

Addressing Mental Health and Ending Stigma in the Workplace: Taking the Next Step, Moving from Awareness to Action!

The need to support employee and volunteer mental health and wellness in the nonprofit sector has reached a critical point and leaders/managers are now faced with helping their employees/volunteers deal with an unprecedented amount of stress, mental exhaustion, and isolation. Fortunately for them the time is right for change to happen.

3 Goals to Supporting Mental Health in the workplace:

1. Normalize conversations about mental health.
2. Promote the acceptance and inclusion of those dealing with a mental health challenge.
3. To cultivate a culture of empathy, psychological safety, and wellness. By improving support systems, spreading awareness, and creating a safe environment for discussion to take place.

To address mental health, you have to understand stigma and the power it has over people's decisions to seek help. Stigma can also cause people to doubt themselves and their abilities, and in terms of those suffering it may even cause them to leave their position just so they do not have to disclose what they are dealing with.

Two Types of Stigma

1. **Social Stigma**, which involves the prejudiced attitudes others have around mental illness.
2. **Self-Perceived Stigma**, which involves an internalized stigma the person with the mental illness suffers from.

Myths about Mental Illness – that MUST be addressed

Mental illness is caused by weakness

Mental illness is an excuse for laziness

People who suffer can feel better whenever they want

People choose to be mentally ill

Mental illness is all in someone's head

These myths have added to the powerful stigma now attributed to mental illness and addiction while at the same time they criticize and diminish those suffering. Mental illness is a treatable disease and treatment options now have an overwhelming success rate. Yet, stigma alone keeps many from getting help and sometimes suffering in silence for years—that is why these myths are so dangerous.

5 Strategies that any size nonprofit can implement to help cultivate a culture of empathy and support

1. **Create a Safe Environment** to discuss and address mental health related issues.
 - This precedent should be set by organizational leadership.
 - Provide safe environments, both in person and online, to discuss and educate the staff on mental health related topics, psychological safety, and wellness.
 - **(This must happen first before anything else)**
2. **Allow For Accommodations**
 - Flexibility options can include: working nontraditional hours, compressed work weeks, hybrid office hours, and telecommuting.
 - It's essential to support an employee/volunteer efforts to seek treatment for a mental health issue, this may include: time off to attend appointments, or a move to a quieter work space or environment.
3. **Share Stories** (across all levels)
 - One of the best ways to break down stigma is by listening to and reading stories of lived experiences (those living with mental illness, in recovery, or taking care of someone living with mental illness).
 - When leaders are vulnerable and share their experiences, or the experiences of those closest to them, it helps create transparency and acceptance in the workplace.
 - Sharing stories makes it easier for employees/volunteers to ask for help when they need it; these stories can help take the fear out of their own disclosure.
4. **Educate** employees/volunteers and managers about mental illness.
 - Promote mental health through in-service trainings, panel discussions, and workshops on mental health awareness and how to recognize signs of stress and poor mental health.
 - Train managers and supervisors to be aware of the signs of mental health issues and how to respond to them appropriately.
 - **Mental Health First Aid** training is a great place to start. Training is offered through a local NAMI chapter at no cost.
5. **Make Wellness a Priority**
 - Encourage work/life balance and promote exercise, healthy eating, and participation in leisure activities to improve mental health.
 - Wellness programs can bring employees/volunteers together and foster a friendly competitiveness in the office.
 - Recognize employees/volunteers for great work, recognition supports well-being and morale.

Strategies ANYONE can use to support employee and volunteer mental health:

- Check-in and listen (regularly)
- Practice gratitude
- Create no-meeting days
- Encourage self-care breaks
- Celebrate small wins together
- Make it OK to talk about feelings and uncertainty
- Recognize and reward good work – timely, authentically, and personalized!

Employees & Volunteers who feel safe and cared for at work - and feel the organization is looking out for them - are more productive, more loyal, and more engaged!

Today’s workforce is asking for more than just salary and title, research shows they want:

- Access to new technology
- Flexible work schedule
- Positive work culture
- Professional development & mentoring
- For their organization to care about mental health and wellness.



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Mental Health Employer Cost Calculator

This cost calculator is a tool that provides organizational leadership specific information about the cost of mental health in their workplace based on the size of employee base, industry, and state.

- The National Safety Council has collaborated with an independent research institution, NORC at the University of Chicago, to create a tool demonstrating the cost of employee mental health and illness for employers.
- Link: <https://www.nsc.org/mentalhealthatwork#/>