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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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**MUST READ:** [The Future of the Four-Day Workweek](#)

## 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.

**MUST READ:** [Unlocking the Power of ERGs](#)

## 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 ant-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.

