



GUIDE

A supervisor's guide to addressing mental health at work

Poor mental health can affect the way people think, feel and behave. In some cases, this can seriously disrupt a person's ability to cope with day-to-day life, which in turn can have an impact on their relationships, work and overall quality of life. In light of this, it is critical that supervisors keep the mental health and well-being of their employees' top of mind, especially in times of immense stress and anxiety.

Good and poor mental health is very individual and can look quite different on different people. Mental health conditions can develop as a result of experiences in both a person's personal and working lives and may be caused by a series of events, both work- and nonwork-related which, when combined, can trigger or intensify poor mental health.



There is often a stigma associated with poor mental health. This fear or concern over being stigmatized may prevent people from seeking help from their employer or other sources of support. Supervisors should always be mindful of this perception because it is likely they may not always be aware that an employee is living with a mental health issue.

An employee's mental health condition may qualify for certain protections under federal, state and local laws. For example, a mental impairment,

just like a physical impairment, may qualify as a *disability* under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Mental health conditions that are considered mental impairments include bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. An employee whose mental health condition qualifies as a disability under the ADA may be eligible for a reasonable accommodation. Also, an employee living with a mental health condition may be eligible for leave under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA).

Common mental health conditions

An employee's mental health condition may affect the team and the workplace as a whole. As a result, a supervisor should have an understanding of common mental health conditions, the symptoms of these conditions and how they may affect the afflicted employee.

The following are several common mental health conditions:

- **Depression:** A person with depression will experience an unusually low mood that is long lasting and persistent. Other symptoms can include feelings of unhappiness and hopelessness, lack of energy, low confidence, feelings of guilt and no longer enjoying activities that they usually do.
- **Anxiety:** A person can experience anxiety in many different ways but when it becomes extreme, and where levels of fear and worry become severe, a range of disorders may be triggered. Some symptoms include feeling nervous, restless or tense; having a sense of impending danger, panic or doom; and having an increased heart rate.
- **Panic attacks:** An extremely heightened state of anxiety can trigger a panic attack, which can be brought on in a matter of minutes. Intense fear or discomfort can quickly create an accelerated heart rate, sweating, trembling, shaking and breathlessness.
- **Bipolar disorder:** Someone with bipolar disorder moves between periods of mania (highs) and periods of depression (lows). Highs and lows can vary in intensity and can last for days, weeks or even months.

While it may not rise to the level of a formal diagnosis, stress is certainly a mental health concern that supervisors should be aware of as it is one of the most prevalent issues employees face.

The warning signs

Creating a personal connection with the team members is one of the most important elements of being an effective supervisor. Through regular one-to-one catch-ups with individual employees and check-ins with the team, together with their observations on how someone is generally performing, a supervisor may be able to identify potential issues early, before they develop into more serious problems.

Below are some of the potential early warning signs of poor mental health.

Physical signs include:

- Tiredness;
- Aches and pains, headaches and sweats;
- A feeling of being run down all the time;
- Weight loss or gain; and/or
- Presenting a disheveled appearance.



Emotional and psychological signs include:

- Anxiousness or a feeling of distress;
- Loss of confidence and/or motivation;
- Mood swings;
- Aggression and/or tearfulness;
- A sense of feeling low and/or confused;
- Struggle to absorb information; and/or
- Lapses in memory.

Behavioral signs include:

- Bring withdrawn at work;
- Less contribution in meetings, activities and tasks;
- Decreased productivity;
- Unusual hours at work - arriving early, leaving late, emailing on the weekend or when on leave; arriving late, leaving early and taking long lunches;
- Increased absenteeism;
- Inconsistent performance; and/or
- Tendency to overreact to problems.

A supervisor should notice changes to an employee's typical work habits, behavior or personality. If an individual tends to be quiet or introverted, that may be how they feel most comfortable. However, if someone who is normally outgoing starts to withdraw from others, a supervisor should take note and explore with that employee.



A welcoming place to share

A supervisor can help to shape the dynamic across the team by encouraging others to speak up about their feelings and emotions, should they feel the need. Consider going around the room at regular team meetings and asking everyone to share what is going on for them at that moment, whether at work or home, including any upcoming events - big or small - that they are worried or excited about.

This practice also allows a supervisor to gain valuable insights into what the employees have going on in their lives. However, do not pressure employees to share personal information. Let them set the pace and share whatever information about their private lives they feel comfortable sharing.

The supervisor should also share and talk honestly about their own challenges. This can help foster a culture where employees feel more comfortable doing so themselves.

Be aware that this practice will not be right for all teams or in all work environments. If the supervisor thinks that it is unlikely that employees will open up, try something else, such as smaller voluntary well-being sessions, where the supervisor and a smaller group of employees check in with one other.

Considerations when speaking to an employee about mental health concerns

If a supervisor is concerned that an employee is displaying early warning signs of poor mental health, it is important that the supervisor have a conversation with the employee sooner rather than later. Timing is critical; do not wait for the individual to display serious warning signs. The following are other considerations to take into account when speaking with an employee about concerns:

Location. Choose a quiet, private space to hold the conversation. If the individual works remotely, consider whether it is possible to hold the conversation in person.

Set aside enough time and be present. Ensure that that there will be no interruptions during the meeting. The supervisor should not give the impression that they have little or no time for the meeting or that it is just another thing that they need to cross off their to-do list.

Be aware of nonverbal communication. A significant proportion of our communication is nonverbal by

way of body language, facial expressions and tone of voice. It is important that the supervisor appreciates the impact of their nonverbal communications during the conversation (and when talking to their team generally), as they can strengthen or undermine their attempt to have a productive conversation.

Listen. The supervisor should encourage the employee to open up by assuring them that they are concerned and there to help. The supervisor must remember though, that they are not a medical professional and it is not their role to diagnose someone or to try and solve their problems.

The supervisor worrying that they need to solve the person's problems is very likely to get in the way of listening effectively and being a genuine source of support. Do not feel the need to fill any silences.

Be open-minded and mindful of the language used. Mirroring the language and pace used by the employee may help to put the employee at ease. It is critical that the supervisor is not judgmental or dismissive in their manner or responses.

Accommodations

An employee with a mental health condition that qualifies as a mental impairment under the ADA may be entitled to a reasonable accommodation. A *reasonable accommodation* is a reasonable adjustment to a job or work environment that enables an individual with a disability to equally compete in the workplace and perform the essential duties of the position held or desired. Examples may include a modified work schedule, ability to work from home or permission to bring a service animal into the workplace.

Accommodations: Further Important Details for SJC

- **A request for an accommodation can be a statement in "plain English" that an individual needs an adjustment or change in the application process or at work for a reason related to a medical condition.**
- The request does not have to include the terms "ADA" or "reasonable accommodation," and the request does not have to be in writing.
- If you hear of or receive such a request, please notify the individual that you will be contacting Human Resources immediately for follow-up (207-893-7757, humanresources@sjcme.edu).
- This applies to all disability accommodations [including accommodations for pregnancy, childbirth or related medical conditions] or religious accommodation requests.
- With limited exceptions, you must keep

confidential any medical information you learn about an applicant or employee. Information can be confidential even if it contains no medical diagnosis or treatment course and even if it is not generated by a healthcare professional.

SJC Accommodations Policy

Address a reluctance to talk. Even though the supervisor may be genuinely concerned, some individuals may be reluctant to talk. If this happens, the supervisor should not assume that they do not want to talk. They may not feel comfortable opening up to their supervisor, so consider whether they would find it easier to talk to someone else. The supervisor could ask the employee who that person might be.

Further, an employee may see the supervisor as part of the problem. Regardless of whether the notion is justified, the supervisor should then identify another person that the employee could speak to, such as an HR representative or someone associated with an employee assistance program (EAP).

Take notes after the conversation. It can be distracting if notes are taken during the conversation and it is likely to make it harder to establish a rapport, connect with the employee or make them feel heard. Immediately after the conversation, the supervisor should take notes of what was said and ensure all internal procedures are followed.

Address next steps. The content of the conversation will determine what the next steps should be. If, for example, the supervisor remains worried about the employee, the next step may be to follow up with them in a few days, or consider whether someone else may be better suited to talk to them.

A supervisor should also be flexible in their approach as much will vary depending on the severity, nature and complexity of the circumstances.

Importantly, if there are concerns about the employee's own safety or the safety of others, consider whether to speak to HR, the EAP or other individuals in the organization for support.

Maintain confidentiality of information provided. The ADA requires that all information collected about an employee's illness, including mental health concerns, be kept in a separate, confidential medical file and not intermingled with other personal documents.

Organizational support

A supervisor should make employees aware of the sources of support the organization offers to those who may have concerns over their mental health. Whether it be by regular email communications or a wellness seminar, employees need to know that the organization takes their mental health seriously and there is assistance available.

Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) play a critical part in promoting the mental health of employees by offering a variety of services on a confidential basis. An employee can call an EAP and get assistance with their mental health concerns, including stress and depression, as well as substance abuse issues.

Health care benefits. Employer-sponsored health care benefits may be indispensable to an employee suffering from a mental health issue. Health care plans typically include coverage for mental health services.

Paid time off. Employees should be encouraged to take advantage of paid time off benefits that may be offered by the organization. A day away from work can be beneficial to an employee who just needs a day to “unplug” or catch up on personal matters.

Other benefits. Supervisors should promote other benefits that the organization may offer that may be

beneficial for an employee’s mental health.

Self-care

It is important as a supervisor to realize the role you play in influencing the behaviors of others. If the team sees their supervisor taking active steps to look after their own well-being, they are more likely to do the same. Conversely, if the reality of what employees see from their supervisor is late night emails, weekend working or an unhealthy work-life balance, employees are less likely to feel empowered and encouraged to take steps to look after themselves.

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