**5 Ways to Fight the Stigma of Mental Illness In the Workplace**

The workplace is one of the most important places to address mental health. Sadly, however, the topic is usually avoided. It might even seem like mental illness doesn’t exist inside the office – which couldn’t be more misleading. In fact, mental illness affects many U.S. adults and is continuing to affect more and more people worldwide.

According to [Center for Discovery](http://centerfordiscovery.com/blog/mental-health-awareness-week-october-1-7-2017/):

* One in four adults in the United States will be diagnosed with a mental health disorder in a given year.
* An average of six to eight years pass before an individual seeks professional help for their mental health disorder.
* Fear and shame associated with the stigma surrounding mental health disorders is the number one reason why individuals do not seek professional help.

Considering how common mental health issues are, it’s shocking that stigmas still exist and prevent individuals from receiving the treatment that they need. An [article](https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/pages/1014-mental-health.aspx) published by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) notes that stigma remains a major obstacle for employees coping with mental illness. Some employees with mental illnesses hesitate in fear that their supervisors or co-workers will treat them differently, and less than a third of them receive treatment.

The stigma of mental illness can lead to discrimination in the workplace. Those dealing with mental health issues may feel alone and isolated at work, and not sure whom they can talk to. The stigma surrounding mental health can have many damaging effects on employees. According to [Mayo Clinic](https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/mental-illness/in-depth/mental-health/art-20046477), some of the harmful effects of stigma can include:

* Reluctance to seek help or treatment
* Lack of understanding by family, friends, co-workers or others
* Fewer opportunities for work, school or social activities or trouble finding housing
* Bullying, physical violence or harassment
* Health insurance that doesn't adequately cover mental illness treatment
* The belief that you'll never succeed at certain challenges or that you can't improve your situation

Because the fear of stigma is preventing some employees from getting the help they need, it’s crucial that companies start addressing the importance of mental health. With about [85%](http://www.psychiatrist.com/jcp/article/Pages/2015/v76n02/v76n0204.aspx) of employees’ mental health conditions going undiagnosed or untreated, mental health should be addressed as frequently as physical health in corporate wellness programs and initiatives.

There are many things that you can go to help fight the stigma of mental illness in the workplace, regardless of your authority at the company. Here are 5 ways you can start fighting the stigma today:

**Get educated.**

Because mental illness is often so misunderstood, getting and staying educated on the subject is one of the easiest ways to combat stigma. Many mental health advocate websites provide free educational resources. Check out this quick [fact sheet](https://www.nami.org/Learn-More/Mental-Health-By-the-Numbers) from the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) and share it with your colleagues.

**Choose the right words.**

If you have colleagues dealing with mental health issues, do your best to stay mindful of your word choice when talking about the subject. While it’s great to openly talk to your co-workers about mental health, remember that the words you use make a difference. Try not to use phrases like, “it could be worse” or “just be more positive”. Check out this [article](https://themighty.com/2016/10/what-not-to-say-to-someone-with-a-mental-illness-and-alternatives/) for phrases to stay away from and some alternatives to try instead.

**Treat mental health like physical health.**

If a co-worker had the flu, you would respect their decision to take a couple days off of work to feel better. However, when an employee is dealing with a mental health issue, it’s not often looked at the same way. Just like a physical illness, mental illness disrupts an individual’s ability to perform their best, focus, and stay productive at work. Be respectful of colleagues taking [mental health days](http://info.totalwellnesshealth.com/blog/tips-for-taking-a-mental-health-day-off).

**Focus on mental *health*, not just mental *illness*.**

Everyone can relate to taking care of and prioritizing their mental health. Rather than focusing solely on how to treat a mental illness, focus on maintaining mental health and wellbeing. When addressing mental health in a workplace setting, emphasize that achieving a healthy state of mental wellbeing is a common goal that everyone shares. Shift the focus away from any “flaws” associated with mental illness.

**Show your support**.

Get involved and support organizations that support mental health. There are many organizations dedicated to ending the stigma associated with mental illness and helping those that are dealing with mental health issues. You can volunteer, donate, or just help spread awareness of these organizations. Share their mental health blog posts with colleagues or post them in company newsletters to help get conversations started.

It’s time to start talking about mental health in the workplace. By fighting the stigma of mental illness in the office, you can make a difference at your company.