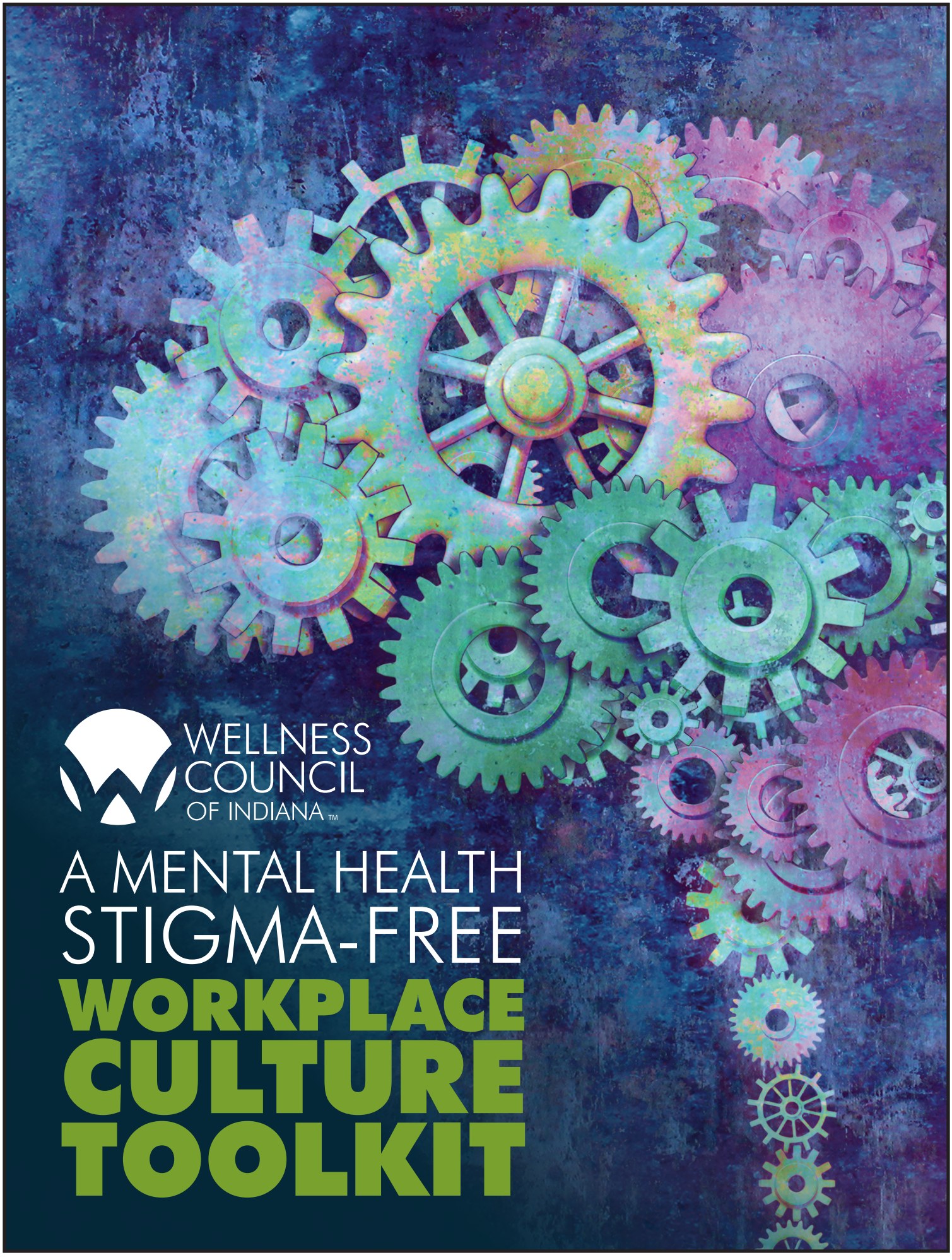

WELLNESS
COUNCIL
OF INDIANA ™
A MENTAL HEALTH
STIGMA-FREE
WORKPLACE
CULTURE
TOOLKIT



INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

It's become imperative for employers to create a healthy work environment for their employees and cultivate positive outcomes among their workforces. This not only includes building a safer physical work environment but also creating a stigma-free workplace culture. Accomplishing that can foster employee loyalty and retention as well as enhance awareness and acceptance. In a workplace culture where mental illnesses or substance use disorder (SUD) isn't stigmatized, employees are more likely to be aware of available resources, enter treatment sooner and begin recovery earlier. This toolkit will guide employers on steps they can take to reduce the stigma associated with mental health conditions as well as SUD.

In this toolkit, "Recovery" means returning to a better condition. According to Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), recovery is a process of change through which people improve their health and wellness, live self-directed lives and strive to reach their full potential.

Additionally, when discussing a "Recovery Ready Workplace" within this toolkit, it means a workplace supporting its communities by recognizing recovery from SUD as a strength and being willing to work intentionally with people in recovery.

Last, a stigma-free company within this toolkit refers to an employer with a culture of openness, acceptance and understanding about employees' overall health and well-being.

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I. UNDERSTANDING MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER

MENTAL HEALTH:

One in five U.S. adults, including one in four Hoosiers, experiences some form of mental health disorder. While these conditions are common, stigma and negative stereotypes can still make it difficult for individuals to seek support or feel comfortable discussing their mental health, both in and outside of the workplace.

Employers can play an important role in reducing stigma and creating a supportive workplace culture. By prioritizing mental health and addressing workplace stress as part of a broader strategy, employers can strengthen trust, connection and psychological safety while supporting employee well-being, engagement and retention.

Mental health is a general sense of emotional, psychological and cognitive well-being.

Mental illnesses directly affect an employee's ability to perform effectively at work and are associated with absenteeism and lost productivity. In fact, 80% of people with depression report some level of functional impairment.

The good news is that treatment works. Treatment for mental health conditions like depression is effective 80% of the time.[1] Many mental health conditions are treated with talk therapy and/or medication. Treatment has been shown to improve productivity and effectiveness on the job.

As an employer, you can't afford to ignore mental health. Investing in the mental health of your employees is critical to taking care of your biggest asset – your workforce. There are measurable returns on that investment. Employers who invest even a $1 on mental health can see a $4 return. When employees seek and receive treatment for mental distress, organizations can see reductions in medical and disability costs, see increase in productivity, and lower absenteeism rates.[2]

SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER:

According to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 44.6 million U.S. adults experienced both mental illness and a SUD in 2020.[3]

Employers have felt the impact of substance misuse for decades through absenteeism, loss of productivity, safety issues and poor job performance. Through Recovery Ready Workplaces, you can accomplish several things. For example, when workplaces are known as

$82 billion in workplace productivity is lost annually due to heavy drinking	Employees with untreated SUD miss nearly 50% more days than their peers	Employees who misuse alcohol are 270% more likely to have a workplace accident	Seven out of 10 employers have felt the effects of opioid drug misuse

recovery-friendly workplace they encourage a healthy and safe environment where employees and their communities can create positive change and eliminate barriers for those affected by addiction. When employers support and embrace people with SUDs it helps prevent feelings of stigma and isolation, and greatly helps improve an employee's chance of recovery.[4]

SAMHSA states that SUDs occur when the recurrent use of alcohol and/or drugs causes clinically significant impairment, including health problems, disability, and failure to meet major responsibilities at work, school or home.

SUD is a chronic disease that does not discriminate based on socioeconomic status, gender, age or race.

SUDs are more common than you may think. According to the National Survey on Drug Use & Health, more than 20 million people in the United States are affected by a SUD – that's one in three American households directly impacted by this disease.

Fortunately, SUD is a treatable, manageable disease. Just like treatment for other chronic diseases like diabetes, asthma and heart disease, SUD treatment should be ongoing and frequently assessed. There are an estimated 23 million Americans in recovery who are creating healthy lifestyles, relationships and communities.

II. IMPACT OF MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER IN THE WORKPLACE

COST OF MENTAL HEALTH TO EMPLOYERS:

According to research, the cost of employee absences, planned and unplanned per year, could be as much as 36% of payroll – more than twice the cost of health care. The costs for treating people with both mental health disorders and other physical conditions are two to three times higher than for those without co-occurring illnesses.[5]

Use the National Safety Council's Mental Health Cost Calculator to estimate the impact of mental health challenges on your organization and help build the business case for investing in workplace mental health.

Considering mental health care, for every dollar spent towards treatment for common mental illness, there is a return of four dollars in improved health and productivity.

COST OF SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER TO EMPLOYERS:

SUDs will cost our health care system and economy more than $400 billion. Workplaces bear a large portion of the national cost, mostly in hidden fees associated with turnover, absenteeism, loss of productivity and health care expenditures.

Employers can save an average of $8,500 by supporting each employee in recovery from SUD.

III. BUSINESS STRATEGIES FOR CREATING A STIGMA-FREE CULTURE IN THE WORKPLACE

Stigma affects individuals with mental health issues or SUDs in all aspects of a person's lives — personal relationships, family life and in the workplace. Fighting stigma is about creating awareness, encouraging acceptance and challenging false beliefs. By addressing stigma in the workplace, employers have a unique opportunity to make it easier for their employees to get help. It starts with breaking the silence around mental illness and education about things such as the following:

- Understanding the mental health benefits offered and knowing how to access them
- Highlighting support and resources available through employee assistance programs (EAP)s
- Proactive manager support for those who are open about living with a mental health condition
- Awareness of language used throughout the organization and avoiding negative terms when talking about mental illness
- Recognizing that mental health and physical health are equally important, and mental health conditions are common and treatable — just like most physical health conditions
- Recognizing signs of emotional distress and what to do when team members may be struggling

BECOME PART OF THE NAMI STIGMA WORKPLACE INITIATIVE

This effort encourages Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), or business practices that take responsibility for a company's impact on social well-being. The initiative combines CSR with employee engagement activities available in NAMI Stigma Workplace Initiative. The kit equips companies with the resources, assets and information they need to promote mental health awareness in the workplace and encourage acceptance and understanding. By signing up to become a stigma-free company, you are making a commitment to help create an accepting and healthy culture within your workplace environment. Stigma-free companies actively show that they value their employees' health, including mental health.

Prioritizing mental health within your company can:

- increase productivity;
- decrease disability costs;
- reduce turnover; and
- improve retention of valued employees.

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BECOME A RECOVERY READY WORKPLACE (RRW)

A healthy workplace culture is built one conversation at a time. The Wellness Council of Indiana's Workplace Well-Being Badge Initiatives provide employers with a clear, supported way to start and sustain those conversations with intention. The RRW badge is designed to help employers build supportive, recovery ready workplaces. The badge focuses on raising awareness, reducing stigma and providing practical tools to succeed.

Employers who complete a badge are recognized for their commitment to creating healthier, more supportive workplaces. Once approved through the application process, an employer's company name and logo will be featured on the Badge Initiative home page for one year, highlighting their leadership and progress.

There is no cost to participate, and employers can begin right where they are.

Why These Badges Matter:

- Build awareness and shared understanding across teams
- Reduce stigma and strengthen workplace culture
- Earn recognition and signal your commitment statewide

Additional ideas to establish an ongoing Recovery Ready Workplace culture:

- Participate in at least one prevention and/or recovery focused community event each year
- Provide stress management, wellness and self-care education
- Establish a relationship with a local recovery community organization as a resource for employees
- Provide a variety of non-alcoholic options at companywide events (everyone will enjoy tasty non-alcoholic options)
- Encourage healthy after-hours activities in addition to or in lieu of happy hour
- Send anonymous employee surveys to ask for feedback and suggestions surrounding the Recovery Friendly Workplace Initiative

IMPLEMENT A COMPANYWIDE STATEMENT

Through a companywide statement, employers can address stigma and SUDs by demonstrating their support for those who have a mental illness or experience a mental health challenge or SUD.

A Recovery Ready and Stigma-Free Workplace is one that promotes the physical health and mental wellness of all employees. Ensure that your employees know – making a companywide declaration will increase awareness of your commitment to the Recovery Friendly and Stigma-Free Workplaces initiative.

Sample statement:

"[COMPANY NAME] has made a commitment to become a Recovery Friendly and Stigma-Free Workplace. We value the health and safety of all our employees and are dedicated to helping those with substance use disorder. We are also committed to fighting the stigma associated with addiction and mental health. We intend to promote positive changes within our workplace and the community."

Mention your commitment to leading a behaviorally healthy workplace every time you reference the company's commitment to its overall culture of health, attracting and retaining the best talent, being an employer of choice and valuing its employees and their family members as human beings.

Our work environment has a huge impact on individuals. It is imperative for our workplaces to be mentally healthy and supportive. Unfortunately, 52% of employees say their company doesn't do enough to promote employee health.

Workplaces may promote a quality work environment by establishing and maintaining potentially protective working conditions, such as fair and equitable treatment, respectful supervision and promotion of supportive social connections and friendships among co-workers.



CREATE COMPANY POLICIES AND REQUIRE TRAININGS REGARDING MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER

You can support your employees in receiving the help they need by offering the following:

- Adequate insurance coverage
- EAPs
- Accommodations and/or disability planning for people with mental health conditions
- Access to quality care
- Policies to support family caregivers

Show support to employees:
Supervisors and employees should be open to conversations about how to support employee mental health and SUDs, be proactive in approaching co-workers who may be struggling and be understanding if someone needs accommodations or time off work.

Provide management training:
Equipping managers and employees with practical skills can help build confidence, reduce stigma and create a more supportive workplace culture. The Indiana Workplace Wellness Training Academy, developed by the Wellness Council of Indiana in partnership with the Indianapolis' Colts Kicking The Stigma initiative, provides employers across Indiana with mental health and substance use education and training opportunities.

- Mental Health First Aid
- The Working Mind – Employee
- The Working Mind – Manager
- QPR Suicide Prevention
- Naloxone Education
- Mental Health Support Skills Refresher

Employers can participate in scheduled public trainings or explore opportunities to bring select trainings directly to their organization.

Decrease stigma in the workplace:
Using non-stigmatizing language, encouraging employees to support one another and providing resources about mental health helps create a healthy workplace culture.

ENHANCEMENT OF EMPLOYEE WELLNESS BENEFITS

Hoosiers are struggling to get the help they need. More than half of people with a mental health condition in the U.S. did not receive any treatment in the last year, according to Mental Health in Indiana.

Of the 345,000 adults in Indiana who did not receive needed mental health care, 37.4% did not because of cost. Additionally, 8.8% of people in the state are uninsured. Hoosiers are over two times more likely to be forced out of network for mental health care than for primary health care, making it more difficult to find care and less affordable due to higher out-of-pocket costs.[6]

According to Mental Health America, in a 2019 brief, more than half of the people living in the U.S under the age of 65 get their health insurance through an employer. For workers and families who rely on employer-sponsored health care, the employer should ensure that its employees receive adequate care and other benefits.

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QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR BENEFITS BROKER AND EAP

BENEFITS BROKER:

- Do your health plans have the same benefits coverage limits for physical and mental health conditions?
- What is the percentage of behavioral health providers that are in network and currently accepting new patients for the health insurance plans we offer?
- For the health insurance plans we offer, do you provide a comprehensive and user-friendly online behavioral health directory with a selection tool to help users access specific services?
- Can you provide us with an up-to-date, accurate and complete provider directory of mental health professionals who are accepting new patients?
- Do our health plans cover a variety of mental health services, including home-based services or different types of outpatient care (e.g., peer services)?
- Do our health plans cover effective prescription medications for mental health conditions at a level that encourages appropriate regular use?
- Do our health plans encourage mental health and stress management through a comprehensive wellness and health promotions program?
- Do our health plans track disability claims for mental health conditions and provide case management services to facilitate a timely return to work?
- Do our health plans provide access to behavioral health providers in after-hours emergencies?
- How quickly can an employee or dependent get an appointment in an emergency?
- Are the health insurance plans we offer accredited through the National Commission for Quality Assurance Managed Behavioral Healthcare Organization or External Mental Health Parity Compliance Audit?
- Do our health plans reimburse for collaborative care in primary care?
- Do our health plans offer a care navigator to help our EAP or employee access timely in network qualified providers?

EAP:

- How can your program be an extension of workplace culture rather than a separate entity?
- How can we work together to promote and educate our employees about the services you offer?
- Can you describe the experience of an employee who first interacts with your services until they no longer need them?
- Do you provide regular and confidential utilization data, and can you make recommendations for how to apply what we learn from the data?
- How do you define utilization? Does utilization include web hits and event participation in addition to actual cases and consultations?
- What resources can you provide to our supervisors?

GUIDANCE FOR SUPERVISORS:

Supervisors play a critical role in helping support employee mental health. They can directly support their employees by noticing when someone's behavior has changed, reaching out to them in a caring and supportive way, and connecting them with resources. Employers can reduce stigma by creating a supportive workplace culture.

BENEFITS OF PRIORITIZING MENTAL HEALTH ON YOUR TEAM



Increased productivity



Decreased disability cost



Increased retention and engagement of valued employees



Create a Supportive and Mentally Healthy Work Environment

- Employers can support mental health by creating working conditions that promote well-being, connection and psychological safety.
- Promote manageable workloads and clear roles and expectations.
- Offer predictable and flexible scheduling where possible.
- Foster psychological safety and encourage employees to speak up, ask questions and seek support.
- Give employees opportunities to provide input on decisions and workplace practices that affect their work.
- Strengthen connection and belonging through supportive relationships, mentoring and team communication.
- Provide managers with training to support respectful supervision, regular check-ins and connection to appropriate resources.

Information and Support for Employees:

- Foster a culture where getting help for a mental health challenge is as routine as getting help for any other challenge
- Help employees understand what resources the organization offers for mental health
- Designate a wellness space in your workplace – regular breaks help people build resilience and perform at their best. A calm room where employees can go, lock the door if possible (and hang a sign saying the room is in use) can help them recharge

Non-Stigmatizing Conversation and Behaviors:

- Create a culture of trust and communication to support an emotionally healthy environment
- Communicate organizational values that include respect, civility and a general culture of well-being to encourage empathetic behaviors by employees
- Promote the use of non-stigmatizing language when talking about mental health
- Practice supportive conversations – a conversation guide for managers offers tips to prepare, conversation starters, language dos and don'ts, and ways to keep the dialogue going

These practices support a workplace where employees feel committed, supported and valued. This increases employee connection to the organization and each other.

At work, those suffering from clinical conditions or more minor ones often hide it for fear that they may face discrimination from peers or even bosses. It takes more than policies to overcome these stigmas. It requires empathetic action from managers on the ground. Many people move across the spectrum of mental health from thriving to barely hanging on, and somewhere in between. Individual experiences consistently demonstrate how much managerial support matters.

When bosses or companies understand mental health issues and how to respond to them, it can make all the difference for an employee professionally and personally. This involves taking notice, offering a helping hand and saying, "I'm here. I have your back. You are not alone."

Pay attention to language	It's important to be aware of the words that are used as they can contribute to stigmatizing mental health issues.
Rethink "sick days"	If you have the flu, your manager will tell you to go home and rest. But few people in business would react to emotional outbursts or signs of stress, anxiety or manic behavior in the same way. It's vital to get more comfortable with the idea of suggesting and requesting days to focus on improving mental as well as physical health.
Encourage open and honest conversations	It's important to create safe spaces for people to talk about their own challenges, past and present, without fear of being called "unstable" or passed up for the next big project or promotion. Employees shouldn't fear that they will be judged or excluded if they open up in this way. Leaders can set the tone by sharing their own experiences. They should also explicitly encourage everyone to speak up when feeling overwhelmed or in need.
Be proactive	Not all stress is bad, and people in high-pressure careers often grow accustomed to it or develop coping mechanisms. However, prolonged unmanageable stress can contribute to worsening symptoms of mental illness. Offer access to programs, resources and education on stress management and resilience building.



ENCOURAGE WORKPLACE LANGUAGE THAT PROVIDES SUPPORT

One major step to destigmatizing mental health and SUDs is to change how they are talked about. Certain ways of talking about mental illness can alienate members of the community, sensationalize the issue, and contribute to stigma and discrimination.

Below is a summary of preferred language to use when communicating about mental health and mental illness:

Instead of Saying	Do Say
Addict, junkie or druggie	A person with substance use disorder
Abuse	Misuse
Dirty	Actively using
Clean	In recovery or substance free
Relapse	Return to use

Below you will find examples of preferred language to use when communicating about SUD:

A person is "living with" or "has a diagnosis of" mental illness	Mental patient, nutter, lunatic, psycho, schizo, deranged, mad	Certain language sensationalizes mental illness and reinforces stigma.
A person is "being treated for" or "someone with" a mental illness	Victim, "suffering from" or "affected with" a mental illness	Terminology that suggests a lack of quality of life for people with mental illness
A person has a "diagnosis of" or "is being treated for" schizophrenia	A person is "a schizophrenic", "an anorexic"	Labeling a person by their mental illness
The person's behavior was unusual or erratic	Crazed, deranged, mad, psychotic	Descriptions of behavior that imply existence of mental illness or are inaccurate
Antidepressants, psychiatrists or psychologist, mental health hospital	Happy pills, shrinks, mental institution	Colloquialisms about treatment can undermine people's willingness to seek help.
Reword any sentence that uses psychiatric or media terminology incorrectly or out of context	Psychotic dog, using "schizophrenic" to denote duality such as "schizophrenic economy"	Terminology used out of context adds to misunderstanding and trivializes mental illness

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IV. CONCLUSION

MENTALLY HEALTHY WORKPLACES DELIVER IMPROVED PRODUCTIVITY AND WORKFORCE PARTICIPATION

Workplaces that foster and support the psychological health and well-being of workers address stigma early and encourage help-seeking behavior. These workplaces are likely to experience less absenteeism, presenteeism, employee turnover and psychological claims.

Evidence tells us that just over half (54%) of people with a mental health condition are not seeking treatment. The longer a person delays treatment, the more likely they are to take leave – resulting in significant impacts not only for the worker, but also for the team and the workplace.

BETTER HEALTH OUTCOMES

Stigma may prevent a person experiencing a mental health issue from seeking help in a timely manner. This can lead to poorer health outcomes.

Stigma may lead workers to hide or ignore risks to their mental health for fear of negative repercussions in the workplace, such as being treated differently or losing their job. This in turn can hamper employers' ability to identify and quickly respond to the risks, which may lead to more severe health outcomes for workers.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

FOOTNOTES:

1 Working Well – Leading Mentally Healthy Business (workplacementalhealth.org/getmedia/5e4af79b-2834-430d-b2ce-e801a26c084a/working-well-toolkit)
2 National Safety Council (www.nsc.org/newsroom/new-mental-health-cost-calculator-demonstrates-why)
3 NAMI Substance Use Disorders (www.samhsa.gov/data/data-we-collect/nsduh-national-survey-drug-use-and-health/national-releases/2025)
4 National Safety Council (www.nsc.org/getmedia/3ded8f5b-32a2-4470-827e-e99eed6fe2d7/building-recovery-friendly-workplace.pdf.aspx)
5 Mental Health America (mhanational.org/resources/how-much-is-mental-illness-costing-our-workplace)
6 NAMI, Mental Health in Indiana (www.nami.org/advocacy-at-nami/state-fact-sheets)