

What To Do When An Employee Needs Mental Health Help



When it appears that an employee may have a mental health problem, many employers are unsure what actions are appropriate and in the best interest of both the individual and the organization. The goal should be to get the employee any needed services so he or she can be healthy and return to a productive work life, but what steps should employers take to get there? [Mental Health America](#) suggests these strategies to ensure the most positive and constructive outcomes.

Establish a Mentally Healthy Working Environment

Employees who have a mental health problem often say the worst part of having such an illness is the stigma. Feelings of shame, concerns about job security, and fear of rejection by colleagues are often debilitating—and they often discourage workers from seeking the help they need. To establish a mentally healthy working environment:

- **Educate:** Employees and managers at all levels of the organization need to learn about mental illnesses, stress, wellness, available health and mental health benefits, and how to access those services.
- **Watch your language:** Stigma begins with hurtful labels, such as “crazy” or “nuts.” Encourage employees to discontinue such language and to start using “people-first” language (e.g., “a person with schizophrenia,” rather than “a schizophrenic”).
- **Encourage dialogue:** Organizations that talk candidly about mental health help set a positive tone. Create a safe environment in which employees are encouraged to talk about stress, workloads, family commitments, and other issues. Send the message that mental illnesses are real and treatable.
- **Put your money where your mouth is:** Actions DO speak louder than words, so it is essential to invest in mental health benefits, including prevention and educational programs. Innovative employers have learned that addressing employees’ mental health needs makes good economic sense. They also recognize that they play an essential role in their employees’ mental health not only by paying for a large portion of treatment but also by creating an environment in which people feel comfortable accessing care.

Learn the Signs of a Mental Health Problem

In the workplace, mental health problems manifest in a multitude of ways. Here are some employee behaviors that may be signs of a mental health problem:

- Working slowly
- Missing deadlines
- Calling in sick frequently
- Increasing absenteeism
- Expressing irritability and anger
- Having difficulty concentrating and making decisions
- Appearing numb or emotionless
- Withdrawing from work activity
- Overworking
- Forgetting directives, procedures, and requests
- Having difficulty with work transitions or changes in routines

These symptoms could also result when an employee has a family member suffering from a mental health problem or other serious health issues. Such situations can sometimes disrupt the employee’s working hours, lead to absences, affect concentration, and decrease morale as much as it would if the employee had the mental health problem.

Do Not Diagnose

An employer cannot and should not “diagnose” an employee. However, you can note and discuss changes in work performance, and listen to the employee’s response and concerns. If there are personal issues, suggest that the employee seek consultation from your organization’s Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or a mental health professional. Reminding the employee of available benefits can also be helpful.

Be prepared for surprise, anger, disagreement, defensiveness, denial, or verbal attacks. If they occur, remain calm. Let the employee express his or her feelings, but maintain control—and keep focused on the work performance—not on personality. Be constructive; point out weaknesses, but emphasize what can be done to improve or rectify the situation. Finally, make sure you have adequate time and privacy, and try to avoid interruptions.

Be Prepared to Handle Emergencies

If somebody is causing conflicts with other workers, deal with the problems quickly and efficiently—especially if there are concerns that the environment is becoming hostile. Listen to all sides, and make decisions based on the facts. Treat people fairly and consistently. Document thoroughly and accurately.

Severe mental illnesses may be life-threatening to the employee. Comments suggesting suicidal thoughts should be taken seriously. Dial 911, take the employee to the emergency room, or contact your EAP or a mental health professional immediately to seek advice about how to handle the situation.

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Make Reasonable Accommodations

You may need to make some reasonable accommodations that will help employees who are dealing with mental health problems perform their jobs. Some employees may need time off for treatment, and assistance in making a healthy transition back to work. Employees should be encouraged to ask for the support they need, and the organization should provide an environment where people feel comfortable and not judged.

It is important to remember that making reasonable accommodations is not only good for your organization and the people involved, but it is legally required. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and state disability laws prohibit discrimination based on disability and require employers to make reasonable accommodations in certain circumstances

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