

No Longer Taboo: Mental Health in the Workplace (November 2022)

As we learn from the business community, we want to share that information with our community of educators and business professionals. Multiple conversations with business professionals illustrated the need for businesses to engage in discussions and action surrounding mental health and well-being. The following Action Brief is a synthesis of those conversations and findings from additional research.

Mental Health Support Gets Prioritized

According to Mind Share Partners' [2021 Mental Health at Work Report](#), workplace mental health is “at a catalytic point in time.” After hearing from 1,500 U.S. full-time workers, the report concludes there is an “urgent need to better prioritize mental health at work moving forward.” Mental Health America corroborates this dire declaration, as [data from its 2023 key findings](#) indicate that in 2019–2020, nearly 21% of American adults experienced a mental illness—which is over 50 million people.

Participants from futuring panels conducted in several different states echoed this sentiment, sharing that now—perhaps more than ever—businesses need to be mindful of and engage in conversations about mental health and well-being with employees and customers.

The call for increased mental health support has not always been a high priority. Panel participants explained that the topic of mental health was never discussed in the workplace until recently, as it was considered taboo. In a [Harvard Business Review article](#), Kelly Greenwood and Julia Anas write that as recently as 2020, mental health support was considered a “nice-to-have” rather than the “true business imperative” it is today.

Why the Call for Mental Health Support Is Happening Now

There are a few reasons the mental health conversation has changed. Unsurprisingly, the COVID-19 pandemic played a large role in bringing mental health concerns to the forefront. Panel participants shared that the pandemic impacted people in a variety of roles—students, teachers, workers, frontline staff, parents, caregivers of elderly parents or family members with disabilities, nursing home staff—and that many experienced work-life balance challenges and remote fatigue (a feeling of disconnect and lack of motivation from working remotely).

In an article outlining [the impact of the pandemic on workers' mental health](#), Allen Smith writes that feelings of isolation and anxiety were amplified by fears of exposure and infection. According to an article by the National Institute for Health Care Management (NIHCM), in fall 2020, “[51% of people reported worse mental health](#) at work since COVID-19 started.”

Additionally, panel participants say the past few years have been especially marked by social and political activism. The murder of George Floyd, [write Greenwood and Anas](#),—as well as increased violence against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders—shined the spotlight on long-existing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) issues that impact mental health.

Compounded by other stressors like natural disasters, at-home schooling, and [the impact of the #MeToo movement](#), these factors combined to make mental health support a more integrated part of the workplace, available to all employees—and not treated as just an individual employee issue. As the

nation continues to grapple with ongoing challenges, many feel it is crucial for employers to address the issues of mental health directly and to engage in discussion and support plans for employee health and safety.

Employees aren't the only ones motivated to address declining mental health. Employers also feel the pressure to provide mental health support in the workplace to support a business's bottom line.

As Philip G. Levendusky, PhD, states in [What Employers Need to Know About Mental Health in the Workplace](#), "Addressing employee mental health is cost-effective for the employer and beneficial for the employee." He goes on to say, "When employees receive effective treatment for mental illness, the result is lower total medical costs, increased productivity, lower absenteeism, and decreased disability costs."

So, it's true that businesses may indeed be motivated to respond to this mental health challenge out of concern for their employees and customers. But it's also true—and perhaps more likely—that employers must address mental health to positively impact a business's overall productivity and success.

What Does Mental Health Support in the Workplace Look Like?

Without legislation to more permanently address the many social stressors—such as a lack of universal childcare, eldercare support, or a [living wage](#)—impacting mental health, businesses find themselves in a position to step in and alleviate these challenges for their employees and customers. According to panel participants, here are three ways businesses can (and do) support and prioritize mental health:

Workplace flexibility. In response to the growing issue of mental health, there is a move toward designing work and workplace policies to recognize the need for the overall well-being of workers. The primary issues center on family-friendly policies, [work-life balance](#), and support for the personal and the professional. Strategies to operationalize workplace flexibility include the following:

- Paid family and medical leave for families and all genders
- Unlimited paid time off (IT and Tech are creating more remote work flexibility)
- Managers have to encourage employees to take leave

Mindful leadership. Change often starts at the top. Panel participants shared that supporting mental health requires leaders who recognize its importance. This includes destigmatizing mental health issues, making the working environment reflective of employee needs, and encouraging self-care and self-advocacy. Additionally, employers should:

- Lead with emotional intelligence and empathy
- Understand personal biases
- Demonstrate cultural sensitivity
- Practice prevention tactics and skills

Chief Well-Being Officers—An emerging occupation. Training, awareness, and support for mental health in the workplace are becoming necessary. As a result, businesses need employees to support these needs and to conduct training and development in the future. In an article for [The Future of Customer Engagement and Experience](#), Joey Price explains that Chief Well-Being Officers—also called Chief Wellness Officers—are emerging occupations whose responsibility is to “oversee the

creation and maintenance of a culture that promotes advocacy, openness, and support within their organizations.”

What Does the Future Hold?

Integrating mental health support in the workplace is a multifaceted issue that will take time, energy, and resources. However, as one panel participant said, “We have to be ready to take care of our people.” At the end of the day, that’s the driving force behind these endeavors: supporting each other. Only time will tell how successful that effort has been.

Links for Further Reading:

- [How Businesses Can Address Mental Health in the Workplace](#)
- [Ways to Look After Your Mental Health at Times of Political Uncertainty](#)
- [Managing Mental Health During Social Movements and Civil Unrest](#)
- [The Role of Mental Health in DEI](#)
- [The Rise of the Chief Well-Being Officer](#)

Discussion Questions:

- Have you experienced remote work, either through school or your job? If so, what was that experience like? How did it impact your mood and overall well-being (if at all)?
- Have you ever worked somewhere (including school) that doesn’t prioritize mental health? What was that experience like? What would improve that working environment?
- What role does (or will) mental health support play in your job or job search? Is it important to you—and if so, how important?
- What type(s) of mental health support strategies (e.g., workplace flexibility, mindful leadership, access to counseling, community support and engagement) appeal most to you? What strategies aren’t included in this article that should be added?
- What are your initial impressions of Chief Well-Being Officers (CWOs)? Do you think they are necessary? In what way(s) might CWOs be helpful or unhelpful for businesses and employees?
- What role does ethics play in mental health support demonstrated by businesses? What ethical principles (e.g., integrity, transparency, trust) are involved in this topic?

Sources:

- [Mind Share Partners’ 2021 Mental Health at Work Report](#)
- [The State of Mental Health in America](#)
- [It’s a New Era for Mental Health at Work](#)
- [Ongoing Pandemic Takes Toll on Workers’ Mental Health](#)
- [COVID-19’s Impact on Mental Health and Workplace Well-Being](#)
- [Survey Finds #MeToo Movement Affects Mental and Physical Health](#)



- [What Employers Need to Know About Mental Health in the Workplace](#)
- [How Raising the Minimum Wage Can Be a Win for Mental Health](#)
- [Two Incomes, No Time: The Struggle Is Real for Many Working Parents, Survey Finds](#)
- [Break the Cycle of Professional Burnout: Meet the Chief Well-Being Officer](#)