

Providing a Supportive Work Environment for Mental Health

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Creating an environment to be mental health-friendly and to reduce the stressors that can create mental health conditions is very important for a healthy workspace. Preventative approaches should be a workplace standard, but what happens if there are personnel who are already diagnosed with mental health conditions or struggle with certain areas of mental health? How can leadership support them so that they feel understood and can work in an environment that can best fit their needs so that they can, in turn, provide good work for their commands?

Even if details are not disclosed, the workplace environment can be a supportive space for personnel to advocate for their needs, mental health or otherwise, to be most effective. People work differently and allowing them to complete their work in approaches that may differ from each other allows for diversity, creativity, and productivity that makes for a successful team. Working with people's strengths can help meet the mission more effectually and with less stress for everyone involved. Understanding your team's personality types and methodologies can also help a leader provide the best task fit for each employee.

When mental health conditions become part of what an employee is struggling with, there are a variety of ways that leadership can be helpful to support them through their recovery:

Destigmatize having mental health conditions. Mental health is no different from physical health. Just as it is important to get a broken bone set or take medication to manage diabetes, getting treatment and allotting time to heal is imperative for compromised mental health. It is not uncommon for people to have mental health struggles, some of which are circumstantial or temporary, and the sooner they are able to get the right help, the better their long-term prognosis. Encouraging personnel to seek help and not responding in a punitive way improves their path to recovery. Providing resources such as the Employee Assistance Program and Military OneSource can be seen as supportive and inclusive.

Make time for employees to attend appointments and therapy sessions. Just like going to any other medical appointment for maintenance or something more acute, employees need time to make their mental health appointments for therapy and/or medication management during the workday. If their appointment attendance is erratic or limited, progress and healing will be minimal or prolonged.

Allow for occasional breaks for mental rejuvenation throughout the day. The human mind is not geared for nonstop working and critical thinking. Allowing personnel to take short breaks away from their work around the facilities, such as walking the labyrinth, going outside for some fresh air and sunshine, engaging in mindfulness moments, or taking breath breaks can help people manage stress and clear one's mind so that they can work more effectively and sharply throughout the day. This is an important practice for any person but can be especially critical for someone dealing with depression, ADHD, anxiety, and so forth.

Be on board with employee wellness. Allowing employees time during the workday to go for a walk/run, take a power nap, attend yoga, exercise at the gym, and so forth, can increase

productivity and concentration and lower stress. Physical outlets provide a number of wellness, health, and mental benefits that are important for a healthy team.

Create space for creative outlets. For many people, taking some time for something creative such as taking 15 minutes to doodle, color a template, draw a mandala, journal, or Zentangle® when needed can provide a much-needed mental and emotional break and outlet. Having a permissive space for personnel to engage in occasional creative breaks can help them recharge, refocus, decompress, and ground themselves.

Mental health days are necessary. Sick leave is not only for physical ailments. There are days that someone may not be able to function 100% mentally and emotionally toward the mission and needs some time to recuperate and allow themselves to recover back to a baseline. It is better for someone to take some time out up front than to push through and end up needing more time in the long run to heal. Early intervention is always ideal for everyone involved. Trust your employees to know what they need for maximum effectiveness.

Coordinate flexible scheduling or remote working capabilities to optimize employees' peak performance time (due to chronotype or medications). Determine what needs your employees have, either medically, physiologically, or psychologically, that would help them be most productive. If remote work is possible, this may reduce stress and improve productivity for personnel. Having flexible start and end times or a regular day off (RDO) schedule can also help employees maximize their time at work when they are at their peak performance and will benefit the team overall.

Schedule walking 5 minutes on the hour for stretching and movement. Studies have shown that walking for a short period of time hourly, especially in sedentary jobs, is more effective on health than working out for the same period of time all at once before the workday. Rather than requiring people to fit in a workout before or after work, having small increments of moderate movement has greater health benefits overall with minimal impact on the workday when spread out.

Have an open door, nonjudgmental availability if employees need to share difficulties and help problem-solve if needed. Employees may need to have support while they navigate their treatment. They may not know where to start, and their supervisors can guide them to the right resources. Knowing that they may be able to share difficulties they are having without judgment can be supportive for employees, and being able to discuss workarounds may be just what they need.

Self-care is critical and should be encouraged individually and collectively. Self-care is a consistent, routine way of taking care of oneself in various domains (physical, mental, social, psychological, spiritual, financial, environmental) on a regular basis for centering and maintenance. This helps one person, or a group maintain a baseline for health so that managing the curveballs in life are more manageable.

Lacy Mucklow is a licensed and board-certified art therapist in practice since 1999 and has been working for the DoD since 2002. She obtained her MA in Art Therapy from The George

Washington University and is currently working on her PhD in Mind-Body Medicine from Saybrook University. She enjoys helping military members and their families through various means that expand beyond the realms of traditional talk therapy. Lacy enjoys employing mandala work, True Colors® personality inventory, Zentangle®, and is a SoulCollage® facilitator. She is also a New York Times bestselling author with “Color Me Calm” and a National Bestseller with “Color Me Happy,” along with nine other book titles. Lacy has released two meditation/guided imagery albums entitled “Lavender Dreams” and “Lavender Destinations” for mindfulness work as well.