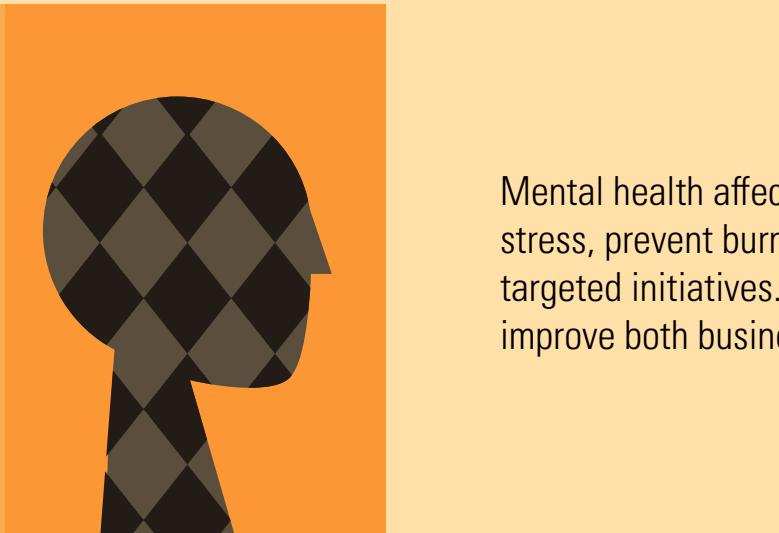


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Workplace Strategies to Address the Global Mental Health Crisis

by | **Clare Miller**



Mental health affects everyone, and organizations can reduce stress, prevent burnout and boost engagement through targeted initiatives. The author outlines strategies that improve both business outcomes and employee well-being.



Once considered a private matter, mental health exacts a heavy toll on millions, and despite increased awareness, employee mental health has worsened, reaching a new low, driving poor performance, lost productivity, higher health care costs and attrition.¹ Depression and anxiety cost the global economy \$1 trillion annually, yet more than 70% of people with a mental illness receive no treatment at all, even though every \$1 invested in mental health and substance use disorder treatment yields a \$4 return.²⁻⁴ Barriers include cost, long wait times, fragmented systems and stigma: Two in five workers worry about retaliation or being fired if they take time off for their mental health or to seek mental health care.^{5,6} Suicide, though preventable, remains a leading cause of death.⁷

Employee engagement is also at record lows, with only 32% of employees engaged, resulting in a \$2 trillion loss in U.S. productivity.^{8,9} According to Gallup® CEO Jon Clifton, this is unsurprising: Fewer than half of employees (46%) know what's expected of them, and only one in three have the tools, authority and information to do their job. Meanwhile, work stress and burnout continue to rise, and mental health short-term disability claims, which increased 300% between 2017 and 2023, saw another 22% jump in 2024 in the U.S.¹⁰

Takeaways

- Work is a social determinant that not only provides a source of income, but also a way to connect to others and build a sense of belonging, structure, meaning and purpose. Organizations that invest in mental health benefits and programs as well as aim to enrich the work experience can improve business outcomes and employee well-being.
- Employees become engaged when their basic needs are met, they have a chance to contribute, they feel a sense of belonging and they are afforded opportunities to expand their skills. If organizations overlook work factors when promoting well-being programs, their efforts may seem performative, out of touch or uncaring.
- Top performers and those with caregiver traits such as self-deprivation, compassion and a strong sense of personal responsibility are at a high risk for burnout. People in "helping professions" face even greater risk. Research shows that to address burnout and increase engagement, it's not the number of hours worked but how employees experience work overall.
- Workplace mental health is not one-size-fits-all, but given its importance, organizations must consider work conditions. Collaboration across organizational stakeholders is critical for an effective approach.

Psychological ill health is the most common cause of disability in Canada.¹¹

Research on engagement, performance, burnout and well-being all point to the same conclusion: Organizations need to improve the workplace itself—alongside improving access to quality care and embedding well-being practices into daily operations. It's time to expand focus, recognizing how environment, culture, job demands, leadership and organizational practices, as well as benefits and programs, all shape mental health.

Unlocking Well-Being Through Work

Work is a social determinant of mental health and can act as a protective factor for mental health, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).¹² Not only does work provide a source of income, but it can also offer a way to connect with others; build a sense of belonging; and provide structure, routine, meaning and purpose. As former U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, M.D., M.B.A., noted, "Work is one of the most vital parts of life, powerfully shaping our health, wealth and well-being." This is also true for people living with mental illness; work is considered a critical component of recovery because it enables the opportunity to productively contribute to society.¹³

Good or bad, work impacts mental health.¹⁴⁻¹⁶

- 60% of employees surveyed said their job was the most significant factor in their mental health.
- 84% of employees said workplace conditions contributed to at least one mental health challenge.
- Managers have greater influence on employee mental health than therapists or doctors, and an influence equal to spouses and partners.
- A poor-quality job (bad boss, toxic workplace, unsustainable workload) is worse for physical well-being than being unemployed and without a paycheck.

Employers are taking necessary actions to raise mental health awareness and invest in mental health benefits and programs. Less common, however, are efforts to enrich the work experience of employees to improve business outcomes as well as mental health and well-being.

Governments around the world and occupational health and safety bodies have different voluntary and legal requirements related to psychological risks at work. One of the National Standards of Canada, *Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace*, was published in 2013, and some provi-

dences in Canada have legislation to address workplace disrespect and bullying.^{17,18} In 2021, the first global standard was introduced: *Occupational health and safety management—Psychological health and safety at work—Guidelines for managing psychosocial risks* (ISO 45003).¹⁹ In the United States, employee mental health strategies often center on mental health insurance benefits, employee assistance programs, and/or inclusion or allyship programs and not work factors.

Long Hours, Low Engagement, Rampant Burnout

Microsoft's WorkLab recently described a "seemingly infinite workday" based on trillions of Microsoft 365 productivity signals, showing how constant messages, meetings and interruptions leave little time for focused and impactful work and push many to work evenings and weekends.²⁰

According to Gallup, despite more hours dedicated to work, employee engagement recently hit a ten-year low. Engagement "reflects the involvement and enthusiasm of employees in their work and workplace. Employees can become engaged when their basic needs are met and when they have a chance to contribute, a sense of belonging, and opportunities to learn and grow."²¹

Disconnection from work is a common sign of burnout, along with feelings of negativism or cynicism, exhaustion and reduced professional efficacy. Three in four workers now experience burnout.²² The WHO defines *burnout* as an occupational phenomenon resulting from chronic, poorly managed workplace stress.²³ Top performers and those with caregiver traits such as self-deprivation, compassion and a strong sense of personal responsibility are at a high risk for burnout. People in "helping professions" face even greater risk (first responders, doctors, nurses, mental health providers and teachers).²⁴

While individual self-care and support can help, addressing organizational factors that permit chronic work stress to remain unmanaged is crucial. These common workplace issues include the following:^{25,26}

- Excessive workload and/or scarce resources
- Unreasonable time pressure
- High-conflict teams and a limited sense of community
- Lack of clarity in their role or conflicting direction
- Shifting workloads or constantly changing expectations
- Ineffective or poor management, including unclear communication from managers and/or a lack of support

- Lack of recognition and reward, including compensation, advancement and acknowledgement
- Unfair treatment at work and values mismatch, as well as incongruence between company values and employee experience
- Perceived lack of control and autonomy at work, especially micromanagement.

Effectively addressing burnout and increasing engagement isn't solved by reducing work hours or demands. Gallup's research shows that it's not the "number of hours you work, it's how you're managed and how you experience work."²⁷

Jennifer Moss, author of *The Burnout Epidemic*, says that the first step in addressing burnout is "repeating and internalizing this mantra: Burnout is about your organization, not your people. Yoga, vacation time, wellness tech and meditation apps can help people feel optimized, healthier. But when it comes to preventing burnout, suggesting that these tools are the cure is dangerous."

These insights into burnout and engagement inform how to effectively promote mental health and well-being benefits, as well as employee assistance program (EAP) resources. If organizations overlook work factors when promoting mental health support and well-being programs, efforts may seem performative, out of touch or uncaring.

Effective Approaches Center on Work

Organization-level initiatives, such as improvements in management practices, staff resources or tailored job design, are the most effective way to reduce work stress, mitigate burnout and increase engagement, according to research, including a recent Oxford study.²⁸

Effective strategies include:²⁹⁻³¹

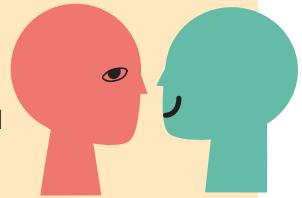
- **Reset expectations and priorities to ensure employees know what's expected of them.** Expectations become clear when they are collaboratively set and prioritized with employees, aligned with what the team aims to achieve, regularly discussed, and considered alongside workload and well-being, according to Gallup. Improving clarity of expectations from today's levels to best-practice levels can lead to a 9% increase in profitability and an 11% improvement in work quality.
- **Connect work to mission and purpose.** Being clear about the mission and values of the organization—and

how employees' work contributes to them—helps motivate high performance and shows people that their work matters. Improving the connection between employees' jobs and the mission or purpose of their organization can lead to a 32% reduction in turnover and a 15% improvement in productivity.

- **Listen to work-related problems.** Use frequent employee check-ins and ongoing conversations to connect with employees, listen to their challenges and identify what's blocking them from meeting work demands. Employees need to believe that their manager will address their problems and genuinely care about them as individuals.
- **Have ongoing coaching and performance conversations.** Celebrate achievements and have regular, learning-oriented performance conversations that focus on action. Using the lens of "advice for the future" can be more effective because people often overreact and under-correct to criticism focused on past mistakes. Shifting the conversation toward what can be changed for the future is more constructive.
- **Actively solicit employee input and perspectives.** Employees who know their input is welcome and makes a difference will take more responsibility for their performance. Research demonstrates that psychological safety—which enables individuals to speak up, make mistakes and provide feedback—is the greatest predictor of effective teams.
- **Focus on strength-based development.** Employees who can leverage their strengths are more engaged, more effective and less stressed. Identify what people do best, praise them for it, and create opportunities for them to contribute and grow their talents.
- **Allow for autonomy and ensure that performance demands are within employees' control.** Employees evaluated against factors outside of their control experience anxiety and detachment, and this can become a source of "chronic despair and frustration" according to Gallup. Clear expectations for results and boundaries, an appropriate level of decision-making authority, and flexibility and choice about where and when to work increase engagement and well-being.
- **Foster cohesive teams: It's the manager's responsibility to build environments that encourage teamwork.** Cohesive teams rely on effective communication,

What to Do If an Employee Shows Signs of Burnout

Because burnout symptoms may overlap with other mental or physical health conditions, it's important to connect employees with appropriate support for both health and legal reasons.



1. **Listen with care.** Pay attention to what's said and what isn't. Does the employee feel comfortable discussing work-related causes of stress?
2. **Address work factors.** Offer support through prioritization, clearer expectations and coaching.
3. **Share resources.** Provide information on accommodations, EAP services, mental health/substance use programs and well-being benefits.
4. **Think system-wide.** Assess team and organization practices to identify and prevent broader burnout risks.

alignment and strong relationships. When teamwork thrives, employees can support team members who are struggling with a problem or experiencing work stress, which enables overall growth of the group.

- **Ensure that policies, practices and procedures addressing bullying, sexual harassment, discrimination and workplace violence are fair and respectful.** Use precision in policies to ensure clarity and specificity, addressing the perpetrator rather than the target.

These strategies foster better work and better health. In fact, Gallup found that when employees are supported, respected, valued and motivated, they produce better work, and that work is significantly less stressful on their overall health and well-being. Addressing work is more critical than ever, given the pace of change and disruption, especially in an AI-future.

Building a Holistic Workplace Mental Health Strategy

Workplace mental health is not one-size-fits-all; however, given its importance, considering work conditions is crucial. Collaboration across organizational stakeholders is critical for an effective approach. Forming an advisory group, stakeholder workgroup or similar body that brings together various groups—human resources, people analytics, benefits and well-being, occupational health and safety, employment

law and compliance, talent and performance management, internal communications, learning and development, among others—can turbocharge progress.

Employers can also play a powerful role in improving mental health by offering benefits and promoting them, as well as fostering a deeper understanding of mental health and well-being.

Here are some effective strategies:

- **Make mental health messages routine and incorporate them throughout the employee lifecycle.** For example, highlight healthy norms during onboarding and promote resources in physical and virtual workspaces. Don't isolate mental health to World Mental Health Day (October 10) or times of stress.
- **Incorporate work into mental health messaging.** When promoting mental health resources and programs, don't overlook the role of work. Be open about business realities or work challenges and provide employees with specific actions they can take, such as discussing priorities and goals with their manager.
- **Increase understanding about mental health and awareness of benefits.** Leverage resources from your company's EAP or external speakers from the community to educate employees about mental health topics, highlight benefits and resources available, and explain how to use them.
- **Use storytelling and contact-based awareness to reduce stigma.** Consider reflecting on cultural differences and highlighting a range of experiences, from stress to mental health conditions. Protect safety and well-being by using content warnings and promoting benefits and programs.³²
- **Educate HR, managers and co-workers about the signs of mental health distress and how to respond.** Optimize processes for speed and external support for assessment, and remove the manager from the middle (which can complicate their core role as manager).
- **Ensure core EAP services for individuals are in place and easily accessible.** These include 24/7 in-the-moment support, short-term coaching and counselling, referrals to assistance for financial well-being, child care, elder care, respite, expert medical opinion and care management and warm transfer for higher levels of care, and other benefits.

- **Develop and document the company's response to mental health crises.** Optimize response for safety and speed to external clinical support for clinical assessment, management and follow-up, providing ongoing support as appropriate. Having a transparent process can mitigate risk to employees in crisis and the company.
- **Use data and analytics to drive a strategy unique to employee needs.** Relevant data may include employee demographics, utilization, engagement of EAP, benefits, time away (PTO, sick) and other programs—as well as HR (analytics on recruitment and retention, as well as pulse/engagement surveys).

Standing Out in the Future

As uncertainty, geopolitical volatility, economic instability, and workplace dynamics like return-to-office mandates and mass layoffs persist, workplace mental health can seem more challenging than ever. The rise of AI brings both promise and disruption, raising questions about its impact on jobs and how to harness its benefits while mitigating potential harm.

Advancing workplace mental health will look different at each organization. While access to care and treatment is critical for prevention, health and well-being, addressing workplace factors holds untapped potential to make significant strides for business.

The employers that will stand out in the future won't be defined solely by compensation and benefit packages. Instead, it will be their commitment to improving employees' actual work experience that sets them apart. Recent generational entrants to the workplace are making their priorities clear; half of millennials and Gen Z say they would accept a lower salary if their employer provided support for their well-being, according to an international survey of 25 countries, including Canada and the United States.³³ Organizations that prioritize addressing the "work" part of workplace mental health will be the ones that attract, retain and empower top talent. Improving employee engagement will not only produce better business results for companies, shareholders and customers, but it will also improve mental health and well-being and help address the global mental health crisis. ☈

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