
Supporting Employee Mental Health

Mental health is a state of well-being in which an individual can realize his or her own abilities, cope with normal stresses of life, work productively, and able to contribute to their community. As humans, mental health is fundamental to our collective and individual ability to think, express emotion, interact with others, earn a living, and enjoy life.

As a supervisor, you play an important role in supporting the mental wellness of your team and, more importantly, to be able to recognize when someone may be experiencing difficulty. This section on the Mental Wellness Hub is dedicated to providing supervisors with straightforward information, resources and supports, as well as practical suggestions to help create an atmosphere where employees feel supported to talk about their mental wellness.

What Is Mental Wellness?

Mental wellness is an integral part of our overall health and is defined by much more than the absence of mental illness. Someone may have good mental health despite being diagnosed with a mental illness. Someone with good mental health does not mean that they are immune from mental illness. Our mental wellness is based on physical, social, and mental factors that contribute to the state of our mental health. Although intermittent or major life stressors may not be a mental illness, it does not contribute to good mental health.

A Challenge for Supervisors

Supervisors are often not aware that an issue with an employee's performance *may* be the result of a mental health concern. Most often, this is the product of a social stigma; supervisors may not recognize the signs of a possible mental health concern or the person experiencing difficulty is not prepared to discuss their concerns with a supervisor.

Only 36% of employees would discuss a mental health concern with a supervisor

Employee mental health concerns often go unrecognized and are not addressed until much later, if at all, which means that things do not get better and ignoring them can make matters worse. Even minor mental health concerns could be easily addressed through a minor change in routine or work environment.

A supportive and trustworthy supervisor can make employees feel more comfortable with disclosing mental health related difficulties. A workplace environment built on trust, honesty, and fairness creates and supports good mental health!

Mental Wellness Matters in the Workplace

When an employee struggles with mental wellness, it could result in an increase in presenteeism, absenteeism, reduced productivity, conflict between team members, work performance, low employee morale, high employee turnover, and an increase in health insurance claims.

Mental wellness challenges can be upsetting and disruptive to an employee and their family. As a supervisor, you have an obligation to care for the people you support. While you cannot heal mental illness, you can certainly work to reduce employee stress and learn how to support those who are experiencing a mental health concern.

The Reality Is.....

With the complex nature of mental health illness, many workplaces struggle to address this concern or refuse to address it at all.

We cannot afford to ignore this concern!

1 in 5 Canadians will experience a mental health concern

This means that you, or someone you know, is or will be affected by a mental illness.

1 in 3 will experience a mental health concern in their lifetime

Every week, **500,000** Canadians miss work due to a mental health concern.

The cost to both business and society are enormous.

30% of all disability claims in the workplace are related to mental health.

\$51 billion dollars is lost annually from the Canadian economy due to mental illness

What Supervisors Can Do to Support the Mental Wellness of Their Team

Supervisors are in frequent contact with employees on their team, which allows you to make a significant impact on the overall work experience.

Below are six tips to help supervisors make employees feel welcome, productive, and safe in the workplace. Most importantly you want your employees to trust you should they want or need to confide in you.

1. Lead by Example

Actively encourage your team to adopt healthier work habits by displaying them yourself: Work sensible hours, take full lunch breaks, rest and recuperate after busy periods, and enjoy vacations, weekends and statutory holidays.

2. Know What Resources are Available to You and Your Staff

Become familiar with mental wellness supports and resources available to University of Regina employees. These may include [Employee Family Assistance Program](#), [Employee Benefits](#), [Mental Wellness Hub](#), and other [community resources](#). Ensure you understand the University of Regina policies on mental health by having a conversation with your Manager.

3. Open the Door to Conversation

Try to maintain regular contact with each employee on your team - not to see how projects are progressing, but to discuss what might be causing them stress. Create opportunities for them to ask you questions and discuss any concerns they may have. Allow them to talk about personal issues at work and/or home, if they are comfortable doing so.

4. Make Mental Wellness Part of the Work Conversation

Include an agenda topic at staff meetings to introduce a discussion of the well-being of employees. A few examples could be "Take 10 Checks", "Not Myself Today", and "Check-In/Check-Up."

5. Help to Manage Workloads

When employees are exceptionally busy or stressed, there are several things you can do to ease their stress. Help them prioritize a project list, ensure work assigned to them be clearly defined, communicate expectations, and provide reasonable deadlines. Supports such as these, help employees remain autonomous while still feeling supported, valued, and needed.

6. Recognize Employees as Individuals

Treat employees with respect and acknowledge their work achievements. Listen to them and attempt to adapt your management style to suit the needs of each employee. Ask employees for feedback about the supports you provide and what they like or ways you could improve in order to achieve their goals.

Positive Mental Health for Employees and Benefits in the Workplace

Ways to Maintain Positive Mental Health	Benefits in the Workplace
Being Connected to Others	Being included; working in a team; people asking your opinion; being invited to some social events through work; having a chance to join working group(s) or Committee(s).
Supportive Relationships	Feeling comfortable with co-workers and senior staff members; being able to approach employee supervisor(s) with issues and concerns; feeling supported with work related and/or personal issues; work environments that reflect an awareness of mental health and wellbeing issues, rather than a single focus on production or profits.
Freedom from Discrimination and Violence	Being part of a work environment that is safe and celebrates diversity rather than viewing individuality as an issue; work environments that do not tolerate discrimination, bullying, intimidation or violence and accept people for who they are.
Self-Determination and Control Over One's Life	Being a good fit in job duties; having a level of autonomy, choice, responsibility and ownership/control over workload and work environment; having the ability to set and achieve work related goals.
Self Esteem and Confidence	General well-being about the work that you do; feeling valued, competent and able to make a worthwhile contribution. Supporting a positive approach when receiving feedback in order to improve performance and behaviors at work.

Evidence proves that workplaces who maintain positive mental health elements can experience several long-term benefits including employees who experience lower levels of stress, anxiety, and depression as well as improved physical health. Employees feel:

- supported by colleagues and senior staff,
- a sense of belonging and connection,
- value in the work they do,
- loyal and more likely to stay with the organization; and;
- safe at work, and are more productive.

Possible Signs of a Mental Health Concern in Employees

Supervisors know their team. They know their behavior and performance on good days, bad days and when they may be under pressure. If you are concerned about an employee's mental wellness because something seems to not feel right, it may be time to initiate a conversation.

Signs to watch for include:

- Unhealthy/unkempt appearance
- Easily frustrated, angry, or angered
- Taking more time off than usual
- Being overly hard on themselves for mistakes
- Mood swings
- Withdrawal from social situations, including conversations with co-workers
- Decrease in motivation or productivity
- Unnecessary fear, worry, or anxiety
- Changes in eating or sleeping habits

Approaching an Employee: Behavior and Mental Health Concerns

So how do you approach an employee whose behavior may indicate a mental health concern?

A discussion with an employee should focus on performance issues. This ensures you do not wander to an area where you may abrogate the employee's human rights. While the conversation may lead to the individual disclosing a mental health concern, this should be considered a secondary effect of the conversation regarding their performance and/or behavior. Always ensure you keep the discussion confidential and to reaffirm the University of Regina's commitment to

DO:

- Approach your concern as a workplace performance issue,
- Inform the employee of the possibility of an accommodation if they have an interest,
- Provide access to information on the Employee Family Assistance Program (EFAP), for eligible employees, or refer them to the Community Resources page on the Mental Wellness Hub, and,
- Schedule a time to meet again to review their performance; and,
- Document the discussion in an objective fashion without commentary.

DO NOT:

- Poke or attempt to diagnosis – you are not a physician,
- Provide a pep talk or tell the employee to “get over it”,
- Accuse the employee of bluffing or malingering;
- Bring in personal anecdotes. While many of us may have experienced similar mental health concerns, do not assume your experience is the same as the employee's, and;
- Should employee disclose a health diagnosis to you, do not focus on that. Focus on solutions for symptoms that impact the employee's work.

If you are certain the employee might be suffering from a mental health concern remember to mention you are willing to discuss an accommodation should the need arise. If the employee decides to disclose more information to you, be supportive but do not attempt to solve the mental health concern. Focus on what you can change --the work environment.

Questions to Ask Yourself Before Responding to an Employee

Consider Possible Effects on the Employee and Co-Workers

- a) Do I see the whole picture or just this particular solution?
- b) Does the solution provide energy for the employee or does it deplete it?
- c) Am I able to preserve the dignity of those involved or will someone be shamed?
- d) Am I encouraging the employees to engage in their own success or am I micro managing?
- e) Have I adequately addressed the possible fears and stigma of others, or am I ignoring them?

Working Together

- a) Were the employee and I able to develop a shared plan of action or are we at an impasse?
- b) Am I assisting this employee to be successful at work or am I focused only on their personality?
- c) Should I follow up with this employee or do I think one conversation will be sufficient?

Consider Your Own Needs

- a) Do I have the time to do this properly or am I pressuring myself to rush through it?
- b) Am I responding to hearsay or speaking about known facts?
- c) Am I in a good frame of mind to do this or should I schedule for another time?
- d) Have I considered my role in this or do I believe that I have no need to improve?

Steps in Responding to a Mental Health Concern

One of the first steps in **responding** to a mental health concern is to **listen for understanding**. Listening for understanding is the practice of participating in a conversation for gaining understanding of the perspective of the other person. Many of us already do this naturally. For those who are new to this, or for those wishing to improve, here are some helpful tips to start the conversation.

Show Interest

Throughout the conversation, consider adopting a mirroring technique to signal to the employee that you are listening. Relax your posture (arms uncrossed, face the employee) and offer some short verbal affirmations that you are still engaged in what they are saying. Another important step, especially when discussing mental health, is to ensure you are not distracted. This means putting your mobile device on mute and/or in your pocket and removing yourself from physical barriers such as a desk or computer screen.

Demonstrate Their Value

Before you begin the conversation, think about what you value in this employee. Employees are the most valuable asset to the workplace and this should be the foundation of any conversation. Use concrete examples of work they have done and that it is valued in order to boost self-esteem.

Be honest, and reaffirm their worth.

Ask One Question at a Time

Mental health concerns are invariably complex phenomena. Due to this fact, we often ask many questions of the person at once in order to get a better understanding. This, however, can be confusing and lead to misunderstandings. Focus on one question at a time and let the employee dictate the tempo of the conversation.

Pause

As a supervisor, you are accustomed to taking leadership of a situation. This, however, can mean that you do not allow time for the employee to think about your question. Remember to allow pauses in conversation to occur as this enables the employee to think about what they want to say and better articulate their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours.

Do Not Interrupt

Interrupting someone who is talking about sensitive personal issues, even when your intent is to offer support, can delegitimize their feelings. This also steers the conversation in your direction, which defeats the purpose of being an active listener!

Listening for the Employee's Interests

While you listen, one way to stay engaged is by listening for the employee's interests. This means that you are actively seeking out what is important to the employee.

Seek Clarification

At some point, you will begin to get a better picture of what the employee is going through. When this occurs, seek clarification in order to affirm that you understand where they are coming from and what they are experiencing. It is ok if you need to talk longer, often times you will not retain all the information provided.