



**National Safety Council
Recommendations for Employers –
Addressing Employee Mental Health
and Distress**

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Addressing employee mental health and distress is an important, complex topic. NSC recommends the following actions to support employees and prevent mental distress and stress related to the workplace. It is not essential to take all of these actions at the same time – remember, taking one or two steps at a time while working through these recommendations can make a significant difference for employees.

Understanding and Addressing Workplace Factors That Impact Worker Mental Health

The workplace has significant impacts on employee mental health and wellbeing. One risk factor for experiencing mental distress is experiencing stress, which can be exacerbated or caused by workplace conditions. Chronic exposure to stressful workplace conditions can lead to a variety of mental health conditions, including experiences of depression, anxiety, an inability to concentrate and emotional exhaustion.¹

Both the content and context of work can play a role in the development of mental distress and illness. Key factors include:²

- Workload (both excessive and insufficient work)
- Lack of participation and control in the workplace
- Monotonous or unpleasant tasks
- Role ambiguity or conflict
- Lack of recognition at work
- Inequity
- Poor interpersonal relationships
- Poor working conditions
- Poor leadership and communication
- Conflicting home and work demands
- Uncomfortable physical working conditions (extreme temperatures, lack of ergonomic best practices, poor scheduling, infrequent breaks)

¹ <https://www.transamericacenterforhealthstudies.org/docs/default-source/wellness-page/from-evidence-to-practice--workplace-wellness-that-works.pdf?sfvrsn=2>

² https://www.who.int/mental_health/policy/workplace_policy_programmes.pdf

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- Fatigue at work (caused by long-term or chronic stress, poor working conditions, personal reasons; can also be a symptom of mental distress and varying mental illnesses)

Employers must address mental health and support overall employee wellbeing in the workplace on both individual and systemic levels. Providing support for individuals, enhancing treatment coverage, and educating employees are critical actions, detailed below. However, they will have limited impact if workplaces do not simultaneously work towards the reduction or elimination of stressors in the workplace themselves.³ Other organization-level measures must be sustained, evaluated and shifted according to workplace need, and must focus on addressing, reducing, and eliminating the variety of workplace stressors and factors listed above.

Actions for Leadership and Supervisors – Prioritizing Mental Health

Leading by example and building a culture of health and wellbeing are critical. Leaders, supervisors and other managers have an essential role in addressing mental health and distress, and encouraging social connectedness in the workplace. Strong social connections in the workplace improve mental health. A workplace with a strong culture of health and wellbeing is one that promotes workers' mental wellbeing, actively works to protect employee mental health, and does not harm employee mental health in negligent, reckless or intentional ways.

Building mental, emotional and psychological safety into every process (communications, trainings, etc.) builds resilience in the workforce. Resilience can help protect employees from various mental health conditions, such as depression and anxiety. Resilience can also help offset factors that increase the risk of mental health conditions, such as being bullied or previous trauma.⁴ Leadership can reduce stigma by speaking candidly and frequently about mental health, and remaining publicly committed to leading a behaviorally healthy workplace.^{5,6}

Workplaces should ensure robust supervisor training on topics and skills related to mental health and supporting employees experiencing mental distress. These include, but are not limited to:

- Understanding organizational resources and how to link employees to them

³ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263461563_Work-home_interaction_from_a_work_psychological_perspective_Development_and_validation_of_a_new_questionnaire_the_SWING

⁴ <https://www.mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/resilience-training/in-depth/resilience/art-20046311>

⁵ <https://lifespeak.com/10-ways-to-improve-mental-health-in-your-workplace/>

⁶ <http://workplacementalhealth.org/getattachment/Making-The-Business-Case/Link-2-Title/working-well-toolkit.pdf?lang=en-US>

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- Understanding language and how to talk to people experiencing mental distress
- Recognizing signs and symptoms of mental distress

Actions for Human Resources (HR) – Developing Policies, Procedures and Programs to Support Mental Health

Employers have a unique ability and responsibility to manage their relationship with benefit providers, such as Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) and health insurance plans to ensure employees have access to the help and support they need. HR teams and supervisors can help make this difference a reality. Workplaces should develop and promote policies and procedures that promote and support general mental health and mental wellbeing.

Some key components to a robust HR response include⁷:

- Ensuring health benefits provide strong coverage of mental health or mental illness services, and conform to parity laws as well as other relevant regulations
- Ensuring robust mental health support and treatment coverage by asking any health insurer they work with to demonstrate what they are doing to identify and help employees experiencing mental distress or illness. Comprehensive coverage includes:
 - Confidential screenings and follow-up care
 - Intervention and referral to behavioral health services
 - Out- and in-patient treatment
 - Counseling and other medical services, including any treatment needed for a co-occurring substance use disorder
- Provide both short- and long-term disability coverage as employee benefits
- Performing a language audit of existing policies and procedures to ensure that the language and content do not inadvertently discriminate against or stigmatize people with mental distress or mental illness
- Ensuring the EAP has excellent support mechanisms in place for supporting employees who are in need of mental distress or illnesses related services

⁷ https://www.nsc.org/Portals/0/Documents/NSCDocuments_Advocacy/Safety%20at%20Work/covid-19/safer-playbooks/mental-health.pdf?ver=2020-06-10-094235-910

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- Ensuring use of screening tools
- Demanding the EAP systematically assess mental distress and illness in workers seeking EAP services and linkage to care, and report rates regularly
- Repeatedly communicating support resources (organizational, national and local) with employees through multiple mediums and in digestible, easy-to-understand ways, with clear instructions on how to access them
- Developing and implementing a peer support program focused on mental health and wellbeing
- Ensuring that medical leave and sick time policies explicitly cover mental health-related and mental illness-related time off to prioritize employees' mental wellbeing and do not require disclosure of the reason for taking time off within the policies; these days should be treated as any other leave time and be subject to all relevant privacy regulations
 - Implementing flexible return-to-work policies for employees returning after time off due to mental distress (for example, specifically alleviating stressors or triggers that may exacerbate or aggravate the condition; developing an individualized support plan; support for remote work)

Providing Employee Education and Awareness

Communication about mental health and distress in the workplace is critical. Openly engaging, discussing, normalizing and being proactive about mental health can have substantial benefits and reduce the stigmas surrounding mental health and distress and seeking support. Employee education on wellness, mindfulness, resilience and other innovative sciences focused on mental health, along with a focus on developing a culture focused on wellbeing and mitigation of chronic stress can positively impact workforce engagement and performance.

Educated workers can better protect themselves from the impacts of mental distress and stress. Consider building a robust education and awareness plan that ensures employees are aware of these impacts, are aware of workplace resources and know they are supported. Communicating on these topics in small, easy-to-understand pieces of information is encouraged, as is sharing on multiple channels (e.g. posters, infographics, social media, brown bag lunches, email communications, communications from leadership, etc.). All education messaging, including messaging about seeking

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support, should be repeated multiple times throughout the year, as many employees may not internalize or remember the information if they think they do not need it.