

Managers' Handbook

Supporting the behavioral health of your employees


Learn how to have an OPEN mindset, spot the signs of struggling employees, and what tools and resources are available to make a difference for your workforce.



As a manager, you play a vital role in the behavioral health of your employees. Managers set the tone of the workplace, signifying what behavior may or may not be appropriate. You set precedents. You model what is safe. This is especially important when it comes to supporting the behavioral health of your employees.








What do we mean by “behavioral health”?

The term “behavioral health” has come to include a full continuum of challenges that impact well-being, from mental health conditions to the everyday stressors—financial debt, social media pressure, and work-life balance, to name a few.

To view webinars and additional educational tools on behavioral health, visit smarterbetterhealthcare.com. 

Inside this handbook

This handbook is intended to help support your communication efforts with your employees around behavioral health. Feel free to read it front to back or jump to a specific section below.

The scale of impact 	Staying OPEN 
 The prevalence of behavioral health challenges among today’s workforce	 How to have an OPEN mindset for every employee interaction
Spotting the signs 	Tools and resources 
 Different ways to identify someone who may be struggling	 How to empathetically connect with and support your employees

The scale of the issue



1 in 5 adults will experience a diagnosable mental health condition in any given year.¹



The first year of the COVID-19 pandemic saw a massive 25% global increase in anxiety and depression.²



The remote work that increased with the pandemic can exacerbate feelings of isolation, the temptation to work longer hours, and fatigue due to back-to-back virtual meetings. For remote employees working overseas, there are the additional struggles of culture shock, language barriers, and lack of a support network.



8 in 10

workers say shame and stigma prevent them from seeking treatment for a mental health condition.³

The impact of stigma

The stigma of experiencing behavioral health challenges is rampant in our culture. People often avoid or delay seeking treatment due to fears of being treated differently or losing their jobs, and more than half of people with mental health conditions don't receive help.⁴

Stigma can be particularly strong within communities of color. One study showed that **63% of Black people believe that a mental health condition is a sign of personal weakness.**⁵ To learn more about disparities within behavioral health and how to combat them, download our mini-eMagazine, "Uniting to advance behavioral health equity," at smarterbetterhealthcare.com. [🔗](#)

As a manager, you have an opportunity to speak out and take action against these damaging stigmas in real, tangible ways.

¹ Center for Workplace Mental Health, American Psychiatric Association Foundation, "Investing in a Mentally Healthy Workforce Is Good for Business," 2020.

² World Health Organization (WHO), "COVID-19 Pandemic Triggers 25% Increase in Prevalence of Anxiety and Depression Worldwide," Mar. 2, 2022.

³ National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), "StigmaFree Company," 2022.

⁴ "Stigma, Prejudice and Discrimination Against People with Mental Illness," American Psychiatric Association, August 2020.

⁵ National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) California, "Mental Health in Black Communities: Challenges, Resources, Community Voices."

An open-door policy on behavioral health

We often say our “door is always open.” But what does that mean in the context of behavioral health? How can we stay open to honest, vulnerable, and difficult conversations? How might we alleviate and not exacerbate stress levels?

Consider implementing a newly defined, behavioral health-focused **open-door policy** to help support your employees:

- Invite them to speak their minds regularly about both professional and personal challenges
- Let them know you want to receive critical feedback about the workplace, their workload, deadlines, and other organizational issues
- Set up conversations to be ongoing ones that can be picked up again at any time, even later that same day

Adopt this **OPEN** mindset for every interaction with employees:

O Offer flexibility around personal struggles

P Practice listening and looking for signs of someone struggling

E Encourage a culture of connection through regular check-ins

N Normalize and model vulnerability

These efforts work

\$1 = \$4

For every US \$1 put into scaled-up treatment for common mental disorders, there is a return of US \$4 in improved health and productivity.⁶

The important takeaway is that investing in behavioral health efforts improves the overall well-being of your employees.

57%

of workers are comfortable with their manager proactively asking them about their mental health.⁷

Furthermore, employees are looking for this support. More than half (57.7%) of workers are comfortable with their manager proactively asking them about their mental health, and 41.0% want their manager to proactively ask them.⁸ It's time to open the door.

Observe, listen, and act with empathy

It's important to be able to recognize the signs of someone struggling by utilizing all of your senses.

Whether in a regular check-in, passing conversation, or a casual joke, listen for themes of behavioral health struggles, like social isolation or financial concerns. Use your eyes as well as your ears to notice changes in facial expressions. This can give some clues to what the person is actually feeling, which might be different from what they're saying.⁹

Using the tips below, practice tuning in to your work community with empathy.

In one-on-one interactions



Look for:

- Changes in energy and engagement
- Changes in demeanor
- Social withdrawal



Listen for:

- Mentions of stress
- Stories of pushing through hardship
- Hopelessness or sadness (especially hidden behind jokes)

In your team overall



Watch for:

- Absenteeism
- High turnover
- Conflicts with peers or direct reports



The problem of burnout

Burnout is a widespread, ongoing issue. In 2019, the World Health Organization identified it as an “occupational phenomenon” resulting from “chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.”¹⁰ Burnout is an organizational issue, not a personal one.

Learn how to battle the root causes of burnout by downloading our infographic at [smarterbetterhealthcare.com](https://www.smarterbetterhealthcare.com).

Creating different “spaces” for your employees

There are different kinds of safe spaces you can provide in the workplace, such as:

Safe physical spaces

At times, we all need a moment to meditate or sit somewhere comfortably in respect of our minds’ and bodies’ needs. Talk to your supervisors about providing safe spaces where your employees can recharge without judgment or repercussion.

Safe personal spaces

Talk regularly with your employees about respecting personal boundaries. Everyone has different levels of comfort. Ensure your employees know it’s safe to speak up if they feel their personal space is being invaded in any way.

Safe emotional spaces

Communicating behavioral health struggles is only possible when person has the emotional space to do so. Tell your employees it’s okay not to share if they’re uncomfortable doing so. This also goes for you as manager—taking care of your own emotional space ensures others are taken care of, too.



Creating space for what’s needed

Different workplaces have different employee needs. In a deadline-driven environment, the need to create space for behavioral health is critical. Normalize taking a day off or adjusting deadlines, and praise and validate employees who step forward with a behavioral health struggle as being good team members.

In a physically demanding environment, make sure your check-ins directly address behavioral health. Ask what your employees need to adequately rest and recharge their bodies. If possible and appropriate, encourage PTO. Always ensure that proper breaks are taken throughout the day for hydration, meals, and mental space.

Communicating thoughtfully

Here are some conversation starters to help gauge how your employees are navigating their behavioral health.

For individual check-ins

Be intentional about questions beyond the basic, “How are you?”

Try engaging ones like:

- “What would be most helpful to you right now?”
- “Let’s think through this together. Is there a way I might be able to take something off of your plate?”
- “I’ve been through something similar. And while I don’t want to make this about myself, I’m open to sharing my experience with you if and when that would be helpful.”¹¹

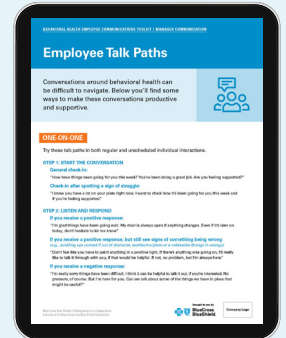
For team meetings

Ask your employees what support they need from you. Address behavioral health directly, and allow them time to bounce ideas off of one another.

Try open-ended questions like:

- “Which projects have gone well this week, and which have been challenging? I’ll start.”
- “What support would be most helpful to the team?”
- “Let’s talk about the behavioral health resources we have available here, and what else you might need...Any questions about these programs?”

More help for thoughtful communication



If you’re interested in additional language support to have empathetic conversations with employees, we’ve created some talk paths to help. Click [here](#) or reach out to your HR department.



A word about vulnerability

Being honest about the challenges you’re experiencing will signal to employees that this is a safe space to discuss their own struggles. Share how you’re managing your own mental health. Practice and commit to healthy working norms and be transparent about the challenges that come with that. Help destigmatize behavioral health struggles by discussing them openly. The change in workplace culture begins with you.

¹¹ Deborah Grayson Riegel, “Talking About Mental Health with Your Employees,” *Harvard Business Review*, Nov. 3, 2020.

Navigating behavioral health challenges is a learning process for all of us. As a manager, you can lead the way. Be part of the change by creating a safer, more supportive and empathetic workplace for your employees.

You'll need resources to make this happen. Utilize any and all of these whenever you need. Throughout your journey of supporting your employees, you are also supported.

Additional Resources

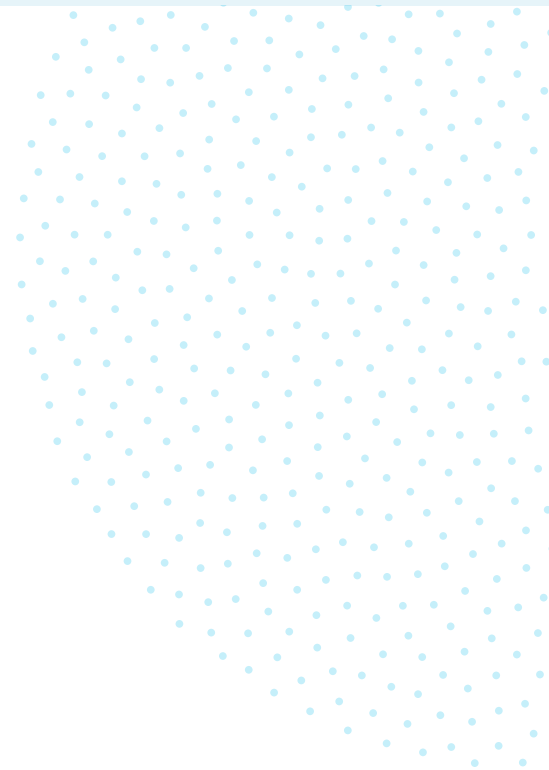
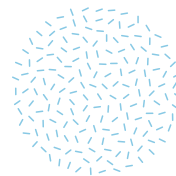
[More Behavioral Health Insights](#)

[988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline](#)

[Insert Human Resources Department Contact](#)

[Insert Toolkit's Customizable Employee Resource Guide](#)

[Insert link to online self-guided tool](#)



Independence 

Independence Blue Cross offers products through its subsidiaries Independence Hospital Indemnity Plan, Keystone Health Plan East and QCC Insurance Company, and with Highmark Blue Shield — independent licensees of the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association