Supporting Mental Health:

Diverse Employees, Diverse Needs

by / **Nick Taylor, Ph.D.**

Factors such as stigma and lack of access to services contribute to poorer mental health outcomes for employees in underrepresented groups, including racial minorities. The first step to address these challenges is to create a psychologically healthy workplace.

The working population is more diverse now than ever—and as employers focus on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), the face of the workforce will continue to more accurately reflect the diversity of the human race.

Amid this shift, employers need to be aware of the mental health challenges that minority and underrepresented groups may face.

This article will discuss why and how these workers experience different mental health issues when compared with other employees. It also will describe the role employers can play in addressing these challenges, which occur both in and out of the workplace.

Mental Health Disparities

The American Psychiatric Association (APA) points out that minority groups often experience poorer mental health outcomes compared with majority groups because of factors including a lack of access to high-quality mental health care services, cultural stigma surrounding mental health care, discrimination and overall lack of awareness about mental health.[1]

The APA identified 12 underrepresented groups—including racial minorities, people in the LGBTQ community and others—and highlighted the mental health disparities they may face on account of their differences from the majority.

Minorities may encounter another mental health challenge specifically related to the workplace. *Subjective discrimination* at work—exclusion, marginalization, disempowerment, or judgmental or stigmatizing attitudes toward someone because they are in a group that may not be perceived as part of the majority—also has a detrimental effect on mental health.

Discrimination can also be deeply embedded in organizational structures and practices. Not only does this affect the mental health and well-being of a workforce, but it can be a sign of unhealthy workplace cultures and, unsurprisingly, affect employee performance.

Research shows that social circumstances that promote a lack of trust, injustice and feelings of low self-worth can have pervasive negative effects on mental and physical health.[2]

The Disproportionate Impact of Mental Health Challenges on Diverse Employees

Just under one in five (18%) U.S. adults have a diagnosable mental disorder, according to the National Institute of Mental Health.[3] By comparison, here are rates among various minority groups, based on research reported by the APA.

- Women who identify as bisexual have lifetime rates of 58.7% for mood disorders (compared with 30.5% for heterosexual women) and 57.8% for anxiety disorders (compared with 31.3% for heterosexual women).[4]
- LGBTQ individuals are more than twice as likely as heterosexual men and women to be diagnosed with a mental health disorder in their lifetime and 2.5 times more likely to experience depression, anxiety and substance misuse.[5]
- Only one in three African Americans who needs mental health care receives it.[6]
- Among Hispanics with a diagnosed mental health disorder, fewer than one in 11 seek help from a mental health care specialist, and fewer than one in five contact a general health care provider.[7]

The APA reports that the consequences of mental illness in minorities may be longer lasting than for nonminority groups. For example, people who identify as being of two or more races are the most likely to report mental illness within the past year compared with any other race/ethnic group.[8]

Research shows that a lack of cultural understanding by health care pro-

takeaways

- Minority groups often experience poorer mental health outcomes compared with majority groups because of factors including a lack of access to high-quality mental health care services, cultural stigma surrounding mental health care, discrimination and an overall lack of awareness about mental health.
- Subjective discrimination at work also can have a detrimental effect on mental health.
- Common barriers to accessing mental health care for minority populations include lack of diversity and cultural competence among health care providers as well as distrust in the health care system.
- Employers can improve mental health outcomes for employees who are members of diverse ethnic, racial or gender groups by creating a psychologically healthy workplace.
- Leadership must be involved in these efforts in order to succeed.

viders is one reason for underdiagnosis and misdiagnosis of mental illness among people from racially or ethnically diverse populations.[9] Following are six of the most common barriers to accessing mental health care for minority populations.

1. Mental illness stigma, which is often greater among minority populations (which can mean they're less likely to seek help)
2. Lack of diversity among mental health care providers (which likely includes those working in employer-based employee assistance programs (EAPs) or health plans)
3. Lack of *culturally competent* (those with the ability to effectively deliver health care services that meet the social, cultural and linguistic needs of patients) health care providers (or the same lack of cultural competency among managers or human resources (HR) leaders)
4. Language barriers (such as between employees and their managers, the HR team and health care providers)
5. Distrust in the health care system (despite employees having access to employer-based health care coverage)
6. Inadequate support for mental health service in safety-net settings (e.g., for uninsured hourly or part-time workers or other vulnerable employees, or not having a proactive, prevention-based employee mental wellness program)

How Employers Can Help

Create a Psychologically Healthy Workplace

Employees who are members of diverse ethnic, racial or gender groups often experience a double dose of stigmatization. First, they may be stigmatized because of their identity. Then, if they experience symptoms of mental illness, individuals can experience further discrimination because of the stigma around mental health.

The first step that employers can take is creating a psychologically healthy workplace—for everyone. *Psychological safety* means that every employee can bring their whole self to work without fear of negative consequences. It means that employees believe that no one will be punished, judged or humiliated for speaking up with their ideas, questions, concerns or mistakes. For example, an employee feeling overwhelmed with the amount of work on their plate would feel comfortable speaking up if they are stressed about meeting a deadline. And if that employee has an idea to help manage their workload, such as suggesting asynchronous communication to reduce the amount of their time spent in meetings, it would be met with a positive reaction and discussion.

Following are questions employers can ask to determine whether they have a psychologically healthy workplace.

1. **Mental health and safety**
   - Are mental health and well-being openly spoken about, regardless of race, ethnicity or gender identification?
   - Are leaders asking employees how they're feeling on a regular basis, such as during recurring one-on-one meetings or when reviewing work?
   - Are policies about mental health and well-being accessible to all employees?
   - Is there a culture of openness and trust? Do staff members feel safe expressing concerns, asking for help or sharing ideas without fearing harassment or reprimand (such as microaggressions, gaslighting or exclusion from communication channels)?
   - Is communication clear? Are roles and responsibilities well-defined?
   - Is harassment, bullying, and racial or gender profiling identified and addressed quickly and effectively?
   - Is support available for employees who feel they've been treated unfairly or improperly because of their race, ethnicity or gender identity? Are there clear policies, and are employees encouraged to use that support system?

2. **Employee involvement**
   - Are employees involved in decision making in equal, inclusive ways?
   - Do employees have equal autonomy?
   - Are there shared company values and vision, regardless of race, ethnicity or gender identification? A shared vision is one that all employees can identify with and that can be acted on from different perspectives. Shared values should impact not just the organization but the economic and social conditions in the communities in which it operates. For example, organizations should commit to caring not just about the quality of work but also about people who produce the work and those who benefit from it.

3. **Growth and development**
   - Are skills sharing and training supported for everyone?
   - Are there opportunities for learning regardless of language, race, ethnicity or gender barriers?
   - Is curiosity encouraged—by everyone? Is no question a stupid question? Organizations can help foster curiosity by encouraging and providing resources for all employees to pursue learning or skills attainment, based on their interests, and rewarding and celebrating milestones, innovations and knowledge sharing.
4. **Recognition**
   - Is feedback given, and is it constructive?
   - Do all staff members feel equally valued?
   - Are people rewarded for their contributions?

Being successful at these efforts requires leadership involvement. According to a Harvard Business Review Analytical Services survey, organizations drive DEI as a strategic priority from the top.[10] They put a senior leader in charge of DEI efforts, but they also share accountability for DEI outcomes more broadly across the organization than other companies do.

Kathi Enderes, a senior vice president with the Josh Bersin Company, said in the survey report that when a CEO sets the strategy and frequently communicates DEI progress, a company is 6.3 times more likely to have a diverse leadership team and is also more likely to be a leader in its industry segment.[11]

If organizations discover that the answer to many of these questions is no, they can begin to work on creating psychological safety. That begins with developing a culture of openness and understanding. Following these steps can help.

- **Lead by example.** Share relatable moments of vulnerability with employees, what actions were taken to overcome challenges and new knowledge that helped. It's important to do this publicly, in both broad employee channels (such as all-hands meetings or company newsletters) as well as amongst smaller groups (such as team meetings).
- **Encourage active listening.** Give employees undivided attention, confirm that their concerns and frustrations are being heard correctly, and openly collaborate on what next steps could be taken to improve. This could be facilitated in recurring meetings, where all employees are invited to discuss a chosen topic and action items are put into place.
- **Create a safe environment.** Always celebrate achievements by acknowledging the work of all team members versus singling out or forgetting individuals who contributed. When discussing or inquiring on sensitive topics, provide the means for employees to share feedback anonymously.
- **Develop an open mindset.** Be willing to understand or consider other perspectives, opinions and ideas, even if they conflict with existing personal beliefs. Develop and demonstrate open-mindedness by asking questions and seeking information to learn more. For example, events like cultural holidays give teams the opportunity to grasp an understanding of traditions or historical differences from their colleagues that may be unfamiliar to them.
- **Treat others as they'd like to be treated.** Don't assume that everyone wants to be treated the same. Instead, encourage employees to communicate their needs to feel respected, to feel comfortable speaking up when a boundary is crossed, and to listen and react positively to each other's needs (condemn hurtful jokes or aggression).
- **Be human, be authentic.** Set a positive tone that embraces imperfection. One way to do this is to share with employees work experiences that resulted in moments of growth, even if they are embarrassing, or admit to a lack of understanding or expertise at the time.
- **Be humble.** Ensure that feedback between employees and leadership and between team members is two-way and frequent by putting surveys or social tools in place that help to easily facilitate conversations.
- **Address discrimination and bias.** Regularly seek guidance or consultation to ensure that internal policies are up to date with modern antidiscrimination practices. Provide resources for education to raise awareness of bias and for training to take countermeasures. As a first step, the organization can take free and accessible online implicit bias courses and assessments and hold open discussions to share individual findings.

In addition, employers should consider implementing digital tools designed to support workplace well-being. Workplace mental health platforms can help mitigate issues with health care accessibility by giving all employees—re-

gardless of geography or job role—a single access point to resources including:

- Measurement tools to understand where they lie on the spectrum of mental health at any given time
- Educational content to gain knowledge around mental health and how to recognize when one's own mental health is changing
- Exercise or training content to better manage mental health conditions and develop healthier habits
- Easy access to employer-provided resources for intervention, such as EAPs providers or therapy.

Conclusion

As employers continue to leverage diversity initiatives to remove barriers to company growth and increase the value of their employer brand, leaders must also be prepared to consider stark disparities in mental health circumstances for more diverse teams.

Encouragingly, employers see a return of $4 for every dollar invested in mental health treatment, according to research released this spring from the U.S. National Safety Council and NORC at the University of Chicago, a nonpartisan research organization.[12] To further support their entire workforce, employers now have the opportunity to reassess how they approach employee mental well-being for every segment of their population. ⓑ

bio

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Endnotes

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