

# Understanding Mental Health in the Workplace

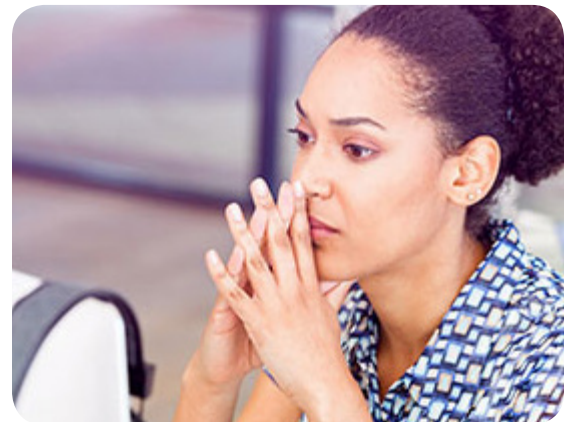
By Kelly Greenwood

Organizations increasingly support the physical health of their employees with healthy snacks, subsidized gym memberships, even walking meetings. However, few do the same for mental health, and may not even realize the consequences of ignoring what it means to have a truly healthy employee.

As the leader of a nonprofit, the mental health of your employees is an important concern. Anyone in your position understands that a stressful, resource-constrained work environment can test employee health and wellness. And putting one's heart and soul into an under-resourced organization for the greater good can be exhausting in and of itself. Add to this the pressure of working with beneficiaries who may be experiencing major hardships, and the environment quickly becomes ripe for triggering existing mental health conditions or bringing latent ones to the surface. This matters in the workplace because your employees' mental health contributes to the effectiveness of your organization.

The unique nature of nonprofit work makes understanding this issue all the more important. Here are five things that you might not know about how mental health appears at work and how greater awareness can help your organization.

**1. Mental health conditions are incredibly common.** In any given year, nearly 20 percent of US adults have a mental health condition<sup>1</sup> (and over 50 percent will manage a



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<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Ahrnsbrak et al., "Key Substance Use and Mental Health Indicators in the United States: Results from the 2016 National Survey on Drug Use and Health," Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, September 2017, <https://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content/SMA17-5044/SMA17-5044.pdf>.

condition at some point in their lives<sup>2</sup>). We are more likely to experience a mental health condition than cancer, heart disease, or diabetes—combined.<sup>3</sup>

**2. Your best employees may have a mental health condition.** Despite the stigma of mental health diagnoses, the same conditions that can create occasional challenges can also drive success. For example, people with anxiety may be more driven to excellence. Those with bipolar disorder can be highly creative and have periods of tremendous productivity. Additionally, those with mental health conditions tend to have greater empathy for others' struggles, which can translate to strong management skills.

**3. Most people hide their conditions at work.** Even though mental health conditions may affect your own staff, you might not realize it because of the lengths they go to in order to “cover” their symptoms. According to a [RAND study](#), more than two-thirds of employees hide their conditions from their coworkers. A [Deloitte UK study](#) found that 95 percent of people who have taken time off due to stress gave another reason, such as a headache or stomach issue. Covering is an added burden for already struggling employees, one sometimes greater than the condition itself. It diminishes an employee's sense of personal opportunity and his or her commitment to an organization, leading to decreased engagement.<sup>4</sup>

**4. Because of the stigma, most workers don't get treatment.** Eight out of 10 workers with a mental health condition report that shame and stigma prevent them from seeking treatment that can typically be very effective.<sup>5</sup> In addition, regular therapy appointments are difficult to keep when employees feel they can't explain why they need time out of the office, often on a weekly basis.

**5. Addressing mental health at work results in major cost savings.** By some estimates, approximately \$17 billion is lost in productivity annually<sup>6</sup> when organizations fail to support employees with mental health conditions. It manifests in leaves of absence, as well as in employee absenteeism and “presenteeism” (going to work without being productive). Acknowledgement of and support for mental health generates cost savings and higher morale, which can make your organization a more inclusive and desirable place to work.<sup>7</sup>

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2 Aaron Reuben and Jonathan Schaefer, “Mental Illness Is Far More Common Than We Knew,” *Scientific American*, July 14, 2017, <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/mental-illness-is-far-more-common-than-we-knew/>.

3 Ibid.

4 Kenji Yoshino and Christie Smith, “Uncovering Talent: A New Model of Inclusion,” Deloitte University, December 2013, <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/us/Documents/about-deloitte/us-inclusion-uncovering-talent-paper.pdf>.

5 “StigmaFree Company,” National Alliance on Mental Illness, <https://www.nami.org/stigmafreeco>.

6 RP Hertz and CL Baker, “The Impact of Mental Disorders on Work,” Pfizer Outcomes Research Publication No P0002981, 2002.

7 Henry G. Harder, Shannon L. Wagner, and Joshua A. Rash Gower, *Mental Illness in the Workplace: Psychological Disability Management* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

Despite these benefits, very few organizations have a culture of openness around mental health or supports in place to accommodate people's needs. Leaves of absence and employee assistance programs are typically insufficient Band-Aid solutions that don't lead to positive culture change. Worse, they can force struggling employees further into the shadows.

Instead, nonprofit leaders can support mental health by making sincere efforts to reduce the stigma. For example, leaders and managers can share their own experiences, or those of close family members or friends, to create transparency and acceptance. This can make it easier for employees to ask for help if they need it, taking some of the fear out of disclosure. In addition, organizations can train managers to recognize the signs of mental health conditions and support struggling employees. Lastly, nonprofits can make it easy for staff to keep therapy appointments and encourage a healthy work-life balance despite pressing priorities and resource constraints. Both your employees and your budget will thank you.

*In the second article of this two-part series, Kelly Greenwood will offer practical guidance on how you and your organization can better support employees with mental health conditions.*



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