

# Supporting Mental Health in the Workplace

## Getting Started Guide for Front-Line Supervisors



Front-line supervisors can make a difference when it comes to helping workers manage stress. This guide aims to help supervisors feel more comfortable and confident about talking to workers about workplace stress, mental health, and substance use.

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### Background

There has been a reported rise in the number of individuals experiencing anxiety and depressive disorders, as well as new or increased substance use, in the United States. Each person experiences varying levels of stress from different areas of their life, including stress experienced at work. Some common sources of work-related stress are:

- Taking care of personal and family needs while working.
- Managing a different or increased workload.
- Lack of access to the tools and equipment that are needed to perform work safely.
- Fear or guilt about being perceived by employers or coworkers as not contributing enough to the day-to-day operations of the workplace.
- Uncertainty about the future of the workplace and/or employment.
- Learning new online tools and dealing with technical difficulties.
- Adapting to a different workspace and/or work schedule.

Supervisors can help by:

- **Identifying what factors are making it harder for workers to get their jobs done** and determining if adjustments can be made to lessen the burden.
- **Showing empathy** and telling workers 1) they are not alone, 2) you recognize the stress they are under, 3) there is no shame in feeling anxious, and 4) asking for help is important. Employers can reassure workers they are open and receptive to discussions about workplace stress, by creating a safe and trustworthy space.
- **Directing workers to coping and [resilience](#) resources** or other supportive networks and services if needed.

## Recommendations for Supervisors

Below is a list of helpful tips for supervisors to keep in mind as they address workplace stress.

- **Find out if workers need help.**
- **Look for ways to redistribute tasks.** Examine workers' job tasks to determine if their workload has increased and look for ways to reassign or prioritize tasks to help them minimize their workplace stress. Just because a worker is not vocal about an increased workload, it does not mean they are not struggling.
- **Monitor your own stress levels.** Be sure to monitor your own stress levels and take time for self-care (e.g., getting enough sleep, exercising, taking time off). Define and adhere to work schedule boundaries. You will be a better supervisor and set the example for others.
- **Be compassionate and understanding** and accept that workers may not always be at the same level of productivity. If possible, allow workers more flexibility in choosing their work hours to accommodate childcare or other caregiving needs.
- **Look for signs and symptoms of stress and mental health emergencies,** knowing that stress affects each person differently. Examples include irritation, anger, or denial; feeling nervous or anxious; a lack of motivation; feeling tired, overwhelmed, or burned out; feeling sad or depressed; having trouble sleeping or focusing; getting into conflicts at work; having trouble completing tasks or meeting deadlines; and submitting poor-quality work.
- **Get help.** Notify someone if you are worried that a worker is experiencing a more serious mental health or substance use issue, but be mindful of privacy concerns. You can:
  - Contact your human resources department for guidance.
  - Call a hotline if you are not sure of what to do—for example, the [Disaster Distress Helpline](#), the [National Domestic Violence Hotline](#), or the [988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline](#).
- **Know the facts.** Ask your employer if you can take training to learn about mental health issues so that you have the skills and confidence to have discussions with workers and are able to recognize the signs and symptoms of emotional distress.

## What to Say and Ways to Say It

Senior managers should distribute organization-wide messaging to inform all staff about how the organization is addressing workplace stress. As a supervisor, you will set the tone—in your interactions with workers and your response to organization-wide messaging—for how your workers will, in turn, respond to the workplace stress. Your own sense of calm, focus, and self-assurance will play a significant role in easing the stress of those around you.

As a supervisor, you should follow up on organization-wide messages by talking directly with workers about their experiences and feelings to help them cope. When having a conversation, workers want to be heard, acknowledged, and understood. Use the tips below to initiate conversations with your staff.

### Set the Stage

- Be flexible about the format—hold a conversation over the phone, in-person, or via video chat.
- Put away or silence devices and give workers your undivided attention.
- Before starting a conversation, ensure that you can be positive, supportive, and patient and that you have sufficient time to dedicate to the conversation.

## What to Say

- Reduce stigma upfront by creating a supportive work environment as it relates to workplace stress and mental health. While not all workers may want to discuss these matters at work, offering support and resources will demonstrate they are supported in these matters.
- Consider sharing an experience about your own stress level or mental health to make the other person feel more comfortable.
- Ask open-ended questions, such as:
  - How are you feeling?
  - How is it going for you these days?
  - How are you keeping in touch with your support system (e.g., family and friends)?
  - Are you struggling with any new job-related burdens? If so, do you have thoughts about what could be done to lessen them?
  - How can I help?
- Show concern and sympathy and validate workers' feelings by using phrases like "I'm so sorry," "I understand," "That sounds difficult," or "How can I help?"
- Be respectful of a worker's privacy and understand they might not be open to sharing. In this instance, offer resources for more information or offer to meet at a later date if they'd like.

## How to Listen

- Practice **active listening** by engaging with the person you are talking to and showing that you hear and understand his/her/their message. Use these tips:
  - Make sure your body language is open and inviting (e.g., face turned toward the person you are talking to, eyes open, arms and legs not crossed).
  - Avoid thinking about what you will say next.
  - Show that you understand what someone is telling you by paraphrasing what you heard.
  - Ask questions to clarify points.
  - Don't interrupt.
  - Respond in a respectful manner without being judgmental or defensive about what the other person has said.
- Acknowledge workers' feelings. Offer help or resources if available and warranted.

## Follow-up

- Finish on a positive note. Mention something positive about the person's work and remind them you are available to talk more if needed. If a worker seems particularly down or stressed, set up a follow-up meeting or set up recurring weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly check-ins as needed.
- Schedule group meetings. Hold group meetings to promote connectedness and provide a forum for workers to voice concerns, ask questions, and receive information about ways to cope with stress.
- Take stock of your own mental health. Respect the limits of what you can do and maintain healthy boundaries to avoid becoming overwhelmed by the events at hand.

## References

- American Psychiatric Association: [What Is Mental Illness?](#)
- American Psychiatric Association Foundation/Center for Workplace Mental Health: [Identify, Connect, Understand Program](#)
- American Psychological Association: [Anxiety](#)
- CDC: [Mental Health](#)
- CDC Foundation: [How Right Now](#)
- Healthy Work Campaign: [Resources](#)
- Mental Health First Aid:
  - [Six Ways to Reassure a Colleague](#)
  - [4 Self-Care Tips for How to Deal with Anxiety](#)
  - [How to Be an Effective Listener at Work](#)
- National Alliance on Mental Illness: [The Ultimate Workplace Mental Health Toolkit](#)
- National Council for Mental Wellbeing: [Mental Health First Aid Course and Curriculum](#)
- National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health: [Stress at Work](#)
- National Institutes of Health: [Depression Overview](#)
- National Safety Council: [Mental Health and the Workplace](#)
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: [Mental Health and Substance Use Disorders](#)
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: [Warning Signs and Risk Factors for Emotional Distress](#)
- U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for PTSD: [Self-Help and Coping Skills](#)
- World Health Organization: [Mental Health and Substance Use](#)
- World Health Organization: [WHO Guidelines on Mental Health at Work](#)