



# The Advantages of Mental Health Support in the Workplace



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**The Advantages of Mental Health Support in the Workplace:**  
*The Research, the Results, and the Numbers*

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### Introduction: What is Mental Health?

The definition provided by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services for “mental health” was used for the research and conclusions provided. It is as follows:

**Mental health:** *emotional, psychological, and social well-being.* (2019)

To fully understand the above definition, the meaning of “well-being” also needs to be specified. Based upon the research conducted, the following definition of “well-being” was created:

**Well-being:** *a state of living encompassing all factors that affect one's physical, mental, social, and spiritual health.*

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services wrote that mental health affects the way people think, feel, and act, and it is a determinant for how stress is handled, how people relate to others, and how choices are made. Maintaining positive mental health allows one to understand their capabilities, cope with stress, work productively, and make contribute to the community. (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2019)

To maintain positive mental health, there are many courses of action one can take, such as:

- Obtaining professional help;
- Making connections with others;
- Keeping a positive outlook;
- Staying active physically;
- Helping others;
- Getting enough sleep;
- Accumulating coping skills. (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2019)

Coping skills can include activities such as meditation, yoga, physical activity, creative activities, and other ways of decompression and relaxation (Scharff Ph.D, 2019). The components of a person’s well-being correspond and often overlap with the ways one can maintain positive mental health. The factors associated with well-being are stated as being:

- One’s self-perceived health;
- A long life;
- Healthy behaviors;
- Mental and physical illness;
- Social connections;

- Productivity;
- Factors in one’s physical and social environment. (Waller Wellness Center, 2019)

Healthy behaviors involve one’s nutrition, exercise, sleep, and other physical health-related actions (Waller Wellness Center, 2019). Air pollution, diet, social participation and integration, support, trust, control, and rewards are all examples provided by the U.S. Institute of Medicine for factors in one’s physical and social environment (National Research Council, 2013).

It can be confirmed that the components of mental health involve one’s feelings, way of thinking, and involvement and position in society, and that a decline or absence in any of these can have an extreme negative impact on an individual.

### Mental Health in the Workplace

As shown in the explanation of mental health, the workplace has a large impact on any employee’s mental health because of how integral it is to the lives of most people. Thus, workplace practices are very important to determining whether workers will be content, productive, and successful.

Some companies have come to understand and accept this reality and have begun making employee mental health a priority. The examples below were provided by the Center for Workplace Mental Health:

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- **Unilever:**
  - Unilever has created a comprehensive program tailored to mental health. It provides
    - Trainings for managers and seniors;
    - Internal campaigns to raise awareness about mental health;
    - Regular employee workshops. (Center for Workplace Mental Health, 2010)
- **American Express:**
  - American Express put together an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) that offers:
    - Telephone and onsite (face-to-face) professional assistance for free;
    - A new “Healthy Minds” program with campaigns and help on connecting with others, talking about mental health, and practicing healthy behaviors;

- Skill development classes based on intellectual behavior therapy. (Center for Workplace Mental Health, 2016)
- **Prudential:**
  - Prudential created programs covering the 5 dimensions of mental health: Physical, emotional, social, spiritual, and financial. These cover employee needs such as
    - Counseling, assessments, training, and coaching for topics including life, budgeting, and self-care;
    - Flexible schedules;
    - Leadership and coworker involvement and connection through the company PruTubes, where individuals can share their own stories and struggles with mental health. (Center for Workplace Mental Health, 2016)

Senior Wellness Editor Lindsay Holmes of the Huffington Post covered the topic of improving workplace mental health. Her suggestions involved:

- Making help accessible to employees and creating safe spaces for them to be open about their hardships;
  - This can be attained through EAP's, such as the one used by American Express. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, EAP's are one of the most effective ways of providing support (Holmes, 2016).
- Dedicating a staff member to mental health promotion;
- Recruiting leaders to speak openly about mental health and support available at the company;
- Offering a variety of mental health support formats, from online to in-person options;
- Creating an assessment with mental health-related questions to better understand and plan for employee needs;
- Measure manager support and mental health training with appropriate metrics decided by the company;
- Create mental health awareness campaigns to normalize mental health. (Holmes, 2016)
  - Campaigns can be sessions where people in the company share their experiences with mental health, like the PruTubes video-sharing space that was invented by Prudential (Center for Workplace Mental Health, 2016).

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All the companies mentioned earlier saw improvements in their employee mental health awareness, communication, and participation. At Unilever, the company has an average of between **60** and **90%** participation in its programs; it

has improved its employee health status, reduced absences, and achieved better performances with the employees that participated (Center for Workplace Mental Health, 2010). A survey taken at Prudential showed that workplace flexibility was one of the top three most appreciated benefits provided to employees (Center for Workplace Mental Health, 2016). Prudential also measured the following statistics after implementing its health support programs in 2010:

- A decline of **43%** in employees with health risks;
- A decrease of **26%** in employees with stress risks;
- **17%** less employees with job stress risks;
- A decrease of **19%** of employees whose health and well-being were affected by stress;
- **44%** less employees struggling with financial risk (Center for Workplace Mental Health, 2016).

### The Effect of Workplace Satisfaction on Productivity

It has often been stated that employees that are happier in their positions and at their companies produce better work for and more willingly engage in their organization. This seems to be somewhat straightforward, but the main question is, how do companies make their employees happy? Also, what steps should they take to ensure dedication and commitment from their staff members?

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A study conducted by Kyle Shobe of Missouri State University found that workplace productivity is mainly driven by four factors:

- Job satisfaction,
- Physical working environment,
- Management support,
- And autonomy in the workplace.

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He wrote that the intellectual capital of a company's productive employees can be considered about **80%** of the total value a firm can provide. Shobe explained that balancing mental satisfaction for employees socially, economically, and physically provides a positive mentality and higher productivity. This improves job performance and motivation to continue improving and creating quality work. Continuing their learning also gives employees more abilities to develop and master, preventing a productivity ceiling from forming. (Shobe, 2018)

As noted before, work is an enormous part of the lives of everyday people, which is why job satisfaction is so important to productivity. This does not only include

monetary compensation; the actual work being done, promotions, coworkers, autonomy, and opportunities provided are other components that Shobe writes apply to job satisfaction. (Shobe, 2018)

The physical environment of the workplace also has a large effect on productivity, Shobe continued. Ensuring employees work in an environment that removes distracting noises and background sounds, as well as provides plenty of quality lighting and motivated coworkers, inspires originality and positively influence productivity. The addition of plants is also very stimulating; they improve air quality, provide a more natural setting, and promote well-being. (Shobe, 2018)

The piece advocates that support and leadership from managers for employee communication, engagement, and innovation is essential to a productive business. Effective stress management, team building, and collaboration from good management helps create more satisfied employees. Managers that take the time to understand their management style, employee needs, and how to implement healthy processes create successful teams. (Shobe, 2018)

Allowing employees to have autonomy demonstrates trust in the employees and gives them the freedom and flexibility to complete their job as is best for them. Both individual and group autonomy are important to provide employees so that they can both share responsibility and be fully responsible. Shobe stated that this is shown to increase loyalty, positively impacting both the company and the mental health of its staff. (Shobe, 2018)

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An article written by the Association for Psychological Science supports the claims made by Shobe, writing that engaged workers (defined as “those who approach their work with energy, dedication, and focus”) are more receptive, productive, and more likely to overachieve, as well as contribute to the betterment of their work environment. When they are provided support, given feedback on their work performance, and given opportunities to grow, be more autonomous, and be more receptive to changes in their work, they produce better work faster. (Association for Psychological Science, 2011)

The study and research completed by both Shobe and the Association for Psychological Science directly correlates to the information provided about positive mental health in the workplace. Having control of one’s work, positive workplace relationships, support, and a healthy physical environment are all parts of improving one’s mental health. These factors affect many of the other parts of mental health and well-being, and ensuring they are met to the best of the company’s ability produces the best—and most productive—employees.

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### How Management Training on Mental Health Benefits Employees

According to the World Health Organization, risks to employee mental health in the workplace include:

- Insufficient health and safety policies;
- Poor communication and management;
- Limited participation in decision-making or low controls over work areas;
- Low levels of employee support;
- Inflexible working hours;
- And unclear tasks or organizational objectives. (World Health Organization, 2017)

As the study done by Kyle Shobe emphasized previously, managers and leaders in the workplace positively or negatively influence all areas of mental health. Training for leadership roles on mental health awareness and support would benefit employees not just in their work lives but also in their personal lives by decreasing work-related stress and providing more stability.

A study published in *The Lancet Psychiatry* journal shows the effects of a 4-hour mental health training program for managers by comparing the work-related sick leave of almost 4000 employees supervised by 88 managers. There was an “Intervention Group,” that consisted of managers trained in the program, and a “Control Group” of managers that had not been trained. At the end of a 6-month timespan, the managers were reassessed for the work-related sickness absence metrics. The results were as follows:

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- Work-related sick leave for employees in the Intervention Group decreased by **28%**.
  - This equates to **6.45 hours** per employee over the 6 months.
- Work-related sick leave for employees in the Control Group *increased* by **28%**.
- Return on Investment for the training expenses was £9,98 for every £1,00 spent (**\$13.20** for every **\$1.32**). (Milligan-Saville, et al., 2017)

### Conclusion: What Types of Mental Health Support Do Employees Desire from their Workplaces?

The support a company can and should provide its staff members should always be variable in its method of delivery to provide employees multiple opportunities to access the help that they want. When American Express updated its mental health policies and programs, it ensured that it hired a

professional counselor that could be available in-person for employees to confide in, but it also kept its over-the-phone counseling service for those that could not make it to a face-to-face meeting (Center for Workplace Mental Health, 2016). Companies need to make their programs as accessible as possible to their employees so that participation is more likely.

There are many options that firms can implement to support their employees in certain ways, as well as many areas that these supports can cover. All of them pertain to mental health and well-being. These areas can include the following:

- Career Development
  - Continuing employee learning
  - Providing useful feedback
  - Promoting employee attendance at office speaker sessions or outside conferences
- Communication
  - Transparency throughout the company
  - Clear job definitions, hierarchies, and upcoming position and employment changes
  - Efficient communication about available opportunities inside and outside of the workplace
  - Openness to employee feedback and suggestions
- Company Policies
  - Flexible work schedules, work-from-home policies, and paid time off
  - Reasonable accommodation for employee needs, both known and unexpected
  - Realistic compensation and good employee benefits
- Environmental Enrichment
  - Living plants and natural light to provide a natural, refreshing atmosphere
  - Office layouts that remove distractions and encourage creativity and productivity
  - Encouraging a positive office atmosphere
  - Promotion of participation in volunteer events
- Financial Advising
  - Availability and awareness of financial support classes and advisors
  - Resources for helping employees manage finances, such as books or online tools

- Managerial Support
  - Managerial training on managing employee mental health and maintaining a positive work environment
  - Autonomy for workers to complete their tasks as is best for the employee
- Mental Health Awareness and Normalization
  - Mental health awareness campaigns to normalize conversations about the topic
  - Openness about mental health issues in the workplace
  - Clear communication about how employees can get mental health support from the company
  - Continued education opportunities and leadership support on mental health topics
- Physical Wellness
  - Gym membership and other wellness class reimbursements
  - Healthy office food choices
  - Availability of resources about improving and maintaining physical health
- Social Inclusion
  - Team development activities
  - Company-wide functions
  - Continued personal acceptance and support of all employees

The list of opportunities that organizations can create for their personnel is endless, and they all take time and dedication to initiate and implement. Policy updates and program creation does not happen overnight, and neither does an improvement in the overall mental health of a company's workforce.

Many of the possible improvements listed above have been implemented in and greatly impacted companies mentioned in earlier sections as well as others. It is long advocated that happier employees make better employees, and research continuously supports this notion. Understanding the changes that companies can make to ensure they have the most content, dedicated, and productive workers is the first step a firm can make to improve itself and its ability to make a meaningful and positive impact on society.

## Appendix

### THE RESEARCH

#### Definitions

**Coping skills:** *acquired assistances that allow one to make sense of negative experiences and integrate them into a healthy, sustainable perspective of the world (Scharff Ph.D, 2019)*

**Employee Assistance Program:** *a program at a company that offers benefits or services to its employees pertaining to personal or work issues (Holmes, 2016)*

**Engaged workers:** *employees that are dedicated, energetic, and focused in their work (Association for Psychological Science, 2011)*

**Job satisfaction:** *the extent to which a job fulfills the worker's dominant need and reflects their expectations and values (Shobe, 2018)*

**Healthy behaviors:** *habits that positively or negatively affect and dictate the overall state of a person's health (Waller Wellness Center, 2019)*

**Intellectual capital:** *the contributions provided from the human capital of an organization (Shobe, 2018)*

**Mental health:** *emotional, psychological, and social well-being (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2019)*

**Well-being:** *a state of living encompassing all factors that affect one's physical, mental, social, and spiritual health*

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#### Statistics

- At the end of a 6-month timespan, the 88 managers in the Control and Intervention groups in the *Lancet Psychiatry* study were reassessed for the work-related sickness absence metrics of their employees. The results were as follows:
  - Work-related sick leave for employees in the Intervention Group decreased by **28%**
    - This equates to **6.45 hours** per employee over 6 months
  - Work-related sick leave for employees in the Control Group *increased* by **28%**
  - Return on Investment for the training expenses was £9,98 for every £1,00 spent (**\$13.20** for every **\$1.32**) (Milligan-Saville, et al., 2017)

- Prudential employees took a survey and chose workplace flexibility as one of the top **3** most appreciated benefits provided to employees (Center for Workplace Mental Health, 2016)
- Prudential measured the following statistics after implementing its health support programs:
  - A decline of **43%** in employees with health risks;
  - A decrease of **26%** in employees with stress risks;
  - **17%** less employees with job stress risks;
  - A decrease of **19%** of employees whose health and well-being were affected by stress;
  - **44%** less employees struggling with financial risk (Center for Workplace Mental Health, 2016).
- The intellectual capital of productive employees at a firm can be considered about **80%** of the firm's total value (Shobe, 2018)
- Unilever has an average of between **60** and **90%** participation in its programs (Center for Workplace Mental Health, 2010)

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