Lawley

Wellness Trend Report:
Prioritize Human Healing Alongside Production

Prepared by the Lawley Corporate Wellness Team

Mental Health in the Workplace

Over the past few years, the wellness industry has seen a major uptick in employers and employees wanting to focus on mental health, self-care and all other related topics. While this uptick was happening prior to 2020, the pandemic really exacerbated individuals stress levels and the prevalence of mental health in the workplace. Employee mental health is no longer something companies can ignore and organizations have to consider it a central concern, especially if they want the overall health of their business to remain strong.

To fully understand the impact of mental health in the workplace, it is important to first look at the statistics. Mental Health America's 2021 **Mind The Workplace** report measured the perceptions of over 5,000 employees across 17 industries in the United States. Survey questions measured financial insecurity, burnout, supervisor support, workplace stress, and mental illness. The survey explored the relationship between workplace and supervisor support, and its impact on burnout and employee mental health outcomes as work environments adapted to pandemic-related changes. The survey includes key findings on all measured areas and below are some of the mental health-related findings:

Employee Burnout

- Most employees are experiencing the early signs of burnout. Nearly 83% of respondents felt emotionally drained from their work, with over 40% stating they strongly agreed with this statement.
- Employees who are experiencing exhaustion, which is an early sign of burnout, reported that workplace stress was affecting their mental health. Of employees who strongly agreed that they feel emotionally drained by their work, 99% agreed and 71% strongly agreed that their workplace stress affects their mental health.

Supervisor Support

- Employees are not receiving adequate support from supervisors to help manage stress. About 59% of respondents disagreed that their supervisor provides emotional support to help them manage their stress, and 1 in 4 employees strongly disagreed with this statement.
- Of employees who strongly disagreed that their supervisors provide emotional support, over 85% disagreed that their employers provide a safe and welcoming environment for employees who live with mental illnesses.
- Talking to a supervisor to change stressful things about work was most strongly correlated with the healthiest overall workplace health scores. Open and honest discussions between supervisors and employees about job stressors is one important area of focus for employers concerned about employee mental health and healthy work environments.

Workplace Stress and Mental Illness

- Nearly 9 in 10 employees report that their workplace stress affects their mental health.
- Over 65% of employees find it difficult to concentrate because of their work environment, compared to 46% of respondents in 2018.

- Nearly 3 in 5 employees feel that their employer does not provide a safe environment for employees who live with mental illness.
- The majority of employees surveyed are seeking new employment opportunities. Over 56% of employees reported they spend time looking for a new position, compared to 40% of respondents in 2018.

Mental Health Statistics in America

In addition to the work-related mental health statistics, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, compiled mental health statistics from studies conducted by organizations like Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the U.S. Department of Justice. The terminology in the statistics below reflects what is used in the original studies.

- 1 in 5 U.S. adults experience mental illness each year.
- 1 in 20 U.S. adults experience serious mental illness each year.
- 1 in 6 U.S. youth aged 6-17 experience a mental health disorder each year.
- 50% of all lifetime mental illness begins by age 14, and 75% by age 24.
- Suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death among people aged 10-34.

It is not always easy to see statistics like this, but they do portray a telling story. Millions of people in the U.S. are affected by mental illness. It is important to measure how common mental illness is, both in society, and in each workplace, so that we can understand its physical, social and financial impact, and most importantly, to show that no one is alone.

Employees Looking to Their Employers

Before discussing the opportunities organizations and their leaders have to help employees maintain or improve their mental health, we are first going to look at what employees are looking for based on their responses in the 2021 **Work and Well-being Survey** commissioned by the American Psychological Association (APA). This survey was commissioned by the APA to look at workplace experiences during the pandemic, measure employee stress related to work, and capture what employees are looking for from their employers as it relates to their mental health, specifically in the context of the pandemic and changing priorities. This survey builds upon prior APA work and well-being surveys that have explored Americans' attitudes toward the workplace and workforce. Below are some key findings that can assist employers in knowing which actions they can take to create psychologically healthy workplaces and support employees' mental health:

- The vast majority (87%) of employees think actions from their employer would help their mental health. The most common actions that would help their mental health include: flexible work hours (34%), encouraging employees to take care of their health (32%), encouraging employees to use paid time off (30%), and encouraging breaks during the workday (30%).
- 37% of respondents said that providing mental health resources and 36% of respondents said that regularly recognizing employee contributions may help employers achieve a psychologically healthy work environment for their employees.

- When looking to the future of the maturing workforce, the findings reveal employees increasingly want their employers to have a holistic approach.
  - Adults aged 25 – 42 are more likely than all other adults to say employers could encourage employees to take time off, provide mental health resources, and promote diversity, equity and inclusion efforts to achieve a psychologically healthy workplace.

Employee mental health is no longer something companies can ignore. Following the pandemic, 70% of employers report they plan to start, continue, or expand investing in mental health benefits. Improving benefits alone will not address the whole problem. Companies will need to prioritize human healing alongside production. In addition to increasing mental health benefits, organizations must also help leaders understand the impact of recent events, normalize pandemic adversity, and apply strategies that support healing for employees and the organization as a whole.

"Companies will need to prioritize human healing alongside production."

Leadership's Role in Mental Health

Leadership needs to step up to the challenge. As emphasized in Unmind's recent report 7 trends that will shape workplace mental health in 2022, "It's not a company's employees who need to boost their wellbeing IQ, or at least not employees alone. Before they lead any culture that understands and celebrates mental health, leaders must first commit to their own learning." To fight stigma, you need a whole-organization approach. Mental health conversations need to become the norm and employees need to feel empowered to understand their minds, as well as their coworkers' minds. Cultural change happens when people buy-in and a great way to begin this is by asking senior leaders to go first. When employees see their bosses being vulnerable and sharing their personal experiences, there is a higher chance that they will feel comfortable to follow. Everyone needs to be educated at every level, but the message from top-down and across the entire organization needs to be clear and consistent, especially when it comes to mental health support and conversations.

How to Help Employees Maintain or Improve Their Mental Health

- **Normalize Conversations on Mental Health:** Intentionally create an environment where it is okay and acceptable to talk about emotional and mental health. Conversations in these categories still carry a stigma and some people are reluctant to speak up. To combat this, create designated spaces for regular check-ins where employees can share their struggles (even if not work-related, but affecting performance), and successes to receive mutual support. Leaders can participate in these

conversations by incorporating them into their teams' weekly meeting structure.

- Go beyond the, "How are you" question to draw out answers. Instead, ask, "How are you really", then listen, ask follow-up questions like, "How can I support you", or "What do you need", and then be prepared to act and assist the person. Normalizing these conversations can help employees feel safe to share and communicate about other work-related issues. These conversations should create an ongoing dialogue and not be structured like an interview.

- **Offer Professional Support and Mentoring**: Companies can designate an onsite individual dedicated to mental health or offer employees access to outside mental health professionals. These resources should be a standing benefit, which will not only improve employees' well-being and performance, but also serve as a competitive advantage.

- **Encourage Individual Fulfillment**: Ensure employees are in a role where they feel aligned with their strengths and career aspirations. Ask for their input during this process and encourage employees to enhance their self-development through available resources. Help employees feel needed, appreciated and like they contribute.

Tips for Managers Leading Discussions about Mental Health

Managers often worry that bringing up mental health at work could cross personal boundaries. When asked about their hesitations, managers think there is a stigma attached to these conversations, or like they do not want to pry, or delve into something that they are not comfortable talking about. Below are 5 tips for managers in leading discussions with their subordinates about mental health without feeling like they are overstepping:

1. **Acknowledge the Discussion Might Be Awkward:** Everyone's comfort level discussing their own mental health varies. Managers can embrace the awkwardness, acknowledging the conversation may be uncomfortable. They can let their employees know they are doing this because they care. Consider framing the conversations using a scale that feels more natural. For example, use a scale of 1-10, where a 1 means the person is completely burnt out and 10 means they are ready to double their workload. You could also use weather patterns, asking the person what their weather pattern is today and having them answer as stormy, clear, cloudy with peaks of sunlight or sunny. Managers can set the tone by sharing their response first, which can create a great sense of trust and psychological safety. Speaking up about your struggles may never feel entirely effortless, but by modeling it yourself, your employees will feel more comfortable sharing their own experiences.

2. **Don't Single Anyone Out:** Assure individuals that you are having these check-in conversations with everyone. This way, the person doesn't feel singled out for performance issues, and they get a better sense that it is part of a bigger group effort. Make it clear that check-ins are not to go over status updates and to-do lists, but rather they are for

setting time to hear about what may be causing the person anxiety, stress and other challenges at work or at home. Set aside time in one-on-ones to ask people directly how they are doing aside from their work tasks.

3. **Let Them Know They Do Not Have to Share:** Discussing mental health at work will take some practice. It should be a part of a routine check-in and not just a one-time thing. We can vary in how we feel each day. Employees should know that they do not have to disclose any information that they may feel uncomfortable sharing. Employees should be invited to share and know that you care about them, but also know that they do not have to answer and that you do not want to pry. It is important for them to know that you are there for them. It is also important to have the conversations in a lens of diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging too. There are significant differences in how people think about asking for help, especially those in underrepresented groups.

4. **Know When to Stop Bringing It Up:** If your employees do not want to discuss certain things with you, they will consistently attest that everything is fine or try to change the topic. This is the time to stop bringing it up. Before you stop bringing it up, consider saying something like, "I want you to know that I care about you and that you can bring anything to me whether it's work or not work-related, but I also do not want to be pushy, would you like me to stop asking?"

5. **Recognize If You Are Not the Best Resource:** Even if your employee is not opening up to you about what is causing them stress,

it does not mean they do not have support at home, at work or elsewhere. Managers need to keep in mind that it is important for employees to have someone to talk to, but it does not always have to be them. If it is not you, do not take it personally, but rather act as a resource. Even though you are a leader, it does not mean that you have to have all of the solutions, but rather that you know where to find the right answers and can steer your employees in the right direction. Managers need to be fully equipped knowing which resources are available through the company (Employee Resource Groups, health benefits, wellness programs, Employee Assistance Programs etc.,). Broader resources in the community are also helpful.

Conclusion

Employers are uniquely positioned to help employees with their mental health problems while simultaneously improving the bottom line. It is crucial that leaders do not try to rush back to business as usual and instead, acknowledge that employees may have experienced fundamental shifts in their values, perspectives, thoughts and feelings as a result of the last few years. It is important for leaders to remember that employee behaviors such as having strong emotions at work, avoiding or hesitating to engage with colleagues, or feeling overwhelmed or exhausted by the shifting demands and changing routines are possible consequences of the pandemic and not always an indication of a lack of competence. Instead of going straight to correction of behavior or feedback, leaders should pause, reflect and then check-in with their employees with curiosity.

Leaders should also practice more broadly acknowledging the changes and impacts that may have taken place for individuals and their teams. This can create an environment where employees feel safe enough to share. Employees are more likely to express gratitude when leaders take the time to pause and name these shared experiences and commonalities. It creates connection and decreases feelings of isolation.

It is important for leaders to listen to their people. Leaders are used to feeling competent, having answers, and being an expert problem solver, but sometimes employees who are struggling just need someone to be present without judgement, showing their support. Leaders can also help support their people by paying attention to how their employees' perspectives have shifted or changed and they should take the time to explore individually and collectively how employees are thinking and feeling about their work and how they have changed. By allowing employees to apply these new perspectives and insights to how they will approach work in the future, leaders can maximize the potential for post-pandemic growth.

Overall, it is extremely important for leaders to build a team culture that prioritizes well-being. Attending to overall wellness is essential in times of stress and leaders need to go beyond just encouraging people to practice self-care and instead, nurture an environment of self-attention. While highlighting wellness perks can be helpful in the short-term, putting the responsibility of wellness only on the employee further shifts the burden of healing back to the individual who may already be struggling. Employees want to be a part of a company that values their well-being, especially in this moment of time. Leaders can accomplish this through simple actions including: setting up a culture where people are recognized for tending to themselves, slowing down and stepping away, finding ways to help people turn off from work and

have deep conversations about priorities and expectations, make the topic of work-life integration a frequent conversation, and encourage boundaries between work-life and personal-life.

Leaders who seize the opportunity to lead with compassion and prioritize post-pandemic adjustments will have resilient and capable workforces invested in the organization's success. Mental health is something we all have. It is also the key to making us feel more productive, effective and happy. We should all make our mental health a priority and understand that mental health matters. Mental illness is nothing to be ashamed of, and neither is talking about it.

> **"Everyone talks about building a relationship with your customer. I think you build one with your employees first."**
>
> – Angela Ahrendts

> **"Leadership is not about being in charge. Leadership is about taking care of those in your charge."**
>
> – Simon Sinek

> **"The greatest asset of a company is its people."**
>
> – Jorge Paulo Lemann

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