PRIORITIZING MENTAL HEALTH EQUITY IN THE WORKPLACE

Six Steps Every Employer Should Consider
The Health Action Alliance is a unique collaboration between leading business, communications and public health organizations to help employers navigate evolving health challenges, improve the health of workers and engage with public health partners to build stronger, healthier communities. Learn more at healthaction.org.

This resource was developed by the Health Action Alliance in partnership with the Ad Council, Huntsman Mental Health Institute and National Safety Council.

EDITORIAL NOTE: The Health Action Alliance is solely responsible for the content of this toolkit and maintains full editorial control of its resources.
6 Steps to Prioritize Mental Health Equity in the Workplace

Certain communities within your workforce may have unique mental health challenges. These may be the product of systemic inequities in community conditions that underpin health, inequitable or harmful experiences when accessing medical care, cultural stigmas, discrimination or other factors. You can help combat these challenges and support your workforce by prioritizing equity in your approach to workplace mental health.

Here are six steps you can take to center equity in your workplace mental health strategy:

**STEP 1: Pay livable wages and address other sources of financial stress.**

Low wages are the top cause of work-related stress. And in just one year, “covering monthly expenses” has risen from number nine to number one on the list of employees’ worries, according to a November 2022 survey from Mercer. Second on the list is the ability to retire, ahead of work-life balance.

Financial anxiety is widespread, yet the burden of financial difficulties falls unevenly: Racial and ethnic pay gaps are well established. Meanwhile, Black households typically have less accumulated wealth than white households, even at the same level of income.

There’s good reason to address financial anxiety: Mercer reports that employees who are financially stable are more productive since they are less distracted by financial worries, have improved physical health and are more loyal to their organization.
In addition to paying all employees a living wage that accounts for inflation, identify where there are disparities in opportunity, experience and pay. Then, implement targeted policies to close these gaps. Finally, make any financial benefits you offer, such as retirement plans, financial wellness workshops and tuition support, available to all employees.

To reduce financial stress:

- Prepare employees for retirement with an employer-sponsored retirement plan.
- Help employees build a safety net by offering life or disability insurance.
- Partner with an expert consultant to offer classes or coaching sessions on financial wellness. Make it a habit to share information about how to access these programs in order to reduce stigma about utilizing them.
- Lean on your employee assistance program (EAP) vendors to go the extra mile in educating your employees about what’s available to them. Many EAPs come with some type of financial counseling, but many workers don’t know what’s available to them.
- Consider additional financial incentives such as tuition reimbursement or loan repayment plans, childcare stipends, professional development funds or reimbursement for home office equipment, phone bills and internet.

**STEP 2: Ensure your employees feel heard — and that you’re hearing from all communities.**

People across your workforce will only feel supported if you commit to collecting—and responding to—feedback. Offer surveys that are anonymous but capture demographic data to be sure you’re getting a representative sample of your full workforce. (In smaller companies where a person’s identity might be revealed through their demographic data, create a safe environment for one-on-one conversations.)

Additionally, make sure the teams making decisions about mental health programs reflect the demographic makeup of your workforce.

**PRO TIP:** Mars, Inc. holds routine calls, pulse surveys and listening sessions with ERGs to improve its understanding of what specific populations are facing. The company keeps its programming relevant to a global workforce by offering support in different languages and adapting programs to cultural nuances, particularly in countries where mental health is strongly stigmatized. For example, in some areas, they do not ask about mental health directly and instead ask about sleep patterns or energy.
STEP 3: Familiarize yourself with the unique challenges faced by employees from specific groups.

Understanding the unique stressors and experiences of your workforce is essential to cultivating a workplace culture of belonging and identifying appropriate solutions for support.

Black, Hispanic, Asian American, Pacific Islander, American Indian and Alaska Native communities face unique mental health stressors as a result of both current and historical discrimination. According to the American Psychological Association, 75% of Black adults say the racial climate in the U.S. is a significant source of stress, and Latina women were the most likely to cite significant stress from violence and crime (89%), mass shootings (89%) and gun violence (87%). Similarly, 72% of LGBTQ+ adults feel as though their rights are under attack.

In the workplace, people of color often experience numerous forms of racial discrimination, including microaggressions and bias. Over half of LGBTQ+ people report hearing jokes about gay or lesbian people from their coworkers. And the majority of young adult women (62%) report that most days their stress is completely overwhelming.

- Go further: Fact sheets from the American Psychiatric Association will give you greater insight into the challenges faced by specific groups so you can tailor your approach.

Keep in mind that people have complex and overlapping identities, not all of which are outwardly visible. For instance, a person can be Black, a caregiver, LGBTQ+ and have a disability—and any or all of these identities may affect the support they need. Lead with kindness, curiosity and understanding for conditions you may have no experience with personally, and let people embrace their whole selves without having to choose which "box" they fit into.

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Supporting Neurodiversity

Teams with neurodivergent members — individuals with a range of developmental, mental health and learning disorders, the most well-known of which include dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autism spectrum disorder (ADSD) — can be up to 30% more innovative because they get the benefit of different mindsets and approaches to problem-solving.

- **And yet:** In the DEI statements of Fortune 500 companies, only 30% mention disability — and only three specifically mentioned neurodiversity.

About one in six of the world population is neurodivergent, which makes it important for companies to be proactive about inviting conversations around accommodations in the workplace (see Part 3 of this playbook for more details).

Here are tips to supporting neurodiversity in your organization:

- **Start at the hiring process.** If you know a candidate is neurodivergent, invite a neurodivergent employee onto the interview panel to be able to talk about what it’s like to work at your company.

- **Be thoughtful with onboarding.** For example, instead of just listing the resources you offer, build them out step-by-step to help employees who may have difficulty processing the information you provide.

- **Make accessibility the standard.** Simple actions, such as recording all video meetings, may benefit different groups of employees and prevent any individual team member from having to disclose their disability by asking for support.

- **Co-design workspace policies—and even workspaces.** This covers desk layouts, lighting design, noise, privacy and other factors in the physical environment that may have a strong and disproportionate impact on neurodivergent workers.

- **Go further:** The [Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion](https://www.earnweb.org), or EARN, provides additional information about creating a supportive work environment for neurodivergent employees.
STEP 4: Take steps to prevent discrimination and bias in the workplace.

Discrimination at work is another major source of stress. As an employer, you’re in a position to prevent discrimination—whether it’s intentional or not—against members of your staff. Start by reviewing, updating and reminding your employees about your company’s anti-discrimination policies. Here are some additional steps you can take:

- Communicate equity, diversity, inclusion and belonging as a core company value in your policies, hiring process, onboarding materials, company website, social media and other company communications.
- Educate your team to recognize, prevent and address microaggressions and bias in the workplace.
- Provide multiple channels for employees to safely report harassment or discrimination. Not all employees feel safe reporting to their manager or human resources. Alternative reporting options include a designated diversity officer or employee resource group.
- If your company offers a hybrid work arrangement, take steps to mitigate proximity bias toward in-office workers, understanding that women and people of color are happier and feel greater belonging working from home.

STEP 5: Embrace authenticity in the workplace.

When employees do not feel accepted in the workplace, they may feel pressured to “code-switch”—or adjust their style of speech, appearance or behavior in order to conform and be accepted by the dominant work culture. Code-switching can take an exhausting toll on mental health when employees have to routinely and consciously monitor their speech and behavior. Inviting people to be their whole, authentic selves in the workplace can reduce stress, as well as promote social connection and greater engagement with the job.

Here are more ideas to build on that approach:

- Practice authentic leadership. Employees thrive under leaders they can trust, connect with and relate to. Authentic leadership encourages that trust through displaying self-awareness, empathy, ethics and accountability.
- Hire and center diverse leadership. Encourage mentoring and coaching relationships that help facilitate upward mobility across varying identities.
- Review your dress codes and correct for policies that disproportionately target specific groups.
- Include pronouns routinely during introductions, on name tags or email signatures.
- Consider company-wide participation in various heritage and pride celebration days.
Meet Gen Z’s Expectations on Mental Health

Gen Z workers (those born between 1997 and 2012) report high rates of mental health distress and diagnoses, and also put the highest priority among all workers on getting support for their well-being. So if you get mental health right for Gen Z, there’s a good chance the rest of your team will feel supported too. Here are three key considerations:

• **Authenticity:** A recent report from EY states plainly: “Authenticity is the most important value for Gen Z.” Inviting people to be their whole, authentic selves in the workplace can reduce stress, as well as promote social connection and greater engagement with the job.

• **Inclusion:** According to Deloitte’s 2023 Global Human Capital Trends report, two in five Gen Z and millennial workers have rejected a job or assignment because it didn’t align with their core values, one of which is inclusion. To make your DEI efforts authentic, identify the inequities in your organization, then be transparent about how you will address them and measure progress.

• **Mentorship:** The youngest workers naturally stand to benefit from drawing on the experience of a career mentor. Mentorship has been shown to overcome exclusion—and Gen Z reports the highest levels of loneliness of any generation. Lonely employees miss a week more of work than non-lonely colleagues and are twice as likely to want to quit, but mentorship leads to higher retention rates for both mentors and mentees.
STEP 6: Offer a wide range of mental health solutions.

Given the complicated and overlapping factors that affect the mental health of people from historically excluded communities, support will not be one-size-fits-all. And that’s good for staying competitive in the market for talent as employees look for flexible benefits and work arrangements.

To ensure you’re making the workplace as welcoming as possible and that the support you’re offering will be accessible by all, consider these actions:

- Support parents and other caregivers through flexible work schedules, paid family leave, assistance with childcare and spaces such as lactation rooms for new parents.

  PRO TIP: During the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown, the Montana Hospital Association turned a hospital conference room into a one-room school for 22 children of its employees, equipping students with laptops to connect with their virtual teachers and hiring an in-person teaching assistant to support online learning.

- Invite your ERGs to take on mental health in your company. Let them identify specific challenges and potential remedies, then provide them the resources they need to lead on proposing, implementing and evaluating solutions.

- Partner with community organizations that offer culturally responsive mental health support.

- Seek out and partner with gender- and sexuality-affirming care providers and resources.

- Connect employees with specialized crisis support resources tailored to specific communities and mental health topics. See the Additional Resources in this Playbook for details.

A MESSAGE FROM HEADSPACE

Your guide to mental health

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Help for your teams

Get started: headspace.com/enterprise

I’m here to help. Torey, Coach

Work Stress Nighttime SOs
HAA Resources

The Health Action Alliance has created a digital resource hub with additional free tools to help your organization effectively lead conversations about mental health and build a psychologically healthy workplace culture.

- Conversation Guide for Managers
- Tips for Leadership Storytelling
- Cultivating Belonging in the Workplace
- Guide to Building a Mental Health Employee Resource Group
- Leveraging Assessments to Fuel Workplace Mental Health

We also offer free training, events and coaching to help you build your workplace mental health strategy. SIGN UP to receive our latest resources and event invitations, or reach out directly to schedule a consultation at hello@healthaction.org.

Additional Resources

- Ad Council
  Belonging Begins with Us

- American Psychological Association
  Inclusive Language Guidelines

- Conference Board
  How Companies Can Address ESG Backlash

- Mental Health America
  BIPOC and LGBTQ+ Mental Health

- Natasha Bowman
  Crazy A.F. (And Fearless)

- Office of the U.S. Surgeon General
  The U.S. Surgeon General’s Framework for Workplace Mental Health & Well-Being

DISCLAIMER: Public health guidance on workplace mental health is evolving. Health Action Alliance is committed to regularly updating our materials once we have engaged public health, business and communications experts about the implications of new guidance from the mental health community and effective business strategies that align with public health goals.

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