Mental Health Basics for Managers

One in 5 adults in the US have a diagnosable mental health condition in any given year. These rates have likely increased in recent years. According to the American Psychological Association’s March 2021 Stress in America Survey, over 30% of US adults reported that their mental health had worsened since the start of the pandemic. Over 60% reported stress-related symptoms such as undesired changes in weight and sleep, and 23% reported drinking more alcohol to cope.

Mental health and substance use conditions often impact people’s performance at work. However, many people fear talking to their managers about their struggles. Some even mask their distress with exceptional productivity. But people with mental health conditions are more likely to consider leaving their jobs. Managers can make a difference in supporting employees’ mental health and in retaining talent by learning about and implementing strategies to address mental health in the workplace.

The BU Faculty & Staff Assistance Office (FSAO) offers managers confidential consultation with licensed mental health providers on addressing these issues. Here are some tips and resources for reference.

Tip 1: Create a Work Environment Which Supports Mental Health

- Have regular check-ins with your staff
- Foster relationships
- Express care and compassion
- Encourage and model self-care
- Support healthy working norms
- Provide uninterrupted work time
- Talk about mental health
- Acknowledge impact of current events on mental health
- Mention unique challenges for specific identities and communities
- Cultivate inclusivity (i.e., use of pronouns in signatures)
- Regularly share resources such as these:

  BU Faculty & Staff Assistance Office  
  BU Employee Wellness
Tip 2: Know What to Look For

Below are some warning signs that someone is grappling with a mental health or substance use issue:

- Change in behavior, demeanor, appearance, or performance
- Tardiness/absenteeism
- Mistakes, missed deadlines
- Forgetfulness
- Indecisiveness
- Apathy
- Over performing
- Social withdrawal
- Neglected appearance
- Emotional displays (irritability, agitation, tearfulness)
- Agitation/aggression
- Illogical thinking
- Bizarre or unusual behavior

Tip 3: Intervene When You Identify Warning Signs

Reach out to express concern and show support.

- Initiate in private: “How are you?” “Are you o.k.?”
- Describe your observations: “You don’t seem like yourself. You’ve seemed distracted lately, and I’ve noticed you’ve been forgetting things.”
- Pause and listen. Don’t jump in with solutions or your own experiences.
- Validate with reflective listening: “That sounds really overwhelming.”
- Offer support: “What can I do to help you?”
- Respect boundaries: “I understand if you’re not comfortable talking to me about this.”
- Share resources: “Do you know about the Faculty & Staff Assistance Office (or PFML or EOO/Accommodations)”

Tip 4: Utilize the Faculty & Staff Assistance Office

- Seek confidential consultation from the FSAO’s licensed behavioral health providers when you identify warning signs, particularly those that are more severe.
• Invite the FSAO to a meeting to talk about their services and/or to facilitate a workshop on resilience and mental health.

References and Resources


• American Psychiatric Association Foundation’s Center for Workplace Mental Health
  • Employer Resources
  • Right Direction: Talking about Mental Health at Work

• Mental Health America (mental health screens)

• National Alliance on Mental Illness

• National Institute of Mental Health

• CDC Mental Health

• APA Stress in America. March 2022

• Mind Share Partners’ 2021 Mental Health at Work Report

• Good Leaders Use Emotional Intelligence HelpGuide

• Emotional Intelligence at Work HelpGuide

Crisis Resources

• Speaking of Suicide Resources

• Samaritans https://samaritanshope.org/ 1-877-870-HOPE (4673) Call or text.

• Crisis Text Line http://www.crisistextline.org/
Text HOME to 741741 Or facebook.com/crisistextline

• National Suicide Prevention Lifeline https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/
  • 1-800-273-TALK (8255) (English) 1-888-628-9454 (Spanish)
  1-800-799-4889 (For Deaf + Hard of Hearing)

• Trans Lifeline https://translifeline.org/hotline/ (877) 565-8860

• The Trevor Project (for LGBTQ youth) https://www.thetrevorproject.org/ 1-866-488-7386
Veterans Crisis Line https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/ 1-800-273-8255

Substance Use Disorders

- FSAO Substance Use Resources (including anonymous self-screening tool)
- NIH Rethinking Drinking

Supporting the Mental Health of Employees with Marginalized Identities

- “Understand Workplace Concerns of Black Employees,” Mental Health First Aid, February 2021.
- “How to support Asian American colleagues amid the recent wave of anti-Asian violence,” CNBC Make It offers tips for leaders and peers to better support their Asian American colleagues right now.
- Transgender Inclusion in the Workplace: Recommended Policy and Practice, Human Rights Campaign Foundation
- FSAO’s BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ Mental Health and Resources