

From Awareness to Action: Workplace Mental Health Strategies for Leaders



Meet Our Team



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Steve is one of the Co-Founders of H3 HR Advisors, a leading HR technology advisory and services consultancy.

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Karen works with client teams to promote their organizational needs seamlessly and effectively, through strategy and planning. She is also responsible for the HR Happy Hour Network media production and promotion. Previously, Karen served 15 years as an elementary educator and early childhood administrator. Her focus is on learning solutions that are engaging and practical.

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Introduction:

Why Mental Health at Work Can't Wait



Mental health has become a defining issue in today's workplace, with conversation evolving from a quiet concern to a clear organizational priority. In 2025, employees are not only expecting better support, but they are also choosing where to work based on it. Mental health support is directly tied to engagement, retention, and performance, making it an essential part of business strategy.

As highlighted in the 2025 H3 HR Advisors Workplace Trends Report, mental health support is expanding beyond traditional Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs). Organizations are offering mental health days, resilience training, and more accessible, inclusive options that meet employees where they are. Yet, while benefits are evolving, culture must evolve alongside them.

The need for action is urgent. According to the World Health Organization, 12 billion workdays are lost globally each year due to depression and anxiety, costing businesses over one trillion dollars in lost productivity. At the same time, 8 out of 10 individuals still don't reach out for help when they need it.

Through practical examples, timely data, and a five-point action plan, this report serves as a guide for HR leaders and people managers who are ready to move from awareness to action and to build a workplace culture where mental health is seen, supported, and sustained.

Key Drivers Behind the Mental Health Movement

The growing focus on mental health is a direct response to the real and rising pressures employees face both inside and outside of work. While mental health conversations have become more mainstream, the forces driving this shift are complex and interconnected.

Burnout and Emotional Exhaustion Are on the Rise

From blurred boundaries in remote work environments to ever-increasing workloads, burnout is affecting employees at every level. The pace of change and the pressure to do more with less have created workplaces where mental fatigue is common and recovery time is rare.

According to data from the 2025 Workplace Trends Report, employees who are less comfortable discussing mental health at work are more likely to experience burnout. Silence around stress and exhaustion only deepens the problem.

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Mental and emotional health are deeply personal, and employees' needs vary widely based on factors like culture, background, and life experiences.

Rett Kearney, Sholder

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Financial Stress is Affecting Mental Health

Financial security remains a significant burden, with 60% of employees reporting financial stress and 46% of those in debt also experiencing mental health challenges, the connection is clear. When employees are distracted by money worries, it impacts sleep, concentration, and overall mental wellbeing.

Employees Expect More Than Awareness

Today's workforce, especially the younger generations, is demanding more than lip service with regards to mental health support. Employees want support that is accessible, inclusive, and available when and how they need it. This includes on-demand resources and the normalization of mental health conversations as part of everyday work life.

While access to care has begun to improve since the pandemic, it's clear that not enough has changed yet. There is still a need for culturally responsive and low-barrier entry points for care.

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8 out of 10 individuals still do not ask for help when they need it.

Dr. Belinda Carrasco, KOA Health

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Leadership Gaps are Holding Organizations Back

Many leaders want to support mental health but lack the tools, training, or time necessary to do so effectively. Without clear guidance and consistent behaviors from leadership, even the most generous benefits will fall flat. This leadership gap creates missed opportunities for early intervention and contributes to disengagement.

In short, the drivers of today's mental health movement are a mix of unmet expectations employee needs, evolving cultural and generational expectations, and a workplace landscape that demands a more thoughtful and responsive approach to wellbeing.

What Modern Support Looks Like

Mental health support in the workplace is a core component of a healthy organization and a critical factor in employee satisfaction, retention, and performance. As awareness increases, forward-thinking companies are shifting their approach from offering surface-level benefits to embedding mental health into the very culture of how work gets done.

Moving Beyond the Traditional EAP

Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) were once the primary solution for mental health support. While EAPs still play an important role, their utilization remains low, often due to lack of awareness or accessibility barriers. Employees today want more flexible options that meet their individual needs before a crisis hits.

What Modern Support Looks Like Today

- Mental health days that are encouraged
- Resilience and stress management training
- Ongoing mental health check-ins embedded into team routines
- Mindfulness and emotional regulation tools that are accessible and on-demand
- Peer support platforms and group models that hold space for emotional processing in a non-clinical setting

These solutions are designed to meet employees where they are, whether they are managing chronic stress, recovering from burnout, or navigating grief or trauma.

Proactive > Reactive

The best mental health strategies focus on prevention. According to the 2025 Workplace Trends Report, organizations that take a proactive approach are more likely to retain top talent, improve productivity, and reduce long-term healthcare costs.

This shift also acknowledges that mental health support is not one-size-fits-all. Employees need access to diverse resources that reflect their cultural background, life stage, and personal preferences. Flexibility and choice are key.

Culture Still Matters More Than Programs

Mental health programs are only as good as they are received. Even the most comprehensive benefits can fall flat if employees don't feel psychologically safe using them. That's why building trust and encouraging leaders to model vulnerability are critical elements of success.

The companies that treat mental health support as an essential component of how they lead and operate will be the best ones positioned to thrive in the coming years.

The Leadership Imperative

Leadership plays a defining role in how mental health is perceived and supported in the workplace. No matter how comprehensive a company's benefits may be, their impact will always depend on the behavior and example set by those in leadership roles.

Culture Starts at the Top

When leaders speak openly about well-being, take time off when needed, and support others in doing the same, it signals that mental health is a shared priority. Employees take their cues from the top. If managers never disconnect, team members won't feel safe doing so either.

There is a widening gap between what companies offer and how equipped leaders are to deliver meaningful mental health support. Many managers want to help but lack the tools, language, and confidence to do so effectively.

The Case for Mental Health Training

One of the most immediate ways to close this gap is through leadership development. Colin Minto shared on a recent episode of HR Means Business, "If you invest in your workers, they will credit you for that. They will stay. They will perform."

Training programs that help managers:

- Recognize signs of stress, burnout, or emotional fatigue
- Respond with empathy and without judgment
- Know when and how to direct someone to professional help
- Model healthy boundaries and time off
- Foster open communication and psychological safety

Leadership support doesn't always require a formal program or script. Sometimes it's as simple as asking, "How are you really doing?" and being prepared to listen. It's remembering that behind every deadline, is a human being navigating life. Employees don't need perfect leaders—they need present ones.

When leaders consistently show care and act with emotional intelligence, they build trust across teams. That trust becomes the foundation for retention, collaboration, innovation, and resilience. In contrast, a lack of leadership engagement around mental health can breed silence, stigma, and disengagement.

Organizations that empower leaders to lead with humanity are not only supporting mental health, they're shaping the kind of workplaces people want to be part of.

Mental Health in Total Rewards and Culture

Integration is key! While offerings like therapy sessions, stress management apps, or mindfulness training are important, their effectiveness increases when they are aligned with broader systems of support.

This includes:

- Flexible work policies that respect employees' mental energy and personal lives
- Compensation structures that reduce financial strain
- Time-off policies that encourage true rest and recovery
- Inclusive DEIB practices that recognize the mental toll of discrimination and exclusion

When mental health is supported in these foundational areas, it shifts from being a wellness “add-on” to a core part of the employee experience.

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When care is a core value and not just a benefit, mental health becomes part of how we lead, work, and grow together.

2025 Workplace Trends Report

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Additionally, a company's culture determines whether employees will feel safe using the resources available to them. Are employees praised for working through burnout, or encouraged to rest? Are leaders vulnerable and open about their own challenges, or do they avoid the topic altogether? When care is a shared value, organizations foster a sense of belonging, trust, and loyalty. That culture becomes a competitive advantage.

Getting Started: A 5-Point Action Plan

Creating a mentally healthy workplace starts with small, intentional steps taken consistently. This five-point action plan offers a practical path forward for organizations ready to move from good intentions to meaningful impact.

1. Assess Where you Are

Begin with a pulse check. Use surveys, listening sessions, or manager check-ins to understand how employees are experiencing mental health support today. Look beyond benefit usage to uncover cultural or communication gaps. Review data like absenteeism, lateness, and even turnover rates to look for signs of people who may be struggling with mental health.

- Do employees feel psychologically safe?
- Do they know what resources are available?
- Are managers equipped to support them?

2. Train Managers to Lead with Care

Equip managers with the tools to recognize signs of burnout or emotional distress and respond with empathy. This is a critical investment that strengthens trust, retention, and team performance. Additionally, managers should take time to assess and look after their own mental health as well.

Focus on:

- Active listening and compassionate conversation skills
- Creating space for open dialogue
- Knowing when and how to connect employees with resources

3. Expand Access and Flexibility

Ensure mental health support is easy to find, culturally relevant, and offered in multiple formats. Different people need different things and your offerings should reflect that.

- Digital tools for mindfulness and emotional regulation
- On-demand peer support models like Sholder
- Mental health days and no-questions-asked PTO
- EAPs that are modernized and well-communicated

4. Normalize the Conversation

Culture shifts happen through consistent messaging and modeling. Use leadership communications, team meetings, and internal channels to reinforce that mental health is a shared priority. Encourage leaders to share their own challenges or coping strategies when appropriate. Companies can also consider overtly recognizing and promoting mental health month and run specific programs, content, and communication during the month. Visibility reduces stigma.

5. Measure Progress and Adapt

Mental health strategies are not “set it and forget it.” Define success metrics such as engagement, retention, absenteeism, or employee feedback, and track progress over time. Stay responsive to what employees need as life, work, and the world continue to evolve.



Remember: Support doesn't have to be perfect to be powerful. Start with what's authentic to your culture, commit to progress, and build from there.

Conclusion: The Connection Between Care and Performance

Supporting mental health at work is multi-faceted. It isn't about one policy, one program, or one awareness campaign. It's about creating a consistent culture of care where employees feel seen, supported, and empowered to bring their whole selves to work.

As outlined in the 2025 Workplace Trends Report, organizations are recognizing mental health as both a moral responsibility and a strategic advantage. The future belongs to employers who prioritize well-being not only in moments of crisis, but in the rhythms of daily work. From benefits to leadership behaviors, from flexibility to financial support, every touchpoint matters.

The good news is that transformation doesn't have to happen overnight. Start small, stay consistent, and let your actions speak louder than your intentions. As employees begin to experience real, responsive support, trust deepens and culture shifts.

When mental health is part of how we lead, how we connect, and how we measure success, the workplace becomes more than a place to work. It becomes a place where people thrive.

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