

## DEVELOPING A WORKPLACE MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAM

### A Practical Approach

By John Wortman



**Workplace mental health issues have a major impact on both employees and employers. A study published in 2020 found that workers with job stress were 3.47 times more likely to be injured than those who had not encountered job stress (Hussen et al., 2020).**

**Additionally, research** indicates that the cost of mental illnesses such as depression for U.S. employers is in the billions of dollars (Hemp, 2004). Creating a mental health program for a workplace may reduce incidents and increase profitability. A 4-year study of the worker well-being program at L.L. Bean showed that for each dollar invested in the program, the company saved between \$1.70 and \$5.30 (NIOSH, 2021). This article discusses the importance of developing an employee mental health program and offers practical steps for how to create one.

#### A Six-Step Process

An organization can develop and implement an effective mental health program for the workplace in six steps (Figure 1). Briefly, those steps begin with consulting with management and obtaining buy-in from company leadership. Next, assess the needs of employees. After that assessment, make a plan. When making the plan, assess the tools available, determine when and how to use them, and set goals for their implementation. Once you have a plan, take action—put the plan into place. With the program up and running, assess the success of the program and its individual initiatives. Finally, after each assessment of the program, decide what (if any) adjustments should be made to enhance success.

#### Step 1: Consult With Leadership, Obtain Buy-In

Discuss the importance of a mental health program with upper management. In addition to moral reasons, communicate that a mental health program may have financial benefits such as increased productivity, attraction of new talent, reduced turnover, reduced worker compensation insurance claims, fewer lost-time incidents, and improved public opinion of the company's social responsibility. During this phase of initial communication, discuss the budget available for the program and develop specific program

goals centered around the interests of leadership. Examples of goals include targets for reduction of:

- employee turnover rates
- workers' compensation insurance claims
- employee-reported stress levels

Safety and health managers often have many responsibilities and limited time to develop new programs. Work with upper management to determine a realistic schedule for creating and implementing a mental health program based on the organization's expectations and the safety team's workload.

#### Step 2: Assess Employee Needs & Work Environments

Assessing the needs of employees is essential to effectively addressing mental health issues. Conducting anonymous employee surveys can yield valuable insights. Tools such as the NIOSH Worker Well-Being Questionnaire ([www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/2021-110](http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/2021-110)) can be given directly to employees or used as a guide for developing an internal survey. Safety and health committees can also provide valuable information about employee concerns. It is important to assess the needs of all employees. Those working in remote areas or on night shifts may be more difficult to reach and have unique concerns. Develop a strategy for getting their input as well.

Fostering work environments conducive to enhancing and maintaining good mental health need not be complicated or expensive. There are several low- or no-cost options that can be easy to implement.

#### Step 3: Decide What Tools to Use & How to Use Them

Once employee needs are assessed, decide how to address them. Fostering work environments conducive to enhancing and maintaining good mental health need not be complicated or expensive. There are several low- or no-cost options that can be easy to implement.

One option is to simply show employees that their employer cares about their mental health, as this can be an effective way of improving mental health.

Additionally, giving positive feedback to employees verbally or through handwritten letters can boost rapport, demonstrate that managers and supervisors are willing to work with employees, and make managers seem approachable for concerns or suggestions about mental health in the workplace.

Promoting insurance-provided mental health services to employees is also an option. This can be done with posters displayed in the workplace, emails, social media and company newsletters.

Another option is for the employer to implement a workplace employee assistance program (EAP) with workers' compensation insurance. If the company does not have workers' compensation insurance, the Department of Health and Human Services ([www.hhs.gov](http://www.hhs.gov)) and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration ([www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)) are excellent sources of information about EAPs. Before implementing an EAP, it may be prudent to ask a few questions of your workers' compensation insurance, including:

- What, if any, are the additional costs to premiums?
- Does the EAP only cover issues related to workers' compensation claims?
- Are trauma counselors readily available? What is the hourly rate?

Employers can also make mental health a common theme in correspondence with employees through staff

meetings, newsletters, social media and other forms of communication.

Finally, work continuously to break the stigma that inhibits people from seeking help with their mental health. Use all feasible means of communication to encourage workers with mental health challenges to seek help.

Make a plan for each initiative that the company decides to implement. Consider how to deliver information, set initiative goals (e.g., include one article about a mental health concern in each newsletter) and timelines.

#### Step 4: Take Action

Once a plan is in place, put it to work. Delegate responsibilities as deemed appropriate; you do not have to do it all by yourself.

#### Step 5: Assess Program Effectiveness

Develop a strategy for assessing the effectiveness of the mental health program and for facilitating continuous improvement. Consider the method and frequency of program assessment. Use resources such as employee surveys, suggestion boxes, workers' compensation records, and turnover data to assess the program's successes and shortcomings. Use these findings to determine which areas of the program can be enhanced, new initiatives that may be included, and which elements to potentially reduce or eliminate.

#### Step 6: Program Enhancement

The success of any mental health program is an ongoing process. If established goals are being met, then it may not be necessary to make significant changes. However, if goals are not being met or there are changes to the program's goals, then it may be necessary to make tweaks. Initial assessment of the program's success can offer insights about both the appropriateness of its intended goals and the effectiveness of the assessment measures used. Some initiatives or goals may need to be enhanced or added while others may need to be reduced or eliminated.

As the program advances, the means to continue enhancing mental health may become more complex. Long-term enhancements could include developing relationships with local businesses to provide services such as lower cost options for childcare or gym memberships, developing a return-to-work policy for those who have experienced a mental health crisis, and supporting the creation

of crisis support groups. Be creative and continuously look for opportunities to improve your program.

#### Additional Considerations

Consider how relevant information can be disseminated among subgroups of employees. For example, consider regular full-time employees compared to temporary employees or subcontractors. What is the most effective means of getting the information to each group? Emails may not reach all employees. It may be helpful to print and manually distribute information. Furthermore, if contracting is used extensively, consider delivering materials to contractors for distribution among their direct employees.

For employees who speak limited English, consider having all relevant information and documentation translated for them. Bilingual workers may be able and willing to help translate these items. Services such as those provided by workers' compensation insurance may also be valuable resources.

#### Conclusion

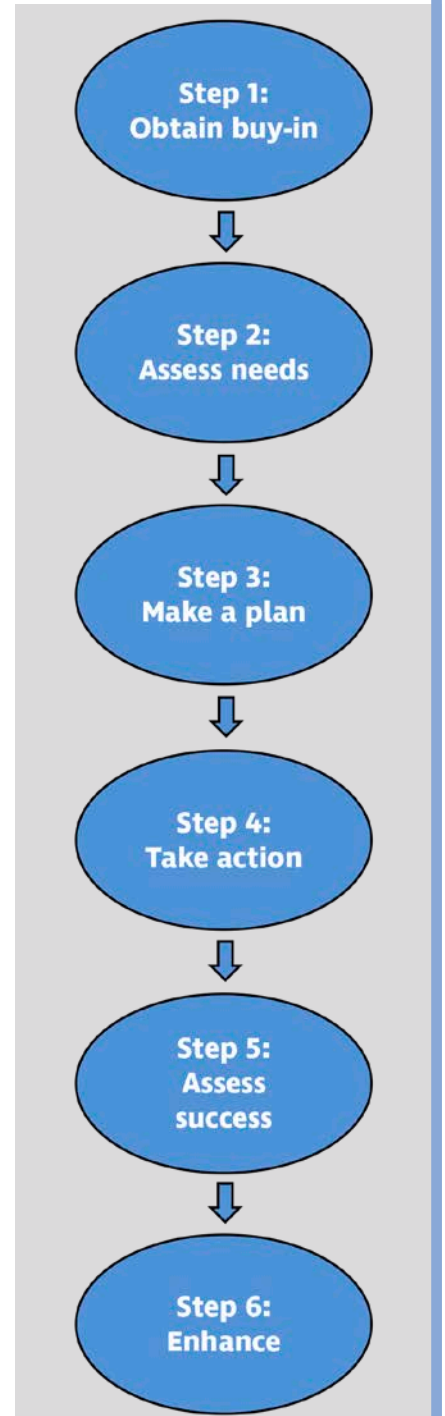
Mental health is essential to worker well-being. Safety professionals are no exception—remember that your mental health is also important. Reach out to management to make any necessary changes to help preserve your own mental health while working to secure that of others. Keeping your own well-being a priority will enable you to be at your best as an advocate for others when developing and implementing an employee mental health program. **PSJ**

#### References

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**FIGURE 1**  
**SIX STEPS TO CREATE A WORKPLACE MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAM**



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