

Prioritizing Mental Health: Knowing Your Population

Part 1



HR leaders often recognize mental health’s impact on their employees and the company’s bottom line, but getting other executives to see the value in prioritizing employee mental health can be challenging.

For starters, defining mental health and all it encompasses is complex. Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also determines how we handle stress, relate to others, and make healthy choices - three notable characteristics often omitted from discussions on the subject.

The American Psychological Association (APA) found that more than 50% of people will be diagnosed with a mental illness at some point in their lifetime, and one in five Americans will experience a mental illness each year.

For HR leaders, knowing your organization’s population – the people who make up your team – is essential to prioritizing mental health effectively and supporting your company’s mission. Since different industries have different needs, understanding your industry’s statistics is necessary to know what you are up against.

For instance, **the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration** found 17% of construction workers qualify as “heavy drinkers.” Knowing this figure and having systems for managing employees with substance misuse and addictions would be beneficial if you are in the construction industry.

Similarly, **Business Insider** discovered that 40% of early care and education workers suffer from clinical depression. 19.1% of food services workers recently **reported using illicit drugs**, and the **National Library of Medicine** determined that male doctors have suicide rates as much as 40% higher than the general population.

Consequently, knowing how to communicate with your population can be as important as getting to know your people. Once you understand your industry’s statistics and unique needs, you can leverage that data with an effective communication strategy. HR teams and leadership can use various communication approaches to support the mission of prioritizing mental health.



Here are four best practices for creating an effective communication strategy:

BE ACCESSIBLE

Accessible leaders create an environment where employees feel comfortable seeking support, guidance, and feedback. Embracing an open-door policy, both physically and metaphorically, to encourage open lines of communication and checking in often are essential. Limiting interactions to annual performance reviews doesn't **cultivate a culture of accessibility**. It's important to be approachable, available, and visible to employees.

BE CLEAR AND TRANSPARENT

Staying concise usually results in clarity. Clear and transparent communication is the cornerstone of effective leadership. Use brief, jargon-free language to ensure employees understand policies, procedures, and expectations. Be empathetic, honest, and straightforward when delivering difficult news or addressing sensitive topics. Transparency builds trust and strengthens the employer-employee relationship. This strengthened relationship creates a safe space for employees to discuss their mental health needs.

PAY ATTENTION TO CULTURE

Cultural sensitivity is vital in today's diverse workplace. Learning who your employees are and *how* they speak goes a long way to understanding and respecting the unique values, beliefs, and communication styles of your employees. Part of developing a shared language in the workplace is tailoring your messages to resonate with different cultural backgrounds, ensuring inclusivity and avoiding misinterpretation. Incorporate DEI initiatives into your communication strategies to foster an environment that embraces individual differences.

KNOW COMMUNICATION PREFERENCES

Every employee has their own preferred communication method. Some may enjoy in-person conversations, while others prefer digital platforms like emails, Slack/ Microsoft Teams messages, and social media. By knowing your population's preferences and adapting your communication style accordingly, you can ensure messages reach all employees effectively.

The workplace can be the source of mental health challenges and where they manifest, but it's not just workers who feel stressed and overwhelmed. Prioritizing mental health for a diverse workforce can be a lot of responsibility for HR and leadership. It requires getting to know the population and their needs. Thankfully, there are resources for employers who want to expand their company's approach to openly discussing mental health.



Here are some great resources that can help you get started:

- + **Lyra Health:** A mental health platform that provides employees with access to therapy, coaching, and other resources.
- + **The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):** Provides information on mental health and resources for employers.
- + **National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI):** A non-profit organization that provides support and resources for people with mental illness and their families.
- + **SHRM Mental Health Toolkit:** A toolkit from the Society for Human Resource Management that provides guidance on how to create a mentally healthy workplace.
- + **Workplace Mental Health Organization:** An organization that provides resources and training on workplace mental health.
- + **Internal Surveys:** These can be conducted to assess the mental health of employees and identify areas for improvement.
- + **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA):** A federal agency that provides information and resources on mental health and substance abuse.
- + **McKinsey Global Institute:** A research organization that has published reports on the economic impact of mental illness.
- + **Mind The Workplace Report:** A report from the Mental Health Foundation that provides insights on the state of mental health in the workplace.

As HR leaders, your communication strategies have the power to shape organizational culture, enhance employee engagement, and drive success. By being accessible, attentive to individual preferences, and knowing your population, you can create an environment of trust, collaboration, and communication that prioritizes the mental health of your colleagues at every level.

AUTHORS



ANNETTE KREUZ
Vice President, Employee Benefits
annette.kreuz@imacorp.com



EVAN OSLICA
Client Advisor
evan.oslica@imacorp.com

This material is for general information only and should not be considered as a substitute for legal, medical, tax and/or actuarial advice. Contact the appropriate professional counsel for such matters. These materials are not exhaustive and are subject to possible changes in applicable laws, rules, and regulations and their interpretations.