

WELLNESS

Should we focus on 'mental health' in the workplace?

Workers don't need performative shows of support. Listen to their problems, home in on specific challenges they're facing, and prioritize genuine connectivity and camaraderie among your team.

By Dr. Paul White
July 13, 2021



Since the COVID-19 virus appeared, the focus on the mental health of employees has increased significantly. And rightfully so.

As a result of the pandemic, major social changes occurred in 2020: "stay-at-home" orders, tens of millions of workers shifted to working from home, children were educated remotely, we were required to maintain social distance from one another (and cover our

faces with masks). Family and community relationships were hindered. The practical consequences? Isolation. Dramatic changes in daily life routines. Uncertainty.

These tectonic shifts in our lives shook our daily lives to the foundations and created an enormous amount of stress for us – individually, as families, for employees and economically.

When demands in our lives increase, they test our capabilities to cope with and manage these pressures. And the longer the demands continue, the more they tax our resources to deal with them.

Long-term stress begins to wear us down and we start to demonstrate symptoms from the “wear-and-tear” over time. These symptoms can be:

- **Physical:** headaches, upset stomachs, difficulties sleeping, lower back pain, sciatica, high blood pressure, exhaustion and more serious medical problems
- **Relational:** irritability, low frustration tolerance, increased conflict, lack of or poor communication and disconnectedness.
- **Emotional and psychological:** discouragement, apathy, hopelessness, worrying, depression, anxiety, short temper, feeling overwhelmed, exhaustion, inability to cope with daily life responsibilities, alcohol and drug abuse, suicidal ideation.

Increases in these symptoms in individuals and family members have been [documented over the past 15 months.](#)

Should we draw attention to the increase in mental illness?

Yes, but not in the way we are currently discussing the issue.

Currently, the corporate world, business executives and political leaders have been told they need to, “Pay attention to the mental health of their employees.” And they do so by giving lip service to the issue — having “Mental Health Awareness Week,” creating an Employee Assistance Program, giving to United Way, or giving their employees access to webinars on “practices to strengthen your mental health.”

Talking about “the mental health of employees” feels like a broad stroke whitewash – that allows leaders to sound like they care and want us all to “do something” without really talking practically about the issues. Being concerned about “the mental health of employees” is similar to other global, vague platitudes such as: “Life is good,” “World peace now,” or “Be grateful.”

We all agree with each of these, but what practically do they mean? They feel more like making a statement for its own sake, which sounds good but has no commitment to action.

What is needed is to take practical action steps with employees who are struggling with specific mental health challenges. It may be one of your team members who has struggled with depression for years but continues to show up and do the best they can every week, or a manager who is having major medical problems aggravated by the anxiety they carry while trying to meet the demands of upper management and the needs of those they oversee.

Or it could be your receptionist who is a single mom trying to work from home while caring for her preschooler because she can't find childcare.

In all of these examples, the common need is *personal connection*. [In the research we conducted in 2020 with newly working from home employees](#), we discovered that one of the key components for employees who were coping better with the stress from the pandemic was staying connected with their colleagues at work. And a recent survey found that employees in the U.S. have significantly [less friendships and social support](#) than they did prior to the COVID-19 outbreak.

Words matter

How we talk about problems and challenges influence how we think about them. Ultimately, the words we use to describe a problem affect what actions (if any) might be taken to solve them. “I’m struggling to cope with the stress in my life” is different from “I’m drinking more and more just to cope with daily life, and I feel like I’m losing control.”

People don’t talk about their emotional issues by using the term “mental health,” or “I’m feeling especially mentally healthy today.” They don’t describe their emotional struggles by proclaiming to a friend, “I’ve realized that I have a mental illness.”

We talk with one another about feeling depressed, discouraged, anxious, having panic attacks, struggling with managing the stress in our lives, drinking too much, not being able to get through the day without smoking some pot, about how angry we are with parents, or our inability to sleep. We describe the *specifics* in our lives.

The vague terms the media and leaders currently use result in “saying something without really saying anything meaningful.” As a result, no meaningful action steps are discussed or implemented.

What to do – speak clearly and connect

First, call the issues and problems what they are – *specific problems* experienced by *individuals*. Don't hide behind the silky curtain of "mental health of our employees." That veils the pain experienced by millions of people every week.

Second, when someone talks about "mental health" or "mental illness," ask them what they mean. Who are they referring to? Do they have any *specific* ideas on what can be done to help that *individual*?

More importantly, be aware of those around you – those you work with you on a daily basis, your friends and neighbors, and your extended family. Listen – to their concerns, to the struggles they are dealing with, to "how they are doing." Take an active interest and explore if there is some way you could be of help (either personally, or by connecting them with a valuable resource.)

A key step is to *stay connected* with your colleagues and team members. Find out how they are doing; share what is going on in your life. All of us – employees, supervisors, managers and executives – are people. We are social beings and need to live in community in order to survive the challenges we face.

Don't ignore them. Don't join in and complain about your own challenges. Don't give some general, vague response ("Yea, life sucks") or suggest how "the government should do more to help people".

And remember, the problem frequently isn't just with others. Everyone (myself included) at some point in their life struggles (or has struggled) with discouragement, anxiety, or trying to cope with stress in unhealthy ways. Talk to a friend or family member. Take steps to take care of yourself in healthy ways.

Finally, listen. Care. Do something (however small it might be) to help a colleague who seems to be struggling. To be effective, the response needs to be specific, relational and person-specific, not generic and global.

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