it is important to find out from your team. One-on-one conversations are an excellent way to gauge where people stand regarding these issues.

Inventories like these are a great way to assess the state of your culture on both a micro and macro level. Understanding the depth that psychological safety does or does not show up in your environment can help you pinpoint where effort needs to be taken.

Creating Psychological Safety

Putting in the effort to get to a place of psychological safety will lead to better individual and team outcomes. Below are suggestions for leaders to consider for creating a safe environment.

1. Remix the Golden Rule

Regarding psychological safety, a good rule of thumb to follow is to treat others as they'd like to be treated. Take the time to learn how and when team members prefer to communicate with check-ins and status meetings.

2. Approach Conflict as a Collaborator, Not an Adversary

It is never easy to navigate a disagreement with a team member. Very often when we feel slighted, our instinct is to defend ourselves and our position. This can lead to a tense working relationship and environment.

Consider changing your viewpoint from, "How can I change you to act the way I want or your opinion?" to, "What's the best way for us to collaborate on a solve for this problem?" This sets the tone for the interaction and prevents it from spiraling into something unhealthy and poisoning the work atmosphere.

3. Speak Human-to-Human

Under many work-related conflicts lie a base human desire feel autonomous, powerful, respected, and proficient in one's tasks. It is important to remember that even in the biggest arguments and disagreements, the other person just wants to walk away from the situation happy, much as you do. When particularly incensed at a team member, remember:

- This person has **beliefs, perspectives, and opinions, just like me.**
- This person has **hopes, anxieties, and vulnerabilities, just like me**.
- This person has **friends, family, and perhaps children who love them, just like me.**
- This person wants to **feel respected, appreciated, and competent, just like me.**
- This person wishes for **peace, joy, and happiness, just like me.**

This small mental reminder can go a long way in keeping the conversation psychologically safe.

4. Replace Blame with Curiosity

If team members sense that you are trying to blame them for something, they will become defensive and view everything you say and do with a different lens. In lieu of utilizing blame to deal with performance issues, incorporate curiosity. This moves you from a, "I know what they're thinking," mindset to a, "I want to learn how they're thinking," frame of mind. Navigate it this way:

- State problematic behaviors as observations and not accusations using neutral language. For example, **"I noticed that you were not 100% yourself at that meeting on Friday."**

- Engage in an exploration around possible causes: **"Why do you think that might be? How have things been going for you?"**

- Put the solve on the other person, so they feel empowered afterward: **"Let's talk about what might be helpful to you moving forward?"**

It is important to note that psychological safety is necessary for organizational learning, innovation, and excellence. A willingness to be mindful during challenging conversations, being open to being wrong, and pausing before reacting all work to making others feel safe being vulnerable, which can eventually manifest as an organizational strength.

A Leader's Role in Mental Health Awareness

Bearing all of the above in mind, let us take a specific look at what business leaders and Human Resources (HR) professionals can do to help improve employee experience at work. Whether colleagues are dealing with chronic illness, a troubling situation in their personal lives, or are feeling unsafe at work, HR professionals and leadership can do a great deal to improve the situation.

Business leaders and HR professionals are faced with a lot of tough situations during their careers. One such challenge could be learning that an employee is struggling with mental health issues. If leadership is not properly educated on the subject, their initial reaction to this situation could be a negative one.

However, as we have learned, the idea that those who struggle with their mental health are dangerous or unproductive is simply false. While it may seem like a complicated situation, leadership can and should do a few simple things to help these employees.

Eliminate Stigma, Increase Awareness

The first thing that HR departments and other leadership should do to help employees struggling with their mental health is to educate themselves and the workforce at large. As we know, most of the stigma around mental health exists because of misunderstandings, misrepresentation, and misinformation. This stigma makes it very difficult for people to ask for help.

The truth is that mental health problems are health problems first and foremost. The brain is like any other organ in the body. When it is sick, it needs to be treated. Sheer willpower does not cure the common cold, so it will not fix a mental health disorder.

Teaching your workforce the basics of these mental health challenges, and dispelling the myth that people with these conditions are dangerous, will help to create a much safer environment for people who are struggling. Educate them about adjusting their language, as discussed above. Ensuring that there is not just conversation, but the right conversation, around mental health is the first step to ending stigma.

Provide Resources

Even though you can teach people a lot about mental health, it is important to recognize that only experts can treat and diagnose mental health disorders. There is a lot of nuance in this space, and it is best left to the doctors in the field. In fact, you could do more harm than good if you attempt to take care of it yourself.

What leadership can do, however, is provide the right resources to employees. Employee assistance programs (EAPs) can train management on the best approaches when it becomes clear that someone on their team is struggling with their mental health. They also give telephone consultations and referrals and can help to start your employees off in the right direction.

Return to Work programs are also a great way to ease someone back into their routine if they have had to take some time for their health. Allowing for personalized work hours, the option to work from home, and other flexible working options can make a positive impact on the employee's productivity. Normalizing this type of flexibility for those who are treating their mental health challenges is also incredibly helpful.

Be Empathetic

It is very difficult for someone who has not experienced mental health issues to understand what it is like. And even if you have, experiences vary greatly. So, one of the best things you can do is to let someone know that you understand that they are struggling and want to help, even if you do not know exactly what they are going through.

Having someone to talk to is extremely beneficial to people in this position, especially if they are scared of repercussions. Treat people who struggle with their mental health with understanding and empathy. Try to find solutions to their problems if you can, or just lend an ear if that is what they need.

You cannot solve everyone's mental health issues, but HR professionals and leadership are in a unique position to help someone on their healing journey. Be a support system and help them to take next steps, all while creating an environment in which they can seek help. It could make all the difference.
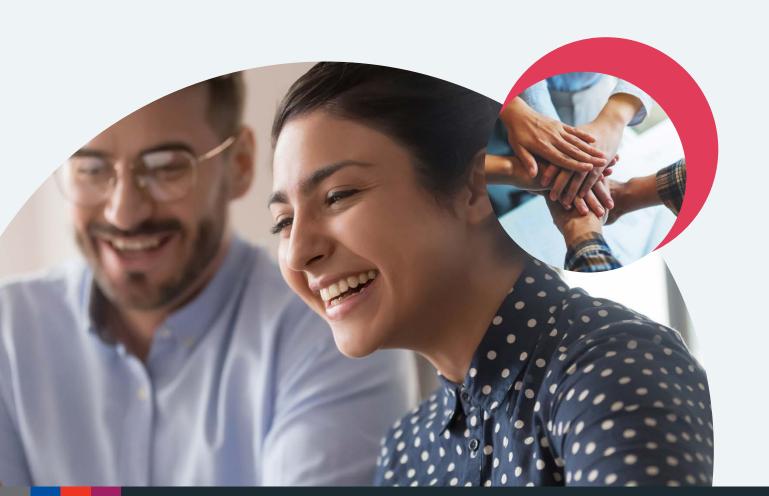
More About Michael Page

Michael Page have been committed to our D&I strategy globally, since 2012. We launched our Ability@Page strategy in 2016, which focuses on disability inclusion across both physical and mental health. We work hard to continue to break down all barriers, whether perceived or actual, and remove any stigma. We haven't done it alone; we have partnered with experts to ensure our support and resources are as effective as possible. It is vital that you contact and collaborate with experts in the field if you would like to learn more or expand your organization's mental health program.

Some resources across North America include:

- **The National Institute for Mental Health**
- **The Center for Disease Control and Prevention**
- **Anxiety & Depression Association of America**
- **Mental Health Commission of Canada**

We encourage you to research and explore the options that best help you and your organization.

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