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8 Ways Managers Can Support Employees' Mental Health

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Illustration by Marco Vannini

Summary. According to recent research, 42% of global employees have experience in mental health since the pandemic began. What can managers do to support their team members during these trying times? The authors offer eight concrete actions managers... **more**

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Uncertainty breeds anxiety, and we are living in uncertain times. Between rising numbers of Covid-19 cases, questions about whether or not to reopen economies and businesses, the ongoing protests in the wake of George Floyd's murder, and the economic fallout of the pandemic, we don't know what will come next. And that's taking a toll on our mental health, including at work.

We saw an impact early in the pandemic. At the end of March and in early April, our nonprofit organization, Mind Share Partners, conducted a study of global employees in partnership with Qualtrics and SAP. We found that the mental health of almost 42% of respondents had declined since the outbreak began. Given all that's happened between then and now, we can only imagine that the figure has increased. Much has been said about this short-term mental health impact, and the long-term effects are likely to be even more far-reaching.

Prior to the pandemic, many companies had increased their focus on workplace mental health (often in response to pressure from employees). Those efforts are even more imperative today.

As we navigate various transitions over the coming months and years, leaders are likely to see employees struggle with anxiety, depression, burnout, trauma, and PTSD. Those mental health experiences will differ according to race, economic opportunity, citizenship status, job type, parenting and caregiving responsibilities, and many other variables. So, what can managers and leaders do to support people as they face new stressors, safety concerns, and economic upheaval? Here's our advice.

What Can Managers Do?

Even in the most uncertain of times, the role of a manager remains the same: to support your team members. That includes supporting their mental health. The good news is that many of the tools you need to do so are the same ones that make you an effective manager.

Be vulnerable. One silver lining of the pandemic is that it is normalizing mental health challenges. Almost everyone has experienced some level of discomfort. But the universality of the experience will translate into a decrease in stigma only if people, especially people in power, share their experiences. Being honest about your mental health struggles as a leader opens the door for employees to feel comfortable talking with you about mental health challenges of their own.

Prior to the pandemic, the biotech firm Roche Genentech produced videos in which senior leaders talked about their mental health. They were shared on the company intranet as part of a campaign called #Let'sTalk. The company then empowered "mental health champions" — a network of employees trained to help build awareness for mental health — to make videos about their experiences, which were used as part of the company's various mental health awareness campaigns. (See the editor's note below regarding our relationships with this company and others mentioned in this article.)

Those of us working from home have had no choice but to be transparent about our lives, whether our kids have crashed our video meetings or our coworkers have gotten glimpses of our homes. When managers describe their challenges, whether mental-health-related or not, it makes them appear human, relatable, and brave. Research has shown that authentic leadership can cultivate trust and improve employee engagement and performance.

Model healthy behaviors. Don't just say you support mental health. Model it so that your team members feel they can prioritize self-care and set boundaries. More often than not,

managers are so focused on their team's well-being and on getting the work done that they forget to take care of themselves. Share that you're taking a walk in the middle of the day, having a therapy appointment, or prioritizing a staycation (and actually turning off email) so that you don't burn out.

Build a culture of connection through check-ins. Intentionally checking in with each of your direct reports on a regular basis is more critical than ever. That was important but often underutilized in pre-pandemic days. Now, with so many people working from home, it can be even harder to notice the signs that someone is struggling. In our study with Qualtrics and SAP, nearly 40% of global employees said that no one at their company had asked them if they were doing OK — and those respondents were 38% more likely than others to say that their mental health had declined since the outbreak.

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Go beyond a simple "How are you?" and ask specific questions about what supports would be helpful. Wait for the full answer. Really listen, and encourage questions and concerns. Of course, be careful not to be overbearing; that could signal a lack of trust or a desire to micromanage.

When someone shares that they're struggling, you won't always know what to say or do. What's most important is to make space to hear how your team members are truly doing and to be compassionate. They may not want to share much detail, which is completely fine. Knowing that they can is what matters.

Offer flexibility and be inclusive. Expect that the situation, your team's needs, and your own needs will continue to change. Check in regularly — particularly at transition points. You can help problem-solve any issues that come up only if you know what's happening. Those conversations will also give you an opportunity to reiterate norms and practices that support mental health. Inclusive flexibility is about proactive communication and norm-setting that helps people design and preserve the boundaries they need.

Don't make assumptions about what your direct reports need; they will most likely need different things at different times. Take a customized approach to addressing stressors, such as challenges with childcare or feeling the need to work all the time. Proactively offer flexibility. Be as generous and realistic as possible. Basecamp CEO Jason Fried recently announced that employees with any type of caretaking responsibilities could set their own schedules, even if that meant working fewer hours. Being accommodating doesn't necessarily mean lowering your standards. Flexibility can help your team thrive amid the continued uncertainty.

Normalize and model this new flexibility by highlighting how you've changed your own behavior. Stacey Sprenkel, a partner at the law firm Morrison & Foerster, proactively told her teams that she was working odd hours because of her childcare responsibilities and invited them to share what they needed to work best during the pandemic.

Ask team members to be patient and understanding with one another as they adapt. Trust them and assume the best. They are relying on you and will remember how you treated them during this unprecedented time.

Communicate more than you think you need to. Our study with Qualtrics and SAP showed that employees who felt their managers were not good at communicating have been 23% more likely than others to experience mental health declines since the outbreak. Make sure you keep your team informed about any organizational changes or updates. Clarify any modified work hours and norms. Remove stress where possible by setting expectations about workloads, prioritizing what must get done, and acknowledging what can slide if necessary.

Make your team aware of available mental health resources and encourage them to use them. Almost 46% of all workers in our study said that their company had not proactively shared those. If you've shared them once, share them again. And be aware

that shame and stigma prevent many employees from using their mental health benefits to seek treatment, so normalize the use of those services.

Although managers will be on the front lines of addressing mental health issues, it's on the most-senior leaders in your company to take action as well.

What Else Can Organizational Leaders Do?

In our 2019 Mental Health at Work Report, issued in partnership with SAP and Qualtrics, the most commonly desired workplace mental health resources were a more open and accepting culture, clearer information about where to go or whom to ask for support, and training.

Mental health symptoms are just as common in the C-Suite as among individual contributors. Sharing your own mental health challenges and modeling healthy behavior are two of the most important steps you can take. Here are a few additional things that leaders can do to normalize and support mental health at work.

Invest in training. Now more than ever, you should prioritize proactive and preventive workplace mental health training for leaders, managers, and individual contributors. Before the pandemic, companies including Morrison & Foerster and Verizon Media were convening senior leaders to discuss their role in creating a mentally healthy culture. That positioned them well to

navigate the uncertainty that has unfolded. As more and more employees struggle with mental health, it's important to debunk common myths, reduce stigma, and build the necessary skills to have productive conversations about mental health at work. If you don't have the budget to invest in training, mental health employee resource groups are a low-cost way to increase awareness, build community, and offer peer support.

Modify policies and practices. To reduce stress on everyone, be as generous and flexible as possible in updating policies and practices in reaction to the pandemic and civil unrest. For example, you may need to take a closer look at your rules and norms around flexible hours, paid time off, email and other communications, and paid and unpaid leave. Try to reframe performance reviews as opportunities for compassionate feedback and learning instead of evaluations against strict targets. In mid-March, Katherine Maher, the CEO of Wikimedia Foundation, sent an email to her organization outlining changes to mitigate stress, including: "If you need to dial back [work hours], that's okay." She also committed to paying contractors and hourly staff on the basis of their typical hours, regardless of their ability to work. When you make changes, be explicit that you are doing so to support the mental health of your employees, if that is the goal.

Measure. Ensuring accountability doesn't have to be complicated; it can be handled in a simple pulse survey done regularly to understand how people are doing now and over time.

BlackRock, the global investment management firm, is one of many organizations that have conducted pulse surveys during the pandemic to understand the primary stressors and needs of staff. This direct employee input has helped shape new programs, including remote management skill-building for managers, enhanced health and well-being support for employees, and increased work flexibility and time off.

* * *

As much as we might like to return to the way things were, we won't. So let's use this opportunity to create the mentally healthy workplace cultures that should have existed all along.

Editor's note: Roche Genentech, BlackRock, Verizon Media, and Morrison & Foerster are clients of the authors' organization, Mind Share Partners.

Editor's note (8/12): This piece has been updated to include the name of Wikimedia CEO Katherine Maher.

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Kelly Greenwood is the Founder and CEO of Mind Share Partners, a nonprofit that is changing the culture of workplace mental health so that both employees and organizations can thrive. It provides training and strategic advising to leading companies, hosts communities to support ERGs and professionals, and builds public awareness. Follow her on Twitter @KellyAGreenwood.

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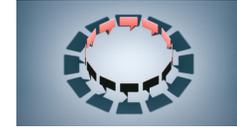
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