

Overcome Barriers to Addressing Mental Health in the Workplace

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After leading hundreds of live and virtual presentations and group conversations on mental health, substance misuse, and suicide prevention in the workplace, several recurring barriers have been identified that limit leaders and organizations from addressing these topics. Make no mistake, it is becoming considerably easier to talk about these topics in the workplace. Yet, there is zero doubt that many leaders, managers, supervisors, and employees are afraid to discuss these topics.

This is sad and can lead to unfortunate - if not tragic - circumstances. The reality is if society was better at tackling mental health challenges, then the necessity of doing so in the workplace would be less of an imperative. Mental health remains a taboo topic with significant levels of stigma and shame associated with talking about it in the workplace, which is understandable after hundreds of years of not doing so. The concept of a caring culture remains an alien thought to workers whose perception is to have been treated as machines and “human doings” more than as human beings.

STIGMA AND SHAME

Stigma is a major barrier that keeps people from acknowledging that they are not okay. Stigma is a fear of the unknown combined with a fear of judgement from others or a fear of consequences - real and perceived. A real concern expressed by workers about disclosing a need for mental health support is fear of adverse job consequences.



Therefore, stigma remains a barrier that keeps people from either offering or seeking help. Acknowledging help is needed historically has been seen as a sign of weakness rather than as a sign of strength. Stigma and shame go hand in hand. Where stigma and shame exist people are uncomfortable or afraid to talk about mental health, which leads to people suffering in silence.

Example of barriers to be overcome to address mental health in the workplace include:

- » Social stigma of others;
- » Self-stigma and shame;

- » Employers are unsure of how employees will respond to programs and practices;
- » Privacy and confidentiality centered on HIPAA compliance;
- » Unsure of the level of risk employees and families are experiencing when suffering in silence; and
- » Companies are not sure where to start.

Intentional Stigma-Breaking

The most important starting point is intentionally undermining stigma centered on mental health issues. The most effective of the group presentations delivered to audiences in workplaces or on jobsites start with a moment of silence to honor those who have struggled or fallen due to these deeply intense issues. The personal appeal to those who have lost a loved one is palpable.

Stigma is a silent killer by preventing people from offering, seeking or accepting help. Only by reducing stigma can progress really be made in addressing the underlying issues leading to mental health, substance misuse, and suicide prevention.

Mental Health and Wellbeing in Construction Pulse Survey


In September 2021, the Center for Workplace Mental Health released the results from the Pulse Survey on Mental Health and Wellbeing in the Construction Industry. This pulse survey focused on opportunities to continue moving forward in effectively addressing worker mental health and wellbeing in construction. The final survey report highlights findings, strategies, recommendations, and resources to improve mental health for construction workers. The Mental Health and Wellbeing Survey addresses four crucial challenges.

1. Engaging company leaders to support mental health initiatives visibly, vocally and vulnerably. Leaders who exhibit these “three Vs” lead by example and let workers know “it is okay to not be okay.” Leaders who care share resources to help workers and families in need of support. Where these “three Vs” exist, a fourth “V” for “vertical”

emerges as workers up and down the organizational structure begin to freely share their lived experience.

2. Raising mental health awareness by regularly sharing resources with employees. It is important for employees to better understand the services and supports available to them and their dependent family members. Teaching employees how to tap into employee assistance programs and employee health insurance programs is important education.
3. Creating a mental health culture to reduce the stigma and shame associated with mental health. It is important to increase the literacy of health and mental health for leaders at all levels in a company. Take time to educate leaders and supervisors why mental health is a workforce safety and health issue. Provide training to promote and reinforce psychological safety in the workplace and on jobsite.
4. Removing barriers and enhancing access to mental health services and support. Barriers to care seeking and acceptance can be removed by integrating mental health into human resources functions, employee benefits programs, and safety/health and wellness practices.

A Call to Action: Immediate Steps Leaders Can Take Now

- » Read the 2021 Mental Health and Wellbeing in Construction Survey Final Report.
- » **Read the flipbook, Building a Caring Culture:** Addressing Mental Health in the Workplace.
- » Discuss mental health with the senior leadership team and develop a simple strategy to develop a mentally health culture and to improve sharing resources with employees and family members.
- » Commit to stamp out stigma in the organization by creating a no-shame zone with a psychological safe work environment where managers and supervisors support workers with empathy and understanding. 



About the Author

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