

“Let’s Talk”

A Manager’s Guide to Destigmatizing Mental Health

Let’s take a moment to normalize mental health in the workplace and identify ways managers can support their teams during times of emotional struggle.

Mental health difficulties are common. It’s estimated that, every year, [approximately one of five individuals will meet criteria for a mental health diagnosis](#) like depression, anxiety, or a substance use disorder. Add to that the periods of life stress we all face from time to time that can lead to emotional distress (e.g., grieving the loss of a loved one, prolonged period of work stress, physical health difficulty), even if these difficulties don’t rise to the level of a clinical diagnosis.

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Struggling with emotions is normal.

Emotional distress is an inevitable and normal part of being human, and no matter where and when it happens, it often finds its way into our professional lives. When these challenges occur, it’s difficult to show up to work and pretend everything is fine.

This is where you come in. You have the power to reduce stigma and normalize mental health in the workplace by signaling to your employees that it’s not only okay to have these experiences, but it’s safe to ask for support.

This guide offers managers insight into how negative perceptions of mental health immobilizes teams, and what leaders can do to reduce stigma and support mental health in the workplace.



Hi! I’m Kendall Brown, PhD

I’m a clinical psychologist and Workforce Transformation Program Manager at Lyra, your mental health benefit. I’m passionate about destigmatizing mental health care and helping you improve your mental health at work and at home.

Supporting employee mental health by reducing stigma

While the importance of supporting mental health in the workplace is increasingly understood, many organizations struggle with addressing stigma. A [survey by McKinsey](#) found that most employers acknowledge stigma is an issue in the workplace, yet less than one in 10 employees say their workplace is free of such biases.

One of the most devastating effects of stigma is that it [prevents people from getting help](#). According to the [National Institute of Mental Health](#), more than half of adults with a mental health condition went without treatment in 2020. And about half of employees are hesitant to talk about mental health issues at work—citing worries of retaliation or job loss if they seek care, according to a poll by the [American Psychiatric Association](#).

3 things you can do to reduce stigma in the workplace

It's important for leaders to explicitly acknowledge that it is normal to struggle with your mental health during challenging times. As a manager, it's likely you're also experiencing difficult thoughts and emotions as you navigate current events in our world.

In addition to regular communication about available resources, there are tools that you can use to proactively mitigate the stigma of mental health in the workplace.

1. It all starts with empathy-driven leadership

Managers can demonstrate empathy and reduce stigma by recognizing that productivity is impacted by distressing circumstances—and that's okay. Respond compassionately by offering flexibility to meet personal obligations. Share Lyra's ongoing mental health awareness campaigns, trainings, or workshops that educate employees about mental health, and encourage employees to seek support when they need it. Such actions signal that vulnerability is a strength and helps combat beliefs people may have about mental illness as unknown or scary.

2. It's important to model healthy behaviors, too

By doing so, managers create a space for employees to feel comfortable and more willing to disclose their struggle, which can ultimately help them get connected to help sooner. This kind of sharing isn't about disclosing intimate or personal details, but more about letting people know it's okay to prioritize their well-being.

For example, you might consider emphasizing what you've done to ensure good self-care, including setting boundaries around work hours. Another way to model healthy behaviors is by using your vacation days or letting direct reports know you're taking time for a mid-day walk, therapy appointment, or other activity to support your mental health and well-being.

In these instances, be mindful of how much information you disclose. Your intention is not to solicit support for yourself but, through your actions, to acknowledge that emotional wellness is important.

3. Keep conversations open, transparent, and shame-free

When managers and company leaders talk openly about their mental health, they send a powerful message to employees that they are welcome to discuss their own challenges. [Research shows](#) that this type of authentic leadership builds trust and improves employee performance. Below are a few ways to remove shame from conversations:

- **Talk about the full range of mental health challenges.**
Instead of shying away from acknowledging more severe conditions, reduce implicit taboos by being open to the various ways mental health issues can present themselves.
- **Check in with your teams regularly.**
Be proactive in sharing useful mental health resources, including those provided by Lyra Health.
- **Choose person-centered language.**
For example, say, "person with a substance use disorder" when referring to someone who is struggling with addiction, and refrain from using terms like "addict." [This language](#) recognizes the person's humanity and helps combat stereotypes.
- **Avoid phrases that reinforce stigma.**
Comments like, "She's being crazy today," can further discourage people from asking for help for fear of being judged.
- **Respond quickly to inappropriate remarks.**
When unsympathetic or harmful comments are made about mental illness, initiate a constructive conversation or training.
- **Take a pulse check.**
Quarterly employee surveys are a useful way to understand the impact of mental health challenges. Follow through with meaningful action in response to survey findings.

A note for dispersed workforces

Signs that may have been evident in an in-person situation can be more challenging to observe through a computer screen. This means an employee who's struggling may have to be more willing to share what they are experiencing. In a remote work context, managers should consider proactive approaches that can make distress more visible, such as setting up dedicated one-on-one time with your remote workers and proactively sharing useful mental health resources designed for dispersed teams.

Managers can be a powerful force in overcoming mental health stigma, and the rewards for doing so are great. When employees can raise their hands to say they're experiencing emotional challenges, they're more likely to get help. And research shows therapy works: According to the [Center for Workplace Mental Health](#), more than 80% of employees who receive mental health treatment say they're more effective and satisfied in their jobs.



*Mental maintenance matters.
Start here.*