

Ways Managers Can Support Employees' Mental Health

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According to recent research, 42% of global employees have experienced a decline in mental health since the pandemic began.

As we navigate various transitions over the coming months and years, leaders are likely to see employees struggle with anxiety, depression, burnout, trauma, and PTSD. Those mental health experiences will differ according to race, economic opportunity, citizenship status, job type, parenting and caregiving responsibilities, and many other variables.

What Can Managers Do?

Even in the most uncertain of times, the role of a manager remains the same: to support your team members. That includes supporting their mental health. The good news is that many of the tools you need to do so are the same ones that make you an effective manager.

So, what can managers and leaders do to support people as they face new stressors, safety concerns, and economic upheaval? Here are some concrete actions managers can take today to improve mental health in the face of unprecedented uncertainty, including expressing their own vulnerability, modelling healthy behaviours, and building a culture of communication.

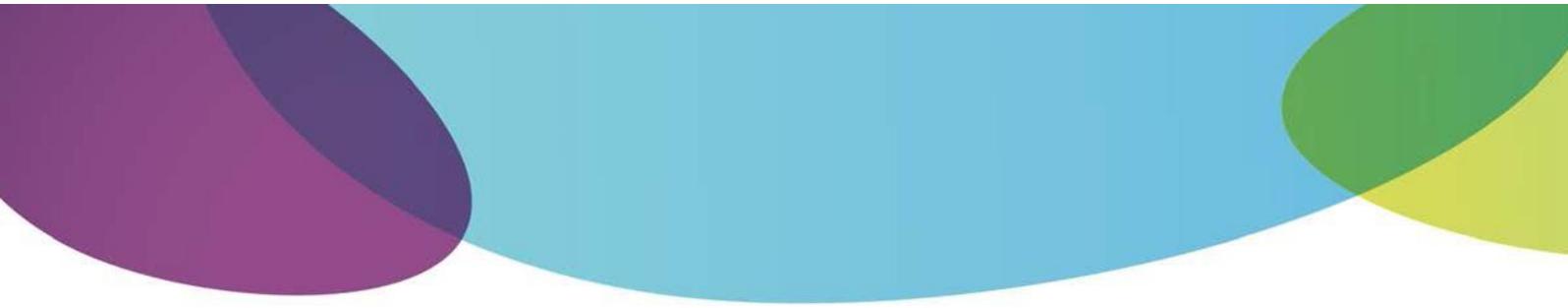
Be vulnerable

One silver lining of the pandemic is that it is normalising mental health challenges. Almost everyone has experienced some level of discomfort. But the universality of the experience will translate into a decrease in stigma only if people, especially people in power, share their experiences. Being honest about your mental health struggles as a leader opens the door for employees to feel comfortable talking with you about mental health challenges of their own.

Those of us working from home have had no choice but to be transparent about our lives, whether our kids have crashed our video meetings or our co-workers have gotten glimpses of our homes. When managers describe their challenges, whether mental-health-related or not, it makes them appear human, relatable, and brave. Research has shown that authentic leadership can cultivate trust and improve employee engagement and performance.

Model healthy behaviours

Don't just say you support mental health. Model it so that your team members feel they can prioritize self-care and set boundaries. More often than not, managers are so focused on their team's well-being



and on getting the work done that they forget to take care of themselves. Share that you're taking a walk in the middle of the day, having a therapy appointment, or prioritising a staycation (and actually turning off email) so that you don't burn out.

Build a culture of connection through check-ins

Intentionally checking in with each of your direct reports on a regular basis is more critical than ever. That was important but often underutilised in pre-pandemic days. Now, with so many people working from home, it can be even harder to notice the signs that someone is struggling.

Go beyond a simple "How are you?" and ask specific questions about what supports would be helpful. Wait for the full answer. Really listen, and encourage questions and concerns. Of course, be careful not to be overbearing; that could signal a lack of trust or a desire to micromanage.

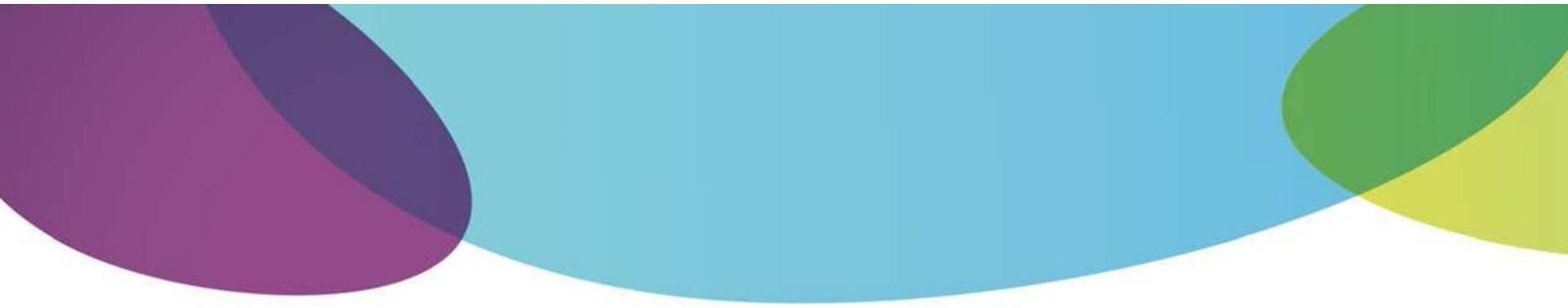
When someone shares that they're struggling, you won't always know what to say or do. What's most important is to make space to hear how your team members are truly doing and to be compassionate. They may not want to share much detail, which is completely fine. Knowing that they can is what matters.

Offer flexibility and be inclusive

Expect that the situation, your team's needs, and your own needs will continue to change. Check in regularly — particularly at transition points. You can help problem-solve any issues that come up only if you know what's happening. Those conversations will also give you an opportunity to reiterate norms and practices that support mental health. Inclusive flexibility is about proactive communication and norm-setting that helps people design and preserve the boundaries they need.

Don't make assumptions about what your direct reports need; they will most likely need childcare or feeling the need to work all the time. Proactively offer flexibility. Be as generous and realistic as possible. Being accommodating doesn't necessarily mean lowering your standards. Flexibility can help your team thrive amid the continued uncertainty.

Normalise and model this new flexibility by highlighting how you've changed your own behaviour. Ask team members to be patient and understanding with one another as they adapt. Trust them and assume the best. They are relying on you and will remember how you treated them during this unprecedented time.



Communicate more than you think you need to

Make sure you keep your team informed about any organizational changes or updates. Clarify any modified work hours and norms. Remove stress where possible by setting expectations about workloads, prioritising what must get done, and acknowledging what can slide if necessary.

Make your team aware of available mental health resources and encourage them to use them. Be aware that shame and stigma prevent many employees from using their mental health benefits to seek treatment, so normalize the use of those services.

As much as we might like to return to the way things were, we won't. So let's use this opportunity to create the mentally healthy workplace cultures that should have existed all along.