

# Five Ways to Create a Culture of Openness at Work Around Mental Health

By Kelly Greenwood

Over 50 percent of all people will manage a mental health condition in their lifetime.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, it's likely that your organization will at some point have an employee who struggles with a one.

In our [first article](#), we shared how to begin to build an awareness around mental health throughout your organization. The second article in our two-part series tackles how you can think through creating a culture that is open about mental health at work. What does it mean to have an open culture? How can you talk about mental health and share experiences? And most important, what can you do if a direct report or colleague needs help navigating his or her mental health condition at work?

Multiple fields comprise mental health in the workplace: therapy and wellness; HR and law; and business management. To build a workplace culture supportive of mental health, solutions should consider each area of expertise. In our work at Mind Share Partners, we've found that the following five steps help leaders and their organizations create a culture of openness for discussing and achieving mental wellness.

## 1. Awareness is the first step.

Mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, and bipolar disorder are extremely common—20 percent of employees will struggle in any given year.<sup>2</sup> Most



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1 Aaron Reuben and Jonathan Schaefer, "Mental Illness Is Far More Common Than We Knew," *Scientific American*, July 14, 2017.

2 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.

people, however, hide their mental health conditions from their employers and don't seek treatment given current stigma. Shame prevents roughly 80 percent of employees from seeking treatment, even though treatments are typically very effective. Being aware of the scope and nature of the issue can help leaders, managers, and employees take steps toward building an open culture and contribute to breaking down the stigma.

## **2. Demonstrate vulnerability to help create a culture of trust.**

One of the most powerful things you can do as a leader is to demonstrate vulnerability. This helps create an open dialogue around mental health, builds trust, and supports other difficult conversations you might have within your organization. Be candid with your team about struggles that you, a family member, or a friend has faced, whether mental health-related or not. If you do talk about mental health (in this context or others), never treat it as something to be ashamed of or that can't be overcome. Instead, be an empathetic ally.

## **3. Be comfortable discussing mental health at work.**

When an employee brings up a mental health challenge, it is okay not to have the perfect answer right out of the gate. It is most important to exhibit a level of comfort and willingness to discuss the topic. Preface your conversation with something like, "This might not come out right, but I want to make sure I get the important things across." In doing this, you relieve some of the pressure to flawlessly articulate your thoughts. As with other difficult conversations, it also is critical to listen actively with an open mind, with care, and without judgment. Reassure your employee that your workplace is a safe environment for this conversation. Thank them for sharing with you, let them know that your organization values them, and express support without acting like a therapist. You don't have to figure out the solution to how you will navigate this at work during the first conversation if one or both of you isn't yet ready. That said, do make a plan for the employee to follow up with you or with whomever your employee feels most comfortable.

## **4. Don't make assumptions.**

You never know what is truly going on with someone else. An employee who appears to be her normal self or to be having a physical problem like gastrointestinal issues may actually be experiencing a mental health challenge. On the flip side, you may think that someone else is struggling with a mental health condition when in fact he is going through a bad break-up or another personal issue. Don't make assumptions about what is or isn't going on with an employee. As a leader, it's never your job to diagnose someone or act like a therapist. It is important, however, to learn to balance being a caring human and a compliant professional. An employer can never force anyone to disclose a mental health condition, but if a direct report does, it's your job to keep it confidential and not discriminate.

## **5. Provide reasonable job accommodations.**

Many of our Mind Share Partners' peer group participants express frustration that the burden to come up with a solution on how to manage mental health at work is often placed on the employee. If you or a manager suspects that a direct report is struggling with a mental health condition, check in with HR to make sure you understand all the

nuances and available resources. There is a lot that can be done within a manager's span of control. Discuss with HR the steps you and your organization can take to accommodate an employee's needs before suggesting the standard leave of absence, which often can be avoided. That way, the employee and manager (with HR's guidance as needed) can co-create the most appropriate path forward. This will vary by the type of mental health condition and the experience of the person with the condition has had managing it. Some of the options your organization can offer include: time off for therapy appointments; flexible working location and/or hours; physical changes to the work environment (e.g, lighting, location of desk); and temporarily shifted responsibilities.

Nonprofit leaders who take these steps build trust and goodwill with employees and provide benefits that can prove attractive in an organization's recruiting and retention efforts. How an organization supports mental health can be shared with job candidates, during new hire orientation, as well as during all-staff meetings, where senior leaders can share their experiences with managing mental health conditions (their own or in an ally capacity). This willingness to support mental wellness creates space for employees to start talking and goes a long way to helping break the stigma of mental health conditions.

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