5 Ways Bosses Can Reduce the Stigma of Mental Health at Work

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Experts tell us that one in four adults will struggle with a mental health issue during his or her lifetime. At work, those suffering — from clinical conditions or more minor ones — often hide it for fear that they may face discrimination from peers or even bosses. These stigmas can and must be overcome. But it takes more than policies set at the top. It also requires empathetic action from managers on the ground.

We count ourselves among those who have wrestled with mental health challenges. One morning a few years ago, in the midst of a successful year, Jen couldn’t get out of bed. As a driven professional, she had ignored all the warning signs that she was experiencing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). But her mentor, Diana, could see something was wrong, and when Jen couldn’t come to work, the gravity of the situation became even clearer. In the ensuing weeks, we worked together to get Jen the help she needed.

Diana understood Jen’s struggles because she had been there, too — not with PTSD but with anxiety. As the mother of adult triplets with autism and a busy job, she’d often had difficulty managing things in her own life.

Throughout both of our careers, we have moved across the spectrum of mental health from thriving to barely hanging on, and somewhere in between. What we’ve learned through our own experiences is how much managerial support matters.
When bosses understand mental health issues – and how to respond to them – it can make all the difference for an employee professionally and personally. This involves taking notice, offering a helping hand, and saying “I’m here, I have your back, you are not alone.”

That’s exactly what Jen said when a coworker told her that he was grappling with anxiety; it had gotten to the point where it was starting to impact his work and his relationships at home. He came to her because she’d been open about her own struggles. She listened to him, worked to understand what accommodations he needed, and told him about available resources, such as Employee Assistance Programs. Then she continued to check in to see he was getting support he needed and make it clear that she and others were there to help.

How do you learn or teach the people on your team to address colleagues’ or direct reports’ mental health issues in the same way? Here are five ways managers can help drive a more empathetic culture:

**Pay attention to language.** We all need to be aware of the words we use that can contribute to stigmatizing mental health issues: “Mr. OCD is at it again – organizing everything.” “She’s totally schizo today!” “He is being so bi-polar this week – one minute he’s up, the next he’s down.” We’ve heard comments like these, maybe even made them ourselves. But through the ears of a colleague who has a mental health challenge, they can sound like indictments. Would you open up about a disorder or tell your team leader you needed time to see a therapist after hearing these words?

**Rethink “sick days.”** If you have cancer, no one says, “Let’s just push through” or “Can you learn to deal with it?” They recognize that it’s an illness and you’ll need to take time off to treat it. If you have the flu, your manager will tell you to go home and rest. But few people in business would react to emotional outbursts or other signs of stress, anxiety, or manic behavior in the same way. We need to get more comfortable with the idea of suggesting and requesting days to focus on improving mental as well as physical health.

**Encourage open and honest conversations.** It’s important to create safe spaces for people to talk about their own challenges, past and present, without fear of being called “unstable” or passed up for the next big project or promotion. Employees shouldn’t fear that they will be judged or excluded if they open up in this way. Leaders can set the tone for this by sharing their own experiences, as we’ve done, or stories of other people who have struggled with mental health issues, gotten help and resumed successful careers. They should also explicitly encourage everyone to speak up when feeling overwhelmed or in need.

**Be proactive.** Not all stress is bad, and people in high-pressure careers often grow accustomed to it or develop coping mechanisms. However, prolonged unmanageable stress can contribute to worsening symptoms of mental illness. How can managers ensure their employees are finding the right balance? By offering access to programs, resources, and education on stress management and resilience-building. In our marketplace survey on employee burnout, nearly 70 percent of respondents said that their employers were not doing enough to prevent or alleviate burnout. Bosses need to do a better job of helping their employees connect to resources before stress leads to more serious problems.

**Train people to notice and respond.** Most offices keep a medical kit around in case someone needs a bandage or an aspirin. We’ve also begun to train our people in Mental Health First Aid, a national program proven to increase people’s ability to recognize the signs of someone who may be struggling with a mental health challenge and connect them to support resources. Through role plays and other activities, they offer guidance in how to listen non-judgmentally, offer reassurance, and assess the risk of suicide or self-harm when, for example, a colleague is suffering a panic attack or reacting to a traumatic event. These can be difficult, emotionally charged conversations, and they can come at unexpected times, so it’s important to be ready for them.

When your people are struggling, you want them to be able to open up and ask for help. These five strategies can help any boss or organization create a culture that ceases to stigmatize mental illness.
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