

Getting Better at Talking About Mental Health at Work

By Carole Matthews

Events of the recent past have moved mental health support in the workplace from a nice-to-have to a must-have, as the pandemic, racial trauma, and political unrest have weighed on US workers and society in general. “I would be hard-pressed to find anybody that could honestly say that they hadn’t struggled with their mental health in some way, shape, or fashion over the last two years,” said Kelly Greenwood, founder and CEO of [Mind Share Partners](#), a national nonprofit headquartered in San Francisco that is focused on changing the culture of workplace mental health, in a recent interview.

In their recent study, [Mind Share Partners’ 2021 Mental Health at Work Report in partnership with Qualtrics and ServiceNow](#), the authors found that mental health concerns, not surprisingly, increased over the prior two years. “Obviously mental health challenges were more prevalent in US workers in 2021. They reported longer durations of [mental health] symptoms across all levels of seniority,” Greenwood said. In the inaugural [2019 study](#), 59 percent of respondents reported at least one symptom of a mental health condition over the previous year. In 2021, that number went up to 76 percent.

And, at the same time, the number of people talking more about their mental health at work increased. Sixty-five percent said that they talked about their mental health to someone at work in the previous year, up from 40 percent in 2019. “From our perspective, that’s a fantastic silver lining,” Greenwood said. Yet there was one surprise in the data: only 49 percent of respondents described their experience of talking about mental health at work as positive.

“There is still a lot of work to be done to build a supportive culture of mental health at work, particularly better equipping managers and colleagues with the skills to be able to have these difficult conversations, as well as navigating the resources they can use to get support,” said Greenwood.

Getting Better

How can nonprofit employers do better? There are two overarching issues they should keep in mind. First, **recognize that mental health is a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) issue.** Mental health affects different populations in different ways, based on cultural norms as well as the level of stigma about discussing it in different communities. And helping people move beyond the stigma to seek access to mental health services can be challenging. “In the workplace, when you’re already part of a historically underrepresented community, it’s a lot harder to raise your hand about a mental health challenge,” Greenwood said. “So investing in DEI to support employee mental health and addressing the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender, is really crucial.” Greenwood suggests leaders foster a sense of inclusion and belonging by having intersectional conversations around mental health, and addressing the unique needs of different communities as they pertain to mental health and the culture of work—whether by offering diverse and culturally competent mental health providers or tackling organizational issues of inequity and exclusion.

Nonprofit leaders should also consider the **set of circumstances unique to nonprofits** that make recognizing the importance of mental health especially critical. Nonprofits are often under-resourced compared with their for-profit counterparts, both in terms of financial and human capital, and their staff also often work long, intense hours because of their commitment to the mission. “There is so much desire to see the positive impact from your work, and you’re sometimes working directly with populations that are experiencing trauma, so it’s nearly impossible for those dual stressors to not have an effect on your employees,” Greenwood added.

Keeping these two broad issues in mind, there are a number of steps nonprofit leaders can take to build a more supportive mental health culture in their workplaces.

Resources and Services from Mind Share Partners

Greenwood and her colleagues at Mind Share Partners offer a number of ways that nonprofit leaders can start their journeys for creating more supportive mental health cultures.

Toolkits and Downloads: Best practices and insights from the field, scientific research, and high-performing managers and professionals managing mental health challenges.

Mental Health Now: On-demand learning for workplace mental health.

Training and Advising: Tailored training and advising solutions. (Mind Share Partners offers deeply discounted services for nonprofit organizations with 25 to 500 full-time employees).

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1. Encourage a culture of “inclusive flexibility.” “Everyone needs something different based on their unique identity,” said Greenwood, “whether that is racial identity, caregiver identity, roommate status, or something else. And those factors can change both across people and also over time within the same person.” Leaders should encourage managers to conduct one-on-one check-ins with direct reports so they can understand what each individual needs to make them most successful in the workplace, regardless of whether that person has a diagnosable mental health condition. “Steps like these check-ins support the mental health of everybody, as well as foster an environment where the necessary flexibility is possible.”

2. Be a champion for employee resource groups. Employee resource groups help employees in many ways, but executive-level support and advocacy is critical to the success of these groups. Also recognize that there can be a useful interplay between the mental health employee resource group as well as other affinity groups in an organization, which can offer a safe space for individuals to discuss their challenges. “We found in our study that allowing employees to openly discuss challenging social and political topics at work is also part of a mentally healthy culture,” said Greenwood. “Being able to talk about these things that are going on and affecting us all is really important.”

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3. Be a leader ally. “Ninety-one percent of study respondents believe that a company’s culture should support mental health, and doing so just requires leadership and intention, not necessarily financial resources,” she added. “Culture change requires both top-down and bottom-up approaches working in tandem. From a leadership perspective, what we find to be arguably the most valuable, is having leader allies,” she said. Leaders who openly talk in a hopeful, supportive way about their own experiences with mental health, or, with permission, about the experiences of others, normalize mental health challenges for their employees.

“That level of vulnerability and transparency does wonders for giving the rest of the team permission to talk about mental health at work and seek support as needed,” she added. And don’t discount the power of modelling mentally healthy behaviors. “If you say to your direct report, ‘Hey, you don’t need to respond to email at night,’ or ‘You don’t need to work on vacation,’ but you’re not doing those things yourself, folks aren’t going to feel like they can do that in practice,” Greenwood said.

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Leaning into these efforts can create a more supportive, open mental health culture that can have many benefits. The 2021 study showed that when employees feel comfortable talking about their mental health at work, they're more satisfied with their jobs and less likely to leave. In addition, respondents who felt supported by their employer tended to be less likely to experience mental health symptoms, were less likely to underperform, and were less likely to miss work. Despite these long-term benefits, some organizations still only think about mental health at times of crises. Instead, Greenwood suggests, organizations should take a proactive approach: build a mental health culture that doesn't just meet the demands of a crises but creates a workplace where everyone thrives.

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