

Supporting Mental Health in the Workplace

Getting Started Guide for Senior Managers



Senior managers can make a difference when it comes to helping their supervisors and workers manage stress. This guide aims to help them engage with their staff on the topics of workplace stress, mental health, and substance use. For many senior managers, the idea of even approaching these topics may be uncharted territory and may make them think they are invading their workers' privacy. However, addressing these important topics head on will help strengthen your organization.

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Background

Research from the [American Psychological Association](#) suggests that, across all industries, lower-level employees were more likely to experience the negative impacts of work-related stress and over 30 percent have felt fed up with work frequently or more often in the past 30 days. Issues in the workplace can exacerbate the risk of experiencing mental health challenges. Combined, these stressors can make it more difficult for workers to get their tasks done; threaten their productivity, happiness, and well-being; and lead to burnout. Because of the many potential stressors' employees may be experiencing, a comprehensive approach is needed to address stressors throughout the community, and senior managers can be part of the solution.

The goal is to find ways to alleviate or remove stressors in the workplace to the greatest extent possible, build coping and resiliency supports, and ensure that people who need help know where to turn. Reducing workplace stress benefits **everyone** across an organization. It can improve morale and lead to increased productivity, fewer sick days, better focus, fewer workplace injuries, enhanced quality of life, and improved physical health (e.g., lower blood pressure, stronger immune system).

As a senior manager, you can help workers by:

- **Being aware** and acknowledging that your supervisors and other workers may be experiencing heightened levels of loneliness, isolation, uncertainty, grief, and stress, and that some workers face extra demands, such as working parents; those caring for an elderly, medically vulnerable, or disabled family member; and those with existing mental health or substance use challenges.
- **Identifying what factors are making it harder for supervisors and workers to get their jobs done** and determining if adjustments can be made to lessen the burden.

- **Showing empathy** and telling workers 1) they are not alone, 2) you recognize the stress they are under, 3) there is no shame in feeling anxious, and 4) asking for help is important. Employers can reassure workers they are open and receptive to discussions about workplace stress by creating a safe and trustworthy space.
- **Providing access** to helpful coping and resilience resources or other supportive networks and services if needed.

Recommendations for Senior Managers

Below is a list of helpful tips for senior managers to keep in mind as they address workplace stress.

- **Be transparent.**
- **Avoid using negative or stigmatizing language when discussing mental health and workplace stress.**
- **Stay positive.** Speak positively around all staff, as you never know who might be struggling with a mental health condition. Encourage supervisors and workers alike to use resources available through your company's employee assistance program or other publicly available websites (e.g., [CDC](#), [American Psychiatric Association](#), [World Health Organization](#), and [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#)).
- **Listen without judgement.** When a staff member reaches out to you, listen without judgement, and acknowledge their feelings. Offer help or resources if available and warranted.
- **Be understanding** and accept that supervisors and workers may not be able to exhibit the same level of productivity.
- **Offer assistance** to supervisors and workers. Ask whether their workload has increased and look for ways to reassign or prioritize tasks to help minimize their workplace stress. Just because a worker is not vocal about an increased workload, it does not mean they are not struggling.
- **Model exemplary behavior.** Be a good role model by demonstrating self-care behaviors (e.g., getting enough sleep, exercising, taking time off), and defining and adhering to work schedule boundaries.
- **Adequately train supervisors.** Train front-line supervisors about mental health issues so they have the skills and confidence to have discussions with workers and can recognize the signs and symptoms of emotional distress.

What to Say and Ways to Say It

Talking about experiences and feelings can help workers cope during challenging times. When having a conversation, workers want to be heard, acknowledged, and understood. Senior managers may use these tips to start a conversation.

Set the Stage

- Be flexible about the format—hold a conversation over the phone, in-person, or via video chat.
- Put away or silence devices and give workers your undivided attention.
- Before starting a conversation, ensure that you can be positive, supportive, and patient and that you have sufficient time to dedicate to the conversation.

What to Say

- Reduce stigma upfront by telling workers you recognize their stress, and it is normal for them to feel anxious.
- Consider sharing an experience about your own stress level or mental health to show your personal side and make the other person feel more comfortable.
- Ask open-ended questions to get the conversation started, such as:
 - How are you feeling?
 - How is it going for you these days?
 - How are you keeping in touch with your support system (e.g., family and friends)?
 - Are you struggling with any new job-related burdens? If so, do you have thoughts about what could be done to lessen them?
 - How can I help?
- Show concern and sympathy and validate workers' feelings by using phrases like "I'm so sorry," "I understand," "That sounds difficult," or "How can I help?"
- Be respectful of a worker's privacy and understand they might not be open to sharing. In this instance, offer resources for more information.

How to Listen

- Practice **active listening** by engaging with the person or persons you are talking to and showing that you acknowledge and understand his/her/their message. Use these tips:
 - Make sure your body language is open and inviting (e.g., face turned toward the person you are talking to, eyes open, arms and legs not crossed).
 - Avoid thinking about what you will say next.
 - Show that you understand what someone is telling you by paraphrasing what you heard.
 - Ask questions to clarify points.
 - Don't interrupt.
- Respond in a respectful manner without being judgmental or defensive about what the other person has said.
- Acknowledge workers' feelings. Offer help or resources if available and warranted.

Follow-up

- Finish on a positive note. When ending a conversation with workers, mention something positive the company has accomplished because of their work and remind them you are available to talk more if needed.
- Schedule group meetings. Hold group meetings to promote connectedness and provide a forum for workers to voice concerns, ask questions, and receive information about ways to cope with stress.
- Take stock of your own mental health. Respect the limits of what you can do and maintain healthy boundaries to avoid becoming overwhelmed by the events at hand.

References

- American Psychiatric Association: [What Is Mental Illness?](#)
- American Psychiatric Association Foundation/Center for Workplace Mental Health: [Identify, Connect, and Understand Program](#)
- American Psychological Association: [Anxiety](#)
- CDC: [Mental Health](#)
- CDC Foundation: [How Right Now](#)
- Healthy Work Campaign: [Resources](#)
- Mental Health First Aid:
 - [Six Ways to Reassure a Colleague](#)
 - [4 Self-Care Tips for How to Deal with Anxiety](#)
 - [How to Be an Effective Listener at Work](#)
- National Alliance on Mental Illness: [The Ultimate Workplace Mental Health Toolkit](#)
- National Council for Mental Wellbeing: [Mental Health First Aid Course and Curriculum](#)
- National Institutes of Health: [Depression Overview](#)
- National Safety Council: [Mental Health and the Workplace](#)
- National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health: [Stress at Work](#)
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: [Mental Health and Substance Use Disorders](#)
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: [Warning Signs and Risk Factors for Emotional Distress](#)
- U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for PTSD: [Self-Help and Coping Skills](#)
- World Health Organization: [Mental Health and Substance Use](#)
- World Health Organization: [WHO Guidelines on Mental Health at Work](#)