MENTAL HEALTH AT WORK HANDBOOK

Key recommendations and actions for managers

Contents

Introduction

Work and mental health are intrinsically related. Having a job is essential for protecting our mental health. By providing a sense of purpose, achievement, confidence, and social inclusion, work gives us a platform to follow structured routines and maintain a healthy lifestyle. However, chronic stress, anxiety, and depression can negatively impact our health and lead to mental health challenges. These conditions can affect our quality of life by causing trouble regulating emotions, sleeping patterns, and socializing with others.

Being happy and stress-free can help increase our immune system and boost our overall well-being. Good mental health also enhances our cognitive abilities, such as concentration, focus, creativity, and problem-solving skills. Moreover, it helps us develop a positive outlook on life, builds self-esteem, and motivates us to achieve our goals and aspirations.

As we realize that mental health plays a crucial role in our overall well-being, productivity, and social interactions, organizations must address this complex and layered issue.

This manual aims to provide managers and decision-makers with a comprehensive guide to creating effective preventive and intervention programs to identify and treat psychological issues in the workplace and support their employees' mental health. It is time to act and prioritize the mental health of our workforce, as it is crucial to the success of our organizations.

A support system for mental health and wellness

Mental Health is extraordinarily complex. Most of us can identify early signs of warning that could lead to mental health disorders, thus prevent them from developing. Therefore, directors, managers, and team leaders should support a system to enhance employee well-being and care for mental health.

Here are some elements we believe provide workers with a support system for mental health and wellness at the workplace:

1. Explain the relevance of mental health at work and your commitment to implementing effective ways to deal with it.
2. Aim to create a culture for improving mental health at work that includes and benefits everyone.
3. Train leaders and group managers to identify struggles and early signs of problems at the workplace.
4. Set up a response structure with mental health prevention programs and professional treatment resources.
5. Be ready to provide psychological first aid to individuals who have experienced a crisis or disaster, if needed.

1. Relevance and commitment

Employee mental health and well-being should be treated as strategic priorities. The design, scope, and evaluation of mental health programs should be a strategic decision at the organization's top.

All employees and related personnel should be aware of its importance, and it should offer them a safe and effective space where problems can be solved.

2. Create a culture for mental health and wellbeing that benefits everyone

Involve employees in decision-making processes and create channels for them to provide feedback on mental health initiatives. Establish employee engagement committees or focus groups to ensure their voices are heard and their perspectives are considered when shaping mental health policies and programs.

Foster a diverse and inclusive workplace culture where all employees feel respected, valued, and included. Encourage diversity in hiring practices, provide equal opportunities for growth and development, and promote a culture of mutual respect and appreciation for diverse backgrounds and perspectives.

Promote work-life integration by providing resources and support for employees to maintain a healthy work-life balance. This may include flexible work arrangements, modified duties, or additional support. Implement policies that allow employees to manage personal responsibilities and prioritize self-care while traveling and on rotation.

3. Timely identification and group management:

Team leaders should be able to identify the early signs of mental health concerns, from wear down and social struggles to other common symptoms and signs.

Training is essential in raising awareness about mental health and its importance among employees and management. Training should educate employees about stress management, resilience building, recognizing signs of mental health issues, and provide information on available resources for mental health support.

4. Formal structure for response:

Access to professional help and treatment, such as helping someone find resources or services, should be offered. Due to the complexity of mental health, managers should encourage and support the use of these professional services.

5. Psychological First Aid

Psychological First Aid (PFA) is an intervention designed to provide immediate assistance to individuals who have experienced a traumatic or distressing event. It aims to promote safety, comfort, and emotional stability in the aftermath of a crisis or disaster. Early intervention is crucial for the prevention of psychological trauma that could lead to chronic symptoms.

PFA is not a substitute for professional mental health treatment but rather a practical and supportive approach that anyone can use to help individuals cope with the immediate psychological impact of a crisis.

Creating a safe and calming environment is crucial for those affected by a traumatic event. Ensuring basic physical needs are met and providing a supportive presence can help individuals feel more secure.

PFA involves active listening, empathy, and non-judgmental support. Encouraging survivors to talk about their experiences can be therapeutic and help them process their emotions.

It is important to note that while PFA is valuable in the immediate aftermath of a crisis, individuals who continue to experience distress or show signs of severe mental health issues should be referred to professional mental health services for further evaluation and support.

The critical elements of an effective mental health program at work

There are four key elements to look for when designing and implementing mental health programs at organizations:

Widen your focus

When we think about mental health at work, the first thing that comes to mind for many is occupational exhaustion also known as "burnout". Burnout was first described in the 1970s as work-related stress, fatigue, and exhaustion, usually observed in high-demanding professions[1]. A series of programs were implemented to help burned-out workers to lower their stress levels and avoid more severe issues. Nevertheless, as burnout science progressed, researchers discovered that it was related to six causes: excessive workload, perceived lack of control, insufficient rewards for effort, lack of a supportive community, lack of fairness, and mismatched values and skills[2]. With these results, the focus moved from the individual to the organization.[3]

The IGLOO model, developed by Nielsen and colleagues[5], identifies five intervention levels: the individual, the team of coworkers, the leaders or managers, the organizational setup and policies of a company, and the culture where the company operates. All of these levels are equally important for developing effective mental health initiatives, and their interaction with the actions of the support system is illustrated in Table 1.

Tackle stigma

Mental health stigma refers to the negative attitudes and beliefs surrounding mental illness, and it prevents individuals from seeking help and support, leading to detrimental effects on their overall well-being.

People with mental health issues are often ostracized, discriminated against, or stigmatized by others who do not understand what they are going through. This stigma can manifest in many ways - from hurtful comments to social isolation and job loss. It leaves people feeling ashamed, embarrassed, and afraid to seek help when they need it most.

Individuals who experience stigma may feel isolated and ashamed, leading to self-doubt and low self-esteem. This can exacerbate symptoms of their condition and hinder recovery. In addition, stigmatizing attitudes can lead to discrimination in the workplace and other social settings.

The impact of mental health stigma not only affects individuals on a personal level, it also affects their families, communities, and coworkers. Stigma often prevents those struggling with mental illness from seeking the help they need.

Tackling mental health stigma is not an easy task, but it is essential to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for people who are struggling with their mental health. Here are some ways that we can tackle mental health stigma:

1	Start the conversation

- Talk about mental health openly and honestly to reduce the negative stereotypes surrounding it. Encourage your friends, family, and colleagues to share their experiences and feelings about their own mental health.

2	Educate yourself

- Learn as much as you can about mental illnesses, symptoms, treatments, and coping mechanisms so that you're better equipped to support those who may be suffering.

3	Use positive language

- Avoid using derogatory terms or labels when referring to someone with a mental illness. Instead, focus on using empowering words that emphasize resilience and strength.

4	Support advocacy groups

- Get involved in organizations dedicated to raising awareness about mental illness or advocating for policies that promote access to quality care for all individuals seeking treatment.

Employers can play a vital role in reducing stigma; through open communication channels, they can promote healthy conversations around this topic and foster an environment where everyone feels comfortable seeking help when needed.

As individuals, we need to break the silence surrounding mental illness by speaking out against discrimination and negative attitudes toward those who struggle with such conditions. We should encourage people to seek help without feeling shame or embarrassment.

Implementation Matrix

Several programs and initiatives have proven effective in promoting mental health in the workplace. The foundation is often established by providing access to mental health resources such as mental health training and education, Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), or wellness programs.

By implementing these resources, an inclusive and sustainable work environment that prioritizes mental health, supports employee well-being, and promotes long-term organizational success can be cultivated.

For a better understanding of how the actions described before could be implemented, Table 1 includes recommendations for each level of intervention:

Table 1. Mental health-specific activities per level of intervention.

Level	Relevance and Commitment	Identification and Management	Treatment Options	Psychological First Aid (PFA)
Individual	Raise awareness on the importance of mental health	Increase confidence in reporting mental health issues	Promote reporting of mental health concerns	Raise awareness of PFA
Management	Change attitudes about mental health, tackle stigma	Include mental health management in training objectives	Develop a process for including professional mental health as a benefit	Raise awareness of PFA
Organization	Increase support for mental health	Promote mental health talks	Provide access to professional resources	Raise awareness of PFA
Where required by local regulations	Review country legislation, record cultural adaptations	Communicate mental health local data	Review social security benefits	Search for certified trainers

Note that the effectiveness of programs will vary depending on the specific workplace and its unique needs. Management commitment, evaluation, feedback, and adaptation are crucial to ensure the success of any mental health initiative.

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