

INSIGHTS



# Reducing mental health stigma in the workplace

Building a supportive culture

**With 1 in 5 Americans living with a mental health condition,** companies are beginning to recognize mental health and wellness as an essential element of overall workforce health.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, mental illness is one of the last remaining workplace taboos. The stigma that surrounds it is considered a major barrier to seeking treatment, and that's a problem for businesses and employees alike.

### What stigma looks like – and why it's a problem

Mental health conditions are common and treatable. So why don't we talk about them as openly as physical conditions like diabetes or asthma? Because of stigma – negative stereotypes about mental illness that persist both in and out of the workplace.

People living with mental health conditions are frequently perceived as irresponsible, lazy, or dangerous. They may face rejection, bullying, and discrimination – because unlike physical health issues, mental health issues are often viewed as character flaws or personal weaknesses.

The truth is, many people living with mental health conditions are productive, reliable employees and leaders who live full and satisfying lives. But even in the most progressive workplaces, many employees keep their conditions secret.

They may be afraid that being open about their mental health will hurt their reputation, compromise work relationships, or even jeopardize their job. **In fact, 8 out of 10 workers with a mental health condition say shame and stigma prevent them from seeking treatment.**<sup>2</sup> That's why it's so important to talk about mental health at work and create a culture of acceptance.



### The cost of staying silent

Stigma drives silence, which can prevent employees from seeking help and getting better. As an employer, you can't afford to stay silent about mental health in the workplace, because the mental health of your workforce and your company's bottom line are inextricably linked.

**Mental illness is the single greatest cause of worker disability in the U.S.**<sup>3</sup>

**62% of missed work days can be attributed to mental health conditions.**<sup>4</sup>

**Employees with untreated mental health conditions use nonpsychiatric health care services 3 times more than those who do get treatment.**<sup>5</sup>

**Depressed employees are 20% to 40% more likely to become unemployed because of their condition.**<sup>6</sup> For example, people with depression have a higher risk of heart disease, diabetes, and stroke.<sup>7</sup>

## Faster treatment, quicker recovery

Currently, fewer than 1 in 3 employees who struggle with a mental health condition get the help they need.<sup>8</sup> But in a workplace culture where mental illness isn't stigmatized and seeking help is encouraged and supported, employees are more likely to be aware of available resources, so they can start treatment sooner and recover more quickly.

Treatment works – effectively reducing symptoms for 75% of those with common mental health conditions like depression and anxiety.<sup>9</sup> Plus, when employees start to feel better mentally and emotionally, they also feel better about their jobs. **More than 80% of employees who receive treatment report improved job satisfaction.**<sup>10</sup>

Taking a stance against stigma shows all employees – not just those living with a mental health condition – that the organization values and cares about them as people. It also demonstrates true interest in helping employees and their families live happy and healthy lives. This can help foster employee loyalty and retention – in addition to promoting awareness and acceptance outside company walls. And that sends a positive message to consumers that can help your business thrive.

## Mental health in the workplace: creating a stigma-free culture

### See the whole person

A person's mental health condition does not define who they are.

### Offer support

Don't be afraid to reach out if you think someone is struggling.



### Challenge misconceptions

Speak up if you hear a co-worker spread stereotypes and myths about mental illness.

### Mind your words

Use respectful language and avoid labels like "crazy" or "unstable."

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## Breaking down stigma and changing workplace culture

In a healthy workplace culture, disclosing a mental health condition isn't considered a sign of weakness – and getting help is celebrated as a sign of strength.

Fighting stigma is about creating awareness, encouraging acceptance, and challenging false beliefs. It starts with breaking the silence around mental illness and educating employees about things like:

- Using the right language when talking about mental illness
- Seeing the whole person, not just their condition
- Being supportive and inclusive

As important as it is to address stigma in the workplace, it can be a hard conversation for employers to start. There are multiple factors at play – attitudes and beliefs about mental illness are shaped over time by various social, cultural, and economic environments.

To help make it easier to tackle this tough subject, the National Alliance on Mental Illness developed the StigmaFree Company program to help employers build a culture of caring.

## Taking action for a healthier future

More and more companies are taking action to improve workforce mental health. High-profile leaders and influencers are talking openly about their own mental health issues to help normalize the conversation. Slowly but surely, we're changing the way we think about mental illness – replacing silence and stigma with acceptance and support. As an employer, you're in the position to join the movement and help lead the way.



## Kaiser Permanente's response Leading by example

When employers and leaders speak up about mental illness, they send a powerful message to employees that it's OK to get help.

Kaiser Permanente Chairman and CEO Bernard J. Tyson is an outspoken mental health and wellness advocate – working to promote awareness both within the organization and in society at large.

In a piece he published on LinkedIn, "Redefining Mental Health for a 21st Century World," Tyson writes, "Improving mental health care is not only an industry issue, it has become a critical societal issue. Our nation's ability to address mental health in a holistic, comprehensive way may just determine how successful we ultimately are in our quest to improve the health of America and the world."

Find more business insights at [kp.org/choosebetter](https://kp.org/choosebetter).

<sup>1</sup>"Mental Health Facts in America," National Alliance on Mental Illness, NAMI.org, accessed July 10, 2017.

<sup>2</sup>"StigmaFree Company," National Alliance on Mental Illness, NAMI.org, accessed July 7, 2017.

<sup>3</sup>See note 2.

<sup>4</sup>"Bad for Business: The Business Case for Overcoming Stigma in the Workplace," National Alliance for Mental Illness of Massachusetts, 2015.

<sup>5</sup>See note 4.

<sup>6</sup>See note 4.

<sup>7</sup>"Chronic Illness and Mental Health," The National Institute of Mental Health, NIMH.NIH.gov, accessed July 10, 2017.

<sup>8</sup>See note 5.

<sup>9</sup>See note 5.

<sup>10</sup>"Investing in a mentally healthy workforce is good for business," Partnership for Workforce Mental Health, Workplacementalhealth.org, accessed July 10, 2017.