

Intervention Strategies for Supervisors

What to do when you think someone on your team may need mental health help

In the best of conditions, supervising others can be a complicated and challenging role. When it appears that an employee may be experiencing a mental health concern, many supervisors are unsure what actions may be appropriate and in the best interest of both the individual and the organization. The goal of this resource is to help supervisors provide support to employees in receiving any needed services so they can focus on their overall health and wellbeing and return to a productive work life. To that end, we offer the following strategies to ensure the most positive and constructive outcomes:

Create a culture and work environment that promotes and supports overall well-being.

If you ask people in the workplace who are navigating mental health issues, “What’s the worst part of having this type of illness?” many will say, “stigma.” Feelings of shame, concerns about job security, and fear of rejection by colleagues are often debilitating – and they often discourage many from seeking the help and support they need. Here are some tips for creating an environment of support:

- **Educate:** Employees and managers at all levels of the organization need to learn about mental illnesses, stress, wellness, what health and mental health benefits are available to them, and how to access those services. Employers use Internet and Intranet technologies in providing mental health and benefit information to their employees. In fact, some employers link their sites to provider

directories and wellness information, while others use toll-free information numbers.

- **Watch your language:** Stigma begins with hurtful labels, such as “crazy” or “nuts.” Encourage employees at all levels to discontinue such language and to start using people-first language (i.e., “a person with manic depression,” as opposed to the dehumanizing term “a manic depressive.”)
- **Encourage dialogue:** Organizations that can talk candidly about mental health help set a positive tone. Create a psychologically safe environment in which employees are encouraged to talk about stress, workloads, family commitments, and other issues. Send the message that mental illnesses are real and treatable. Many people mistakenly believe that mental illness is permanent and untreatable. However, with access to appropriate treatment, the vast majority of individuals with mental illness achieve significant improvement and continue to lead productive lives.
- **Put your money where your mouth is:** Actions DO speak louder than words, so it’s essential to invest in mental health benefits, including prevention and educational programs. Innovative employers have learned that addressing employees’ mental health needs makes good economic sense. They also recognize that they play an essential role in their employees’ mental health not only by paying for a large portion of treatment but also by creating an environment in which people feel comfortable accessing care.

Learn the signs of a mental health problem.

In the workplace, mental health issues manifest in a number of ways. Here are some employee behaviors that may indicate signs of a mental health concern:

- Working slowly
- Missing deadlines
- Calling in sick frequently
- Increasing absenteeism
- Expressing irritability and anger
- Difficulty concentrating and making decisions
- Appearing numb or emotionless
- Withdrawing from work activities
- Overworking
- Forgetting directives, procedures, and requests
- Having difficulty with work transitions and changes in routines

These signs and symptoms could also show up when an employee has a family member suffering from a mental health problem or other serious health issue. Such situations can sometimes disrupt the employee's working hours, lead to absences, affect concentration, and decrease morale as much as it would if the employee was experiencing the mental health issue.

Do not diagnose.

As a supervisor, you cannot and should not diagnose an employee. However, you can note and discuss changes in work performance, and listen to the employee's response and concerns. If there are personal issues, suggest that the employee seek consultation from WellSpan Employee Assistance Program (EAP). The EAP can help you in encouraging the employee to seek mental health support. Reminding the employee of available benefits provided by your organization at the time can also be helpful. Our website may be a useful resource: www.WellSpan.org/EAP.

When you do intervene, remember to control YOUR emotions. It is not uncommon to be nervous about handling this type of intervention appropriately – nor is

it uncommon to feel your own emotion about the situation. Perhaps you feel anger at a particular behavior or disappointment in performance or worry about the employee's wellbeing. This is normal, but to ensure the conversation goes well, plan out the content ahead.

Be prepared for surprise, anger, disagreement, defensiveness, denial, or verbal attacks. If they occur, remain calm. Let the employee express their feelings but maintain control – and keep focused on the work performance – not on “personality.”

Try to avoid appraisals that are completely negative. Be constructive; point out concerns but emphasize what can be done to improve or rectify the situation as applicable. Finally, be thoughtful about the timing and location of the meeting. Make sure you have adequate time and privacy and try to avoid interruptions.

Make Reasonable Accommodations.

To support employees who are dealing with a mental health concern, you may need to make some reasonable accommodations that will help them perform their jobs. Be prepared to accommodate the needs of employees who have “standing appointments” for treatment. Some employees may need time off for treatment, and supervisors need to ensure a healthy transition back to work. Staff should also be encouraged to ask for the support they need, and supervisors should provide an environment where people feel comfortable and not judged. Contact your organization's human resources department to learn more about your specific policies and procedures. It is important to remember that making reasonable accommodations is not only good for your organization and your employees – it is also required by law. The American Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibits discrimination based on disability and requires employers to make reasonable accommodations. Modifying work schedules for appointment is a common accommodation.

Be prepared to handle emergencies.

If an individual is creating problems and conflict with others, appropriately manage the concern quickly and efficiently – especially if there are concerns that the environment is becoming hostile or possibly violent. Listen to all sides and make decisions based on the facts. Make sure your employees feel that they are listened to and that you care about them. Document accurately how you treat individuals fairly and consistently.

Severe mental illnesses may be life-threatening to the employee. If a staff person makes comments such as, “I wish I were dead” or “Life’s not worth living anymore,” take these threats seriously. Dial 9-1-1, transport the employee to the nearest emergency room, contact crisis intervention, or another mental health professional immediately to seek advice about how to handle the situation.

Seek Consultation.

WellSpan EAP may be helpful in some of these situations and efforts. Please do not hesitate to contact our client services representatives at 1-800-673-2514 for assistance.

*In case of an emergency such as someone expressing suicidal thoughts or harm to self and/or others, please contact **Crisis Intervention at 1-800-673-2496***