

Better Call Sarah: Mental Health in the Workplace

October 30, 2024
By Sarah Goodman



Dear Sarah,

With October being Mental Health Awareness Month, I'm concerned about how we can better support our employees' mental well-being at work. We've been hearing a lot about the importance of mental health, but as a small business owner, I'm unsure how to implement effective strategies. What can I do to create a more supportive environment?

– Mindful in Marketing

Dear Mindful in Marketing,

Thank you for your thoughtful question! Mental health in the workplace is an increasingly relevant issue, especially during October, when awareness campaigns are in full swing. Supporting your employees' mental well-being is more than a compassionate choice – it is a smart business strategy that can lead to increased productivity and lower turnover rates.

You also need to comply with the law. If an employee's mental health condition qualifies as a disability under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), you are required to provide reasonable accommodations. Conditions like major depressive disorder, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia meet this definition, while others such as PTSD, anxiety, and depression may also qualify. Mental health conditions may also trigger protections under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA)^[1]. It's important to be aware of these legal frameworks to protect both your employees and your business. It's also especially important for businesses to comply with these laws, as the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) has emphasized its focus on protecting workers with mental health-related disabilities in its most recent [Strategic Enforcement Plan](#).

Fortunately, you can take proactive steps to support mental wellness in the workplace to support your employees and help protect your business from potential discrimination claims.

Mental Health Policies and Procedures

Employers should be prepared with the proper policies and procedures in place to address employee mental health concerns.

1. Draft and Communicate a Mental Health Policy

Create a clear mental health policy that outlines your commitment to employee well-being. Include resources available, such as Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) and mental health days. Make sure this policy is easily accessible and

communicated to all employees.

2. **Manager Training and Education**

Train managers and supervisors on their legal obligations under the ADA, FMLA, and related laws. This should include knowing how and when to involve HR. It's also wise to designate HR professionals to handle leave requests and accommodation issues promptly and consistently.

3. **Engage in the Interactive Process**

If an employee approaches HR with a mental health-related issue that qualifies as a disability, employers must engage in the "interactive process." This dialogue between employer and employee is aimed at finding reasonable accommodations that allow the employee to perform their job. Common accommodations to address mental health issues are extended leave, scheduling changes, and additional breaks. You need to listen to the employee and the employee's healthcare provider. Always remember that this is an *interactive* process, so it may take several steps. Be patient and creative.

Reduce Mental Health Stigma

Historically, employers avoided discussing mental health with their employees. Even today, employers may feel uncomfortable bringing it up because they don't know the "right" words or worry they might overstep. But it's important to talk about. Employees who feel supported and who have receptive supervisors may be less likely to have a sudden need for an ADA accommodation. They are also less likely to file an EEOC charge.

4. **Check On Your Employees**

Regular check-ins with employees—whether through one-on-one meetings or anonymous surveys—can help you gauge how employees are feeling. When employees feel supported, they are more likely to seek help early, which can reduce the need for more formal ADA accommodations later on.

5. **Offer Mental Health Trainings**

Consider organizing workshops or inviting mental health professionals to provide guidance on recognizing the signs of mental health struggles and how to support colleagues. Train managers to approach sensitive conversations with empathy and understanding.

6. **Lead by Example**

As a business leader, it's important to model healthy behaviors. Share your own strategies for managing stress and openly discuss the importance of mental health. When employees see leadership prioritizing well-being, they feel empowered to do the same.

Create A Work Environment That Promotes Mental Well-Being

Building a culture that supports mental health involves more than just offering workshops—it requires integrating mental well-being into everyday work practices. Flexibility, balance, and proper resources are straightforward ways employers can build a work environment that supports employees' mental health.

7. **Flexibility**

Mental health can fluctuate over time, and offering flexibility—whether through adjustable workloads, flexible deadlines, or remote work options—can help employees manage stress during tough times. Encourage employees to communicate their needs and be open to adjustments as necessary.

8. **Work-Life Balance**

Promote a healthy work-life balance by encouraging employees to take regular breaks, use their vacation time, and, if possible, offering flexible work schedules. Employees who feel that their personal time is respected are more likely to be productive and less likely to experience burnout.

9. **Adequate Staffing and Resources**

Employers can reduce unnecessary stress by ensuring employees have access to the tools and resources they need to do their jobs effectively. This includes providing up-to-date technology, clear processes, and adequate staffing levels so employees aren't overburdened. When employees have what they need to perform their tasks efficiently, they experience less frustration and can focus on their work without additional stress. Regularly assess whether your team has the proper support, equipment, and training, and address any gaps promptly to maintain a healthy and productive work environment.

Incorporating mental health support into your workplace culture is a powerful investment in your business's future. These strategies can ensure legal compliance while also fostering a positive, healthy work environment. Prioritizing employee well-being will reduce stress, improve productivity, and create an atmosphere where your team can thrive.

[1] The U.S. Department of Labor published "Fact Sheet #280: Mental Health Conditions and the FMLA" in May 2022, to explain leave eligibility under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) for use related to an employee's own mental health condition or that of an immediate family member. Additionally, the FMLA's definition of a serious health condition can be broader than the definition of a disability and encompass many illnesses, injuries, and physical or mental conditions that require multiple treatments and intermittent absences. State leave and disability laws can provide greater amounts of leave and/or benefits to employees, including those who may not be covered by the ADA or FMLA.