How to Reduce Mental Health Stigma in the Workplace

Mental health is one of the most common issues affecting workers today. Over 50% of people will be diagnosed with a mental illness at some point in their lives. That makes it almost certain that at least some people at your workplace are affected by mental health issues.

But we don't hear people talking about mental health very often at work. This is because of stigma. Stigma can be very dangerous, and is often the culprit behind why people don't get the mental health treatment they need. Mental illness is just as serious as physical illness. When left untreated, it could become severe and even fatal.

Especially if you hold a leadership position in your workplace, what you do and say has a big impact. You can use this influence to make strides toward moving your workplace away from mental health stigma.

Here are 6 strategies you can try.

What is stigma?

First of all, it's important to understand what stigma is, and what it looks like in the workplace. Stigma can be broadly defined as a negative societal attitude about something, usually a group of people.

For example, leprosy, scabies, and sexually transmitted diseases are all examples of health conditions that have carried (or still carry) stigma. Other experiences and characteristics also carry stigma, like having been convicted of a felony in the past.

Although we've come a long way, mental health still carries a large stigma. This is especially true in the workplace. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, 8 in 10 workers say that shame and stigma prevent them from getting the help they need for a mental illness.

This is a serious conversation that we need to approach in our places of work. By doing your part to fight mental health stigma, you make it more likely that employees who need mental health support will get it.

6 strategies to fight mental health stigma at work

Each of us plays an important role when it comes to reducing mental health stigma in the workplace. Here are 6 strategies that people in different positions can use to help fight stigma one step at a time.

1. Create supportive mental health policies

It's one thing to say that you support mental health awareness, and it's another to show it through action. Creating and advocating for supportive policies around mental health is one of the most effective ways to make it clear to employees that you stand against mental health stigma.

Some policies to consider include:

- Allowing people to take time off for mental health, no questions asked
- Anti-discrimination policies for people with mental illness
- Offering accommodations for mental health challenges
- Allowing flexible working hours so people can take care of mental health needs
- Ensuring that employees have healthcare benefits that include affordable mental health services

2. Share openly about mental health

Many people feel like they can't share their mental health struggles at work. Part of this is because they don't see anyone else sharing. Even though it isn't implicitly stated, if no one ever talks about mental health, then it could become quietly understood that this isn't a subject that's appropriate to discuss in your workplace.

Challenge these types of unspoken rules by talking openly about mental health. If you feel stressed and burnt out, don't be afraid to talk about it. Model for employees that it's okay to do so.

Of course, this doesn't mean that any person at work should be "dumping" all of their emotional struggles onto their colleagues. But people shouldn't need to work so hard to hide the fact they're struggling, either.

3. Speak up when you hear stigmatizing language

The words we use when talking about mental health matter. Societally, we often use mental health terms incorrectly without even thinking about it. For example, you might say that you're "so OCD" because you need your desk to be organized. You might call a finicky printer "bipolar" because it works perfectly on some days and crashes on the next.

These might seem like harmless colloquial terms, but they further mental health stigma in damaging ways. Use mental health terms appropriately, and never as a joke. You may not be aware of anyone in your workplace who lives with these conditions, but you can never know which of your employees and/or their family members has a mental illness.

Learn about the correct terminology, and use person-centered language when it's appropriate. Don't be afraid to speak up and make gentle corrections when you hear others making unintentional (but hurtful) mistakes.

4. Create a mentorship program

As open as you try to be about mental health issues in the workplace, it's important to understand that some people may just not feel comfortable talking about mental health with their manager or human resources staff. Creating a mentorship program can connect employees with more experienced mentors who can guide them both professionally and personally.

Mentorship is usually designed to help newer employees succeed in the workplace. A mentor can guide their mentee in terms of career and work-life balance. But they could also serve as a trusted person to who the mentee feels comfortable talking about mental health issues. The mentor could help the mentee navigate their mental health in the workplace.

5. Bring in a mental health professional

Lastly, consider bringing a mental health professional once a month to talk to your employees about mental health concerns. Even if you offer mental health benefits, like an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), people may feel too ashamed to access them. By bringing in a professional who is easily accessible, it might make it more likely that people will actually seek the help that they need.

You could work with community organizations or your EAP to find an appropriate mental health expert. A mental health expert can also assess your company culture and give you more tips on what you could do to reduce stigma.

6. Deliver training

People have different levels of exposure to topics surrounding mental health. It could be beneficial to deliver training about mental health awareness and stigma in the workplace. Training ensures that every employee has the same access to accurate and empathetic information about mental health.

Managers, in particular, should be trained so they know how to navigate employee mental health concerns when they come up.

Mental health awareness training could cover a broad range of subjects, like how to recognize signs of common mental health conditions and how to support struggling colleagues. Training also serves as an opportunity to open conversations around mental health, and send a clear message that your workplace is working to fight against stigma.

MINES offers workplace training on a variety of mental health and well-being topics. If you need support or have any questions about how the EAP can help your team, please contact MINES for details and scheduling.