



12.4 How to Support an Employee with Mental Illness



Leading With Empathy

Empathy is the ability to recognize and understand the thoughts, feelings and experiences of another person; it's about attempting to put yourself in another person's shoes. As a manager, leading with empathy is an important part of building trust with your employees.

Four Benefits of Empathy in the Workplace

1. It helps you to better understand and connect with people.
2. It builds trust in others.
3. It helps you to have hard conversations.
4. It boosts collaboration and productivity.

Developing your emotional intelligence and skills like empathy will help you to recognize when an employee is struggling. Managers who think that an employee may be experiencing a mental health challenge have a legal duty to inquire. Simply put if you think there is a mental illness you must ask the employee.

How to Separate Struggling Performance or “Bad Behavior” from Illness

In the tool An Introduction to Mental Health you will find a list of symptoms of mental illness and how they can show up in the workplace. Sometimes it is hard to tell the difference between poor behavior and symptoms of an illness.

When an employee's performance is not meeting expectations or they are showing signs of bad behavior, it is important to consider the following before deciding on the course of action:

1. Is the behavior culpable - did they know what was expected of them?
2. Is the behavior non-culpable – did they not know what was expected of them?

An employee experiencing a mental health challenge requires supports that may include coaching or accommodations to help them through a challenging time with their health.

How to Support an Employee That You Think Might Be Experiencing a Mental Health Challenge

- Listen non-judgmentally
- Give reassurance and information
- Encourage the person to get professional help
- Encourage other supports such as self-care and reaching out to family and friends

Four Tips for Psychologically Safe Conversations about Mental Health

1. Approach the conversation with caring and empathy.

Having a one-to-one meeting with a manager can be stressful for an employee. If it's about their performance or something personal like a mental health challenge it can be scary. Start the conversation with this simple statement: "I noticed that you haven't been yourself lately." Then pause and wait for the employee to respond. Let the person know that you care and want to help them.

2. Choose curiosity over judgement.

When talking to an employee with a mental health challenge it can be easy for unconscious bias to creep in. Research from John Gottman at the University of Washington shows that criticism can escalate difficult conversations. A curious approach can help you to avoid triggering a fight or flight reaction (very common for people with an anxiety disorder) in the employee.

3. Anticipate reactions and plan for them.

Consider your messaging in advance and plan for the conversation. This will reduce the risk that your words will be misinterpreted and, hopefully, create a better outcome. Keep in mind that one conversation will likely not solve or "fix" anything. Mental health challenges can be complex disorders.

4. Listen first, act second.

It may be comforting to know that as their manager, this is one area where you don't have to know all the answers. You do need to listen, ask curious and respectful questions, and offer supports such as accommodations and information about benefits available through the employee and family assistance plan (if you have one). And of course, just being available to listen is one of the most important ways that you can support your employee.

Disclaimer:

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