



Mental Health



5 Strategies for Improving Mental Health at Work

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by **Morra Aarons-Mele**

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“I have never felt so seen.”

This feedback — which I have received repeatedly since the publication of my book, *The Anxious Achiever*, last year — makes me feel grateful. It also makes me angry.

Every day, my inbox is filled with stories that would make your eyes burn. I recently conducted an informal poll on LinkedIn in which 87%

of 1,228 respondents reported that a stressful coworker, client, boss, or work situation was the catalyst for negative physical symptoms such as migraines, nausea, hair loss, sleep loss, weight changes, autoimmune outbreaks, and panic attacks.

And it's not just my community. Headspace's 2024 Workplace State of Mind [study](#) found that work stress has negatively impacted physical health for 77% of employees and relationships outside of work for 71%. A May 2023 Gallup and Workhuman [poll](#) found that fewer than one in four employees felt their organization cared about their well-being — nearly half the number who said the same before Covid-19.

What happened? While benefits and conversations around mental health have changed, workplace cultures haven't caught up. Workplace mental health expert Natasha Bowman also shared that while a high level of empathy and compassion emerged during the pandemic, she's seeing a shift back to pre-pandemic habits, including rollbacks of DEI and well-being initiatives. People are not responding well. "Today, workers demand more than just a paycheck — they demand respect for their mental health needs. It's not just about ticking off boxes, it's about creating a culture where employees feel empowered to prioritize self-care without fear of repercussions," said Bowman.

I couldn't agree more. To address this critical moment for companies and employees, I wanted to share my state of workplace mental health — culled from what I've learned from wise colleagues and from hundreds of keynotes and conversations on workplace mental health since the launch of my book — as a path forward.

Start with the Work

Today, improving workplace mental health involves tackling how, why, and where we work. Pat advice on putting your phone away in the evening or scheduling your emails feels so 2020.

So, get specific and focus on the work product you need and how you can better support the employees involved. For example, imagine a large hospital system: The workplace mental health considerations of ER clinicians are going to be very different from those of the billing department because their work product is totally different. Advice from flexible workplace expert Cali Yost should be the cornerstone of any well-being initiative: When you start with what needs to get done, Yost says, teams can “reimagine how, when, and where work is done to perform effectively as an organization, and help people be their best as well.” Consider [new research](#) from JAMA, which finds that greater job flexibility is associated with decreased odds of serious psychological distress and lower odds of weekly anxiety.

Like return-to-work mandates, blanket policies for employee mental health rarely succeed and aren't realistic given the varied ways we work today. Jim Mortensen, president of R3 Continuum, a leading workplace behavioral health provider, says: “Just as a general practitioner can't handle every physical medical issue that an individual has, a single behavioral health solution won't address all the problems that an employee base has. You have to both recognize the diversity of issues within a company and also understand the specific stressors of that organization, because they do differ. If you aren't tailoring the solutions to the problems that people are experiencing, you won't get the results you need.”

Don't Rely on Outsiders to Drive Behavior Change

Too often, companies rely on outside experts or a designated well-being consultant without also engaging internal champions who are managers and leaders in business units. Or, a company confines the work to human resources or an internal wellness team. Either way, if you're asking teams to change how they work to achieve better mental health outcomes, you need buy-in from day-to-day decision-makers within business units.

Newton Cheng is an example of one of these decision-makers. He is a former engineer who serves as Google's director of health and performance, and he is one of the most powerful advocates I've seen for improving mental well-being in large, complicated organizations. Cheng is both public about his own mental health issues — which helps him connect to the wider employee base — while also working to change a large system, navigate red tape, and meet business goals.

In a conversation I had with him, Cheng reflected on why his mental health workshops around Google are successful: "I'm sitting in the same shared stigma they are. I'm modeling what it looks like to lead vulnerably in the same organization they are. It gets really hard to do anything about mental health until you see someone who's doing it right in front of you."

Don't get me wrong, outside clinicians and practitioners help leaders develop crucial mental health literacy and learn to talk about and model healthy practices. But experts don't get it like managers do. And yet Newton is the first to admit that becoming this leader took time and a lot of trial and error, plus a comfort with risk. Organizations that want to create mentally healthy cultures need to recruit well-respected, successful insiders who are willing to step out and take the lead. Others will follow!

Foster Conversations Across Generations and Genders

There are two elephants in the room that need to be addressed. First, every generation at work struggles with their mental health; it's not just young people who want to talk about their feelings. Second, men want to share their emotions at work but might feel more stigma than women. How can workplaces tackle these biases?

To start, increase mental health literacy across the organization. When there's no shared language or baseline of knowledge, biases and stigma flourish. Younger people may talk more openly about mental health simply because they grew up talking more about it than previous generations, though overusing and misusing terms (e.g., "OMG I had a total panic attack") can make comments easier to diminish and ignore. Invest in training for everyone to learn the mental health basics.

It's also crucial to make sure men are visible and talking. If your mental health programs skew too female, invite men in! I joke that having "manvangelists" talk about mental health is crucial to decoding the gender bias of emotions at work.

Finally, give generations their own spaces to share: Mental health is an inclusive conversation but it can be helpful to offer people who share lived experiences — generationally or otherwise — the space to connect.

Be Patient and Prepare to Invest in What Matters

There's no magic app to make people happier at work. Becoming a more mentally healthy organization is a commitment to change the fundamentals, and it starts with leadership. Psychologist Emily Anhalt says organizations must embrace this reality: "This will not be a quick and easy thing. This is a forever journey that you have to decide is worth your while."

There are two key aspects of this journey that I've come to see as most important.

First, recognize that technology will not fix our mental health issues; technology is part of the problem. Every conversation I have includes feelings of utter hopelessness that we have lost the battle with our phones and attention spans. The hyper-responsive cycle of always being online exacerbates anxiety at work. We need strategies to address mental health that acknowledge the outsized role technology plays in our work lives and the damage it does to our mental health.

Second, consider that work is about people, and people are messy and difficult. "Pretty much every mental health struggle a person is having, at its core is a struggle of relationships, Anhalt notes. "Companies have to be willing to get in there and help people actually feel met and heard and seen and connected." Here's the wonderful thing: When employers invest time, curiosity, and thoughtful strategy as they develop mental health programs, people do feel met and heard and seen and connected. It's a win!

In the end, Anhalt recommends that leaders who care about mental well-being need to invest in the long game and build trust with employees over time. This approach is difficult to justify for businesses beholden to short-termism and shareholder pressure, but there is growing interest in the field of human sustainability and models like the [U.S. Surgeon General's Framework for Workplace Mental Health and Wellbeing](#). These give me hope and feel like the mindset shifts we need. Whether any of these ideas will gain "juice" inside companies remains TBD.

Walk the Talk

Mental health is core to everything we do at work. Protecting it will take all of us.

No matter what level you are in your company, if you're passionate about mental health, be persistent. Anhalt notes that the reason why there are more mental health benefits now is that enough people said, "I'm not going to work here if that's not part of it."

Those of us in the workplace mental health field look forward to the day when we don't have to try so hard to convince organizations to invest in this work. "What is keeping me up at night is that we are currently in a state of 'pushing' our trauma-informed corporate transformation work with companies and leaders," says Susan Schmitt Winchester, former CHRO at Applied Materials and author of *Healing at Work*. "My dream is that in the future, leaders are 'pulling' for our work because they deeply understand the connection between leader and employee well-being to everything they care about — culture, performance, productivity, employee experience, etc."

Leaders also need to "do the work" of getting in touch with how their own emotions color their work lives. And they carry immense power to destigmatize mental health conversations by sharing what they are doing to preserve their mental health and how those actions are impacting them.

Magic in service of workplace mental health can happen at all levels of an organization and some of the simplest, human-centered tactics can be incredibly powerful. Have a candid conversation with a coworker. Find strength in numbers by asking for policy change with colleagues. Be the team leader who reaches out to encourage a more reasonable sign-off time after seeing midnight email timestamps from your staff. Be

the CEO or VP who shares a personal story so others who struggle can feel seen.

One thing I am reminded of time and again is that being anxious and being an achiever are not mutually exclusive. We all have issues to work through because we're human. But we can thrive at work when our needs get the air time and support they need and deserve.

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