

Workplace Wellbeing

Talking about Mental Health in the Workplace

Depending on which generation you are from, for many, talking about mental health in the workplace maybe something you never imagined being discussed in the world of human resources, leadership, and employee satisfaction. However, questions about how to discuss mental health in the workplace are some of the most commonly asked by today's workplaces, leaders, and employees.

In the past, talking about your own mental health struggles in the workplace or asking an employee about their mental health were both strongly discouraged. The workplace was seen as a place you didn't want to appear "weak", and as a leader, at times it almost reflected a don't ask don't tell philosophy. Thankfully, through the continuous work to eliminate the stigma related to mental health, significant research has been conducted demonstrating the benefits for both businesses and employees when they are able to discuss mental health in the workplace. When mental health can safely be discussed in the workplace, employees tend to demonstrate increases in job performance and productivity, lower rates of burnout, and increased feelings of engagement in the workplace. Businesses that welcome these conversations see lower turnover rates and increased rates of successful recruitment. They also experience higher employee ratings of social inclusion and lower rates of absenteeism or presenteeism.

It is important to get comfortable with discussion mental health in the workplace regardless of your role. This guide offers insight and considerations for preparing to discuss mental health with employees and leaders.

Here are some general considerations for discussing mental health regardless of you role.

1. **Timing is important:** Plan to have the conversation when there is enough time and neither person will feel rushed. It is best to plan for about 30 minutes to an hour.
2. **Understand available resources:** Whether you are an employee, a supervisor, or a CEO, it is important for you to know the mental health benefits and resources your company offers such as Employee Assistance Program(EAP) or Employee Resource Groups(ERP). In addition, it can be helpful to know some of the local resources such as the local NAMI group and 988 suicide and crisis hotline.
3. **Seek information about mental health:** Reach out to local providers or outreach groups and inquire about learning & training opportunities related to understanding mental health such as Mental Health First Aid.

Talking About Your Mental Health

Deciding to talk about your mental health with your supervisor or employer can feel overwhelming. However, thoughtful preparation increases the chances the discussion leads to increased support and overall positive outcomes. The sooner you reach out for support and share about your mental health, the easier it is to address current needs and any that may arise in the future.

1. **Self-Reflect:** Spend time reflecting on the current situation. Make a list of the factors impacting you in and out of the workplace. Try to put together a timeline that includes significant changes, your attempts to cope, problem solve, or manage your symptoms independently, especially within the workplace. Reflect on how the situation not only impacts you but others as well.
2. **Decision Making:** What do you need right now? What is the starting place? What process or approach has been helpful in the past? Who will you talk to? What resources would be helpful? There are many decisions to make as you prepare for the conversation
 - a. **What resources, support, or accommodations are you requesting?** It is best to have some realistic options in mind. The more clear and direct you can be in expressing your needs the better.
 - b. **What information/details do you need to share and are you comfortable with sharing?** The information you share should be directly related to how you are being impacted at work or what outside impacts may affect your presence or performance at work.
 - c. **Who will you talk to?** It is great whenever you can have the discussion with your direct supervisor or manager, but it is okay to reflect on your feelings of safety and trust with members of leadership. For some it may feel most comfortable to speak with HR and have them assist in speaking with your direct leaders. It is also important to keep in mind if you talk with your supervisor, they may still be obligated to talk with their manager or HR in order to follow company policy. Be prepared to discuss who else will need to know.
3. **Prepare and Practice:** Now that you have completed the decision making, it's time to prepare for the actual conversation. It's normal to have some nervousness or emotions related to having the conversation, and it's also really important to be clear, concise and direct in your delivery and request. Try free writing or typing the conversation out just as you would imagine saying it. This will help to get the words out and reduce the intensity of any nerves or emotions that are likely to come up. You can also practice the conversation in the mirror or with a trusted person. Remember, you can choose how much you want or need to share. It may be as simple as "I've been having a hard time the last couple of weeks and need to take the next couple of days off. Is that okay?" or it could be more complex, either way practicing can help you feel more confident and grounded when having the actual conversation.
4. **Schedule and Share:** Now it's time to have the actual conversation. If you don't have a regular meeting time established that would be appropriate for the conversation, or if you need to meet sooner, with someone else etc, reach out and make a meeting request. Be sure to communicate where you would like to meet and how long you will need. Take some of your lists or ideas with you regarding what would be helpful or what you have identified as your needs. Remember to breathe during your conversation as it can help you to stay grounded. After sharing practice empathy for yourself and the other person as they will be doing their best to respond. Keep an open mind as you begin collaborating on what options are available.



When an Employee Discloses Mental Health

- Most leaders feel passionate about wanting to be present and supportive to their team members. Trust is important in all workplace relationships. Being present in a supportive way when an employee discloses about their mental health can greatly enhance the trust in the professional relationship. Many leaders identify this as their goal, but also identify feeling unsure they have the tools needed to do so, feeling worried about saying the wrong thing, and feeling defeated when they can offer a solution. These are normal experiences. Every leader goes through them for a variety of situations. One thing to always remember is that as a leader you are never required to have all of the answers and many times as a leader, the best thing you can do is to truly listen. With listening as your foundation, there are some additional things you can do to support your employee in the moment as well as set the stage for productive collaboration and ongoing conversations.
- **Say Thank You and Give Acknowledgement:** The employee that just disclosed has likely spent a lot of time making the decision to do so and to prepare for the conversation with you. It certainly takes courage and trust, so start your response with "Thank you for sharing". Next provide acknowledgement by reflecting back what you heard them say, what the take away messages were.
- **Remain Grounded and Open:** When someone discloses, you want to make sure your response is not one of panic or alarm. Everyone has mental health just like physical health. You want your response and ongoing conversation to be consistent in tone and nature of any other conversation in your relationship. You don't have to attempt to be more friendly and nor should you avoid or try to distance from it. Rather you want to remain calm, engaged, and open minded. Avoid making assumptions about the severity of symptoms or any other details. If you have additional questions, use open ended questions such as "could you tell me more about___"
- **Offer Empathy, Not Comparison:** Empathy is when we express to someone we see them and their current situation. It communicates that we can imagine or understand what they might be thinking or feeling. Empathy is not communicating that we have been through the same thing or something similar. As humans, sitting with other's distress is uncomfortable and sometimes we want to give them a hopeful example like "my nephew experienced depression but is doing great now" this type of comparison is not helpful. Try not to disclose things about your own mental health or others during the conversation. Keep the conversation about the employee and what they are sharing.
- **Communicate Support Transparently:** It is good to express to the person that you care about their wellbeing and want to support them. It is also critical that you do not overpromise or exaggerate what support you can offer. If they are disclosing the information to you as an FYI, you can ask them for what would be most supportive at this time. If they disclose and request for resources or accommodations, you can still express you care about them, want to support them, and to do so you will need to collaborate with upper management/HR etc. It's okay to thank them for providing possible solutions and rather than saying you will make them all happen, say you will explore them further with___ and schedule follow up time.



- **Address Confidentiality:** It is important during the conversation to be transparent about whether there is anyone else you will need to talk to about the disclosure. If you will need to talk to someone else, try to give as much detail about what you may be sharing and how you will communicate if there are any changes regarding who you need to share with or what you need to share. The employee may even seek your help to share the information with another leader, if so, discuss further what they hope this looks like and if possible offer your support for them to share the information directly with you present.
- **Offer Resources & Seek Information:** Every leader should know available company resources such as EAP, ERPs, and how to access in-network providers for your company's insurance carrier. Take the time to educate yourself on this information and perhaps even create an easy to use handout for leaders of all levels to use anytime someone makes a disclosure. You don't have to be an expert on mental health when you have this available.
- **Consider Options & Impacts:** Often, your response may be something simple such as making it safe for the person to disclose mental health symptoms as a reason for missed work or re-arranging schedule to attend therapy appointments. Other times there will be opportunities to reflect on company policies, practices, and resources and determine if there are larger system changes that could benefit the everyone. It may also be necessary to include the HR department for approving formal work accommodations. If this is the case, it is important to also consider any rippling impacts such as if the person's team mates will have questions or do they have a potential to impact team dynamics. If so, it is crucial to have additional conversations including the person to discuss what responses could be or need to be. This ensures the employee can have time to prepare for them or provide input on their willingness or desire to address team members directly.
 - There may be some requests made by employees which requires you to seek outside information. It is good to seek professional advice from other HR professionals, legal counsel, and industry experts when needed.

Additional Resources

- [Mental Health America's Workplace Mental Health Resources](#)
- [Job Accommodation Network](#)-Provides extensive list of accommodations by condition, limitation or work related function
- [Center for Workplace Mental Health](#) (American Psychiatric Association)
- [Mind Share Partners- Workplace Mental Health Toolkits and downloads](#)

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