MEETING IN A BOX | AN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE

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Meeting in a Box: Mental Health Awareness Month 2024

In the fast-evolving landscape of the modern workplace, acknowledging and addressing mental health concerns has become imperative. This Mental Health Awareness Month Meeting in a Box underscores the vital role employers play in fostering healthy and supportive workplaces.

This cultural competency tool also examines industry leaders' mental health programs and emergency support mechanisms, mental health facts and figures and five turning points in mental health awareness. After reading the full report, use our employee discussion questions to inform your mental health and well-being conversations.

Mental Health Matters: How Companies Can Support Mental Health at Work

Over 50 million American adults reported dealing with a mental health condition in 2023. Mental health challenges not only affect employees' ability to work but, in some cases, may arise because of their work environment. Despite how much mental health matters in facilitating healthy workplaces, some employees have doubts about their employer's ability to recognize mental health struggles at work.

Supporting employees' mental health requires both awareness and action. Organizations should work toward understanding the ways that work affects mental health and take steps to mitigate the risks and the harm associated with poor mental health.

Work-Life Balance

An inability to balance work responsibilities with a stable home life contributes to employees' poor mental health. While the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated mental health challenges in many respects, it also introduced remote work to many employees for the first time. This offered a level of flexibility that was new to many employees and was more conducive to a positive work-life balance. Now, as many companies return to pre-pandemic policies, the loss of that flexibility is negatively affecting employee mental health, according to a study published in Harvard Business Review.

The study reveals how rigid return-to-office policies can undermine employee autonomy. The loss of control over how and when work is completed upsets the work-life balance achieved with remote work. These policies and the lack of balance they afford are among the top reasons employees cited for declining mental health.

The most direct way employers can support an improved work-life balance is to offer more flexible working arrangements. While fully remote work may not be feasible for all companies, accommodations for hybrid work and a four-day workweek have been shown to reduce employee stress and burnout. These initiatives support employees who need flexibility while also signaling to all employees that mental health matters in their organization.

Such accommodations aim to improve employees' work-life balance, but there are tools employers can leverage for the same ends. Work boundaries are equally important in promoting better mental health. Not sending work-related communications after business hours and encouraging employees to avoid responding to after-hours communications can help employees develop healthy habits.

Crucially, leaders who want employees to cultivate such habits should model them themselves. If employees are to believe that their mental health matters, leaders must demonstrate that through their commitments to healthy work habits. Leadership practices define company culture and leaders who model an unhealthy work-life balance signal to their team that such behaviors are the expected norm or are required to be successful.

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Work Relationships

Work-related stress is one of the most prevalent forms of mental health struggles. According to a study published by the National Library of Medicine, interpersonal relationships are a leading contributor to workplace stress. These problems can manifest both between colleagues and between managers and their team members.

While relational conflict can cause stress, feelings of loneliness and isolation are far more common, according to an American Psychological Association (APA) report. Such feelings come despite in-person work environments where colleagues interact with each other frequently. Poor communication between coworkers and a shallow sense of interpersonal connection causes employees to feel unsupported by managers and colleagues. The lack of meaningful, empathetic relationships negatively impacts employees' sense of belonging at work, contributing to worsening mental health.

Leaders can combat relational problems in a few key ways. Transparent systems of communication for addressing disagreements are essential to mitigating conflicts. An HR department may use mediators to diffuse problems and provide a resource for cultivating worker harmony. Leaders can also work to develop a culture of empathy that encourages mutual support between employees.

Employee resource groups (ERGs), which all Fair360 Top 50 companies have, are a valuable resource in developing a supportive culture. ERGs help foster a sense of community between employees with shared identities and experiences. While these groups often form to support employees from underrepresented groups, ERGs can also coalesce around employees who want a safe environment to discuss mental health matters. The platform ERGs give for discussing shared workplace challenges and mental health struggles invites authenticity from employees and empathy from colleagues and leaders. This helps develop a supportive employee network that encourages deeper relational connections and a shared sense of belonging in the workplace.

Workplace Discrimination

Mental health is an individual issue and a matter of workplace fairness. For underrepresented groups, discrimination on a structural or personal level can be a source of mental health problems. Moreover, such discrimination can also amplify and exacerbate existing mental health struggles initially caused by other factors.

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The above-mentioned APA report revealed that certain minorities, like women and people with disabilities, are more likely to feel their workplaces are toxic and unhealthy. This can often be on account of discrimination on an individual level in the form of inappropriate jokes, comments or malicious insults that demean an employee's identity. When such an environment is allowed to develop, the psychological safety of minority employees is threatened. Their mental health suffers as a result.

Even without this kind of explicit bias, implicit systemic biases against underrepresented groups can equally harm their mental health. The APA found that Black and Hispanic employees were less likely to feel a sense of community and belonging at work compared to their peers. Similarly, many employees belonging to one or more underrepresented groups reported feeling unsupported in the workplace because of their identity. These feelings were especially pronounced among racial minorities and LGBTQ+ employees.

Opportunities for advancement and professional development are essential for mental well-being. Still, women and minorities, especially people of color, often struggle to break into higher leadership roles and tend to be underrepresented at successive steps up the career ladder.

Employers can support underrepresented employees and combat discrimination at the individual and structural levels to positively affect their mental health. Workplace training on inclusion and equity are a great way to begin combating individual instances of discrimination. At all Top 10 companies, inclusion training is required for at least some employees. In **80%** of those companies, that training is required for all employees. Subsets of inclusion training also exist to combat discrimination against specific groups at many Top 10 companies. For example, **50%** of Top 10 companies require all employees to complete disability awareness training and **60%** require all employees to complete anti-racist training. Such training can foster a healthier work culture, overcoming the adverse mental health effects associated with toxic workplaces.

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In combating feelings of isolation and loneliness, as reported by underrepresented employees, ERGs yet again prove an invaluable resource. These groups allow employees with a minority identity to develop a supportive community within their organization. Crucially, these groups provide a feedback mechanism that alerts leadership to the specific needs of underrepresented employees. This cultivates a more supportive workplace and addresses systemic biases that stifle career advancement for minority employees.

Talent programs, like mentorship, sponsorship and high-potential programs, can also create growth opportunities for underrepresented groups. All Top 10 companies offer formally structured versions of each of these programs.

Sponsorship and high-potential programs offer direct roads to advancement. Conversely, mentorship focuses on advancement indirectly through skills development and by outlining goals for career growth. To combat systemic bias effectively, these programs must intentionally pursue equitable representation. When implemented properly, such programs provide attainable growth opportunities for mental well-being at work.

Prevention Strategies

Not all mental health struggles are a product of the workplace. Anxiety and depression can develop from a litany of causes, and many mental illnesses are the result of genetics and biology. Nevertheless, organizations play a crucial role in supporting employee mental health regardless of the origin of mental health issues, according to the World Health Organization.

Training managers and entry-level employees to recognize the signs of mental health crises can help employees more quickly receive the mental health care they need. Additionally, this training enables employees to recognize their mental health struggles. It also provides strategies for coping with common causes of poor mental health.

Organizations can also take steps to recognize mental health issues and provide resources for care in the workplace. According to the CDC, employers can mitigate mental health problems by offering mental health screenings to employees. Those screenings can then refer employees to a qualified mental health specialist. It is also important for benefit packages to include mental health as part of employees' healthcare plans. With such resources in place and an explicit strategy for leveraging them effectively, the workplace can become an avenue for supporting mental health.

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Navigating Mental Health Benefits:
A Guide for Employers

Mental health benefits are becoming increasingly important in the workplace, with employees seeking employer support. Offering mental health support can boost productivity, increase ROI and employee retention, attract new talent and improve overall employee mental health.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the economic burden of mental health issues such as depression and anxiety costs $1 trillion per year in lost productivity. To support positive mental health, some employers have implemented expanded benefits packages.

Some common mental health benefits offered by employers include:

Wellness Benefits
Educational workshops, screenings, paid time off (PTO), mental health days, on-site massage, yoga and volunteer days.

Traditional Therapy
Access to in-person or telephone and video counseling services.

Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs)
Designed to address mental health in the workplace, offering a wide range of services, including counseling.

Mental Health Coverage
Inclusion in employees' healthcare plans, helping offset out-of-pocket costs for treatment.

Digital Mental Health Resources
Access to apps, telehealth counseling and online tools to help employees manage stress and improve mental health.

Weekly Meditation Sessions
Organized sessions to help employees relax and focus on mental well-being.

Paid Caregiving Leave
Offering paid leave for caregiving to help employees manage their mental health while caring for loved ones.

Flexible Scheduling
Allowing employees to have flexible work schedules to reduce stress and improve overall mental health.

Membership Program Discounts
Discounts on memberships for mental health and wellness programs, such as gym memberships or mindfulness apps.

Industry Leaders and Their Mental Health Programs

Healthcare providers that take the Fair360 Top 50 survey understand the importance of supporting mental well-being by providing employers with top-notch medical insurance plans. Industry leaders like The Cigna Group, Blue Shield of California and UnitedHealth Group offer a host of options to employers regarding medical insurance.

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The Cigna Group (No. 14 on the 2023 Top 50 Companies list) offers tailored healthcare coverage to cater to the diverse needs of employees and employers. Mental health and substance abuse benefits are part of the insurance provider's medical plan with no separate deductible. Benefits cover licensed providers, services, consultations, referrals and community support groups.

Cigna also offers member substance abuse support, including inpatient/outpatient treatment, coaching and referrals. Additionally, it offers health and wellness programs and services, such as no-cost medical check-ups, $0 virtual care and EAPs.

Blue Shield of California (No. 1 on the 2023 Top Regional Companies list) supports employees' mental health and well-being through its CredibleMind platform, which offers resources and tools for managing stress.

Covering over 230 mental health topics, CredibleMind provides science-based information and assessments on depression, anxiety, sleep, social connections, burnout and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Members receive scores and recommended resources after completing assessments. The platform's topic centers organize mental health topics, while diverse resources like podcasts, books, articles and videos cater to different learning styles, aiming to destigmatize mental health and make resources broadly accessible.

UnitedHealth Group's (No. 15 on the 2023 Top Hospitals and Health Systems list) health benefits business, UnitedHealthcare, offers a variety of benefits to help individuals address their mental health concerns. Depending on a person's health plan benefits, they could have access to EAPs, virtual visits and well-being resources. These include finding an in-network behavioral health specialist and using UnitedHealthcare's network of apps and phone services for emotional support. The company also has a Self Care platform, which provides members with self-care techniques, coping tools, meditations and other curated resources personalized to each individual's mental health needs.

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Integrating Mental Health Support into Benefits Packages

When deciding on your health plan provider as an employer, it's crucial to look for providers that provide mental health support like the companies mentioned above. To foster a healthier work environment and empower employers to prioritize employee well-being, consider integrating the following mental health support tools into benefits packages.

- Offer fully paid or subsidized access to various digital mental health resources and solutions.
- Expand EAPs, providing more visits to those who seek help; offer virtual visits for mental health care.
- Encourage open dialogues within organizations to understand employees' mental health needs and address them effectively.

Emergency Support

On top of mental health benefits, employers must provide resources for employees who are having a mental health emergency. Display the following emergency resources in prominent places such as the office bulletin board, your intranet or in a monthly email or newsletter.

Substance Use Helpline: 1-855-780-5955

Call the number above if you or someone you know is showing signs of addiction. The helpline is confidential and will help the person in need find support, guidance, treatment options and a provider to answer questions.

National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-7233 | 1-800-787-3224 (TTY)

Seek assistance for crisis intervention, obtain information and access referrals to local services for individuals affected by domestic violence or those reaching out on their behalf.

988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline

Call or text 988 or chat 988lifeline.org/chat if you or someone you know is struggling or in crisis. The 24-hour, toll-free line provides confidential support, prevention and crisis resources. TTY users can use their preferred relay service or dial 711 followed by 988.

The Crisis Text Line: Text "Home" to 741741

This is a free, 24/7 resource to help you connect with a crisis counselor for assistance dealing with all kinds of mental health crises.

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Facts and Figures - Mental Health Awareness

100% of Top 10 companies have made specific commitments to address the health and safety of the general workforce.
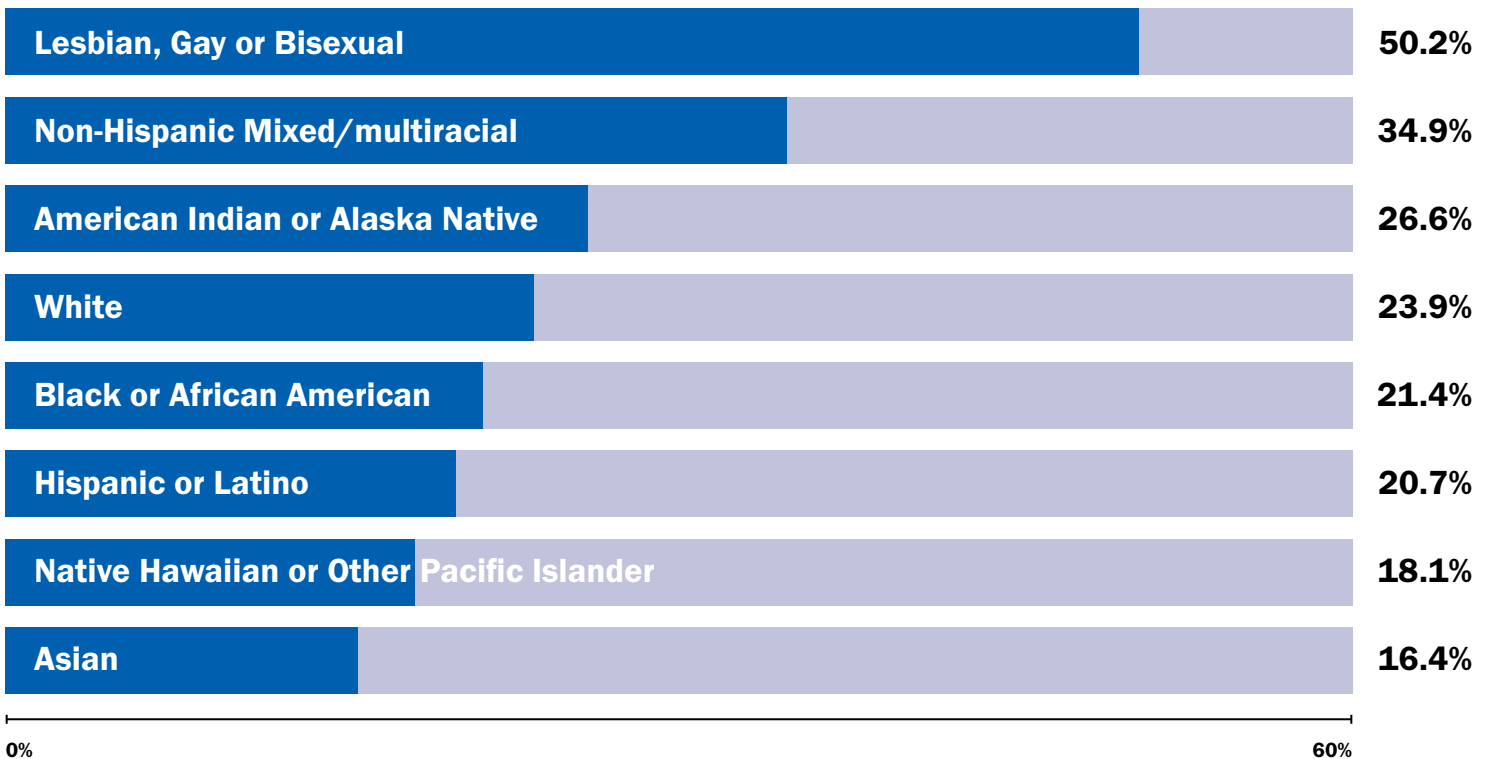*Source: Fair360*

57.8 million people experienced mental illness in 2021.
Source: National Alliance on Mental Illness

47.2% of U.S. adults with a mental illness received treatment in 2021.
Source: National Alliance on Mental Illness

50% of all lifetime mental illness begins by age 14 and 75% by age 24.
Source: National Alliance on Mental Illness

46% of people who die by suicide had a diagnosed mental health condition.
Source: National Alliance on Mental Illness

Annual prevalence of mental illness among U.S. adults by demographic group:

Demographic group	Prevalence
Lesbian, Gay or Bisexual	50.2%
Non-Hispanic Mixed/multiracial	34.9%
American Indian or Alaska Native	26.6%
White	23.9%
Black or African American	21.4%
Hispanic or Latino	20.7%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	18.1%
Asian	16.4%

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Source: National Alliance on Mental Illness

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5 Turning Points in Mental Health Awareness

Throughout history, the perception and treatment of mental health conditions have evolved, shaped by significant events that have influenced societal attitudes, medical practices and policies. These five events are milestones in the understanding and treatment of mental health, paving the way for advancements in mental health care.

1773
The Establishment of The Public Hospital of Williamsburg

The institution was the first in the United States exclusively dedicated to the care and treatment of individuals with mental illness. It marked an early effort to provide specialized care for those suffering from mental health conditions.

1843
Dorothea Dix's Advocacy for the Humane Treatment of People with Mental Illness

Dorothea Dix, a social reformer and advocate for mental health, submitted a report to the state legislature in Massachusetts highlighting the inhumane conditions in mental asylums. Her

advocacy efforts spurred reforms in mental health care and led to the establishment of more than 30 mental hospitals in the U.S.

1946
Passage of the National Mental Health Act

This legislation in the U.S. laid the groundwork for federal involvement in mental health. It emphasized the importance of research, diagnosis, treatment and public education related to mental health issues. Three years later, the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) was established.

1990
Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Inclusion of Mental Health

The ADA expanded its definition of disability to include mental health conditions, ensuring that individuals with mental illnesses were protected from discrimination and granted equal rights and opportunities in employment, public accommodations and other areas.

2013
The Affordable Care Act (ACA) Expands Mental Health Coverage

The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, referred to as the Affordable Care Act or "ACA," is the healthcare reform law enacted in March 2010. In 2013, the ACA expanded mental health and substance use disorder benefits and federal parity protections for more than 60 million Americans. The health plans must cover preventive services like depression screenings for adults and behavioral assessments for children at no additional cost. Insurance companies also can't deny healthcare coverage to anyone because of a pre-existing mental health condition.

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Discussion Questions for Employees

- How do mental health challenges impact employees' ability to work, and how can employers address these challenges?

- In what ways can a poor work-life balance contribute to mental health issues among employees?

- How might remote work, as experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, affect mental health differently than traditional office settings?

- In what ways can employers combat discrimination at both individual and structural levels to support employees from underrepresented groups?

- How can mental health benefits packages impact both employee and organizational performance?

- How might the inclusion of mental health in healthcare plans address the economic burden of mental health issues on businesses?

- What role do organizations play in raising awareness about mental health, and how can they contribute to reducing the stigma associated with mental health conditions?

- How do demographic factors influence the prevalence of mental illness, and what implications does this have for workplace mental health initiatives?

- How did legislative acts like the National Mental Health Act, Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Affordable Care Act (ACA) shape mental health policies and support for individuals with mental illnesses?

- In what ways have the historical milestones in "5 Turning Points in Mental Health Awareness" paved the way for advancements in mental healthcare and influenced societal attitudes toward mental health?

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