

Taking Care of Yourself, Your Employees, and Your Business
10 Tips for Mental Health and Wellness for Business Owners

Heatlamp sat down with Amanda Porter, MSN, APRN, FNP-C, PMHNP-BC, CARN-AP, Psychiatric Nurse Practitioner and Integrative Mental Health Practitioner with the Lindner Center of HOPE in Cincinnati, Ohio, to discuss ways business owners and employees can better practice mental health and wellness in their organizations.

When we're discussing mental health and wellbeing, we're talking not only about the cultural environment but the physical environment as well. Not only do we want to encourage business owners and employers to implement healthy practices and initiatives in their organizations, we want to create an environment where people feel confident and safe discussing topics related to mental health and wellbeing.

Tip No. 1: First and foremost, the business owner or employer should model the practice of wellness themselves.

If a manager or owner is observed by their staff to not be setting good boundaries with their time or having tense conversations with language that's not indicative of a person who is appreciative of mental wellness issues, it's going to have a trickle-down effect. Employees will not feel comfortable approaching that person with their own mental health issues if the leader seems like they don't have their own mental health under control. As a business owner, manager, or leader, practice mindfulness and try to identify the underlying triggers for your own stress so you can better manage them and be a model for mental health and wellbeing to your staff.

It's also important for an employer to be constantly checking their body language. If anyone has ever had the experience of talking to a manager who might be verbally saying one thing, but their body is saying completely different, in congruence that can be really difficult for someone to interpret the real message. Be mindful of your body language and posture and be gentle with your verbal tone. This all goes into being an approachable person for your employees who may be struggling with a mental health issue to foster meaningful dialogue.

Tip No. 2: Communicate mental wellness issues with employees.

Communication is so important, not only in discussing mental wellness issues with staff but also giving them tools to facilitate communication. A good practice is to integrate into your internal communications, intranet, or even creating an email campaign that touches on very basic mental wellness issues and practices. This can open the door for employees to be more comfortable approaching leaders about mental health dialogue or symptoms they may be experiencing if they feel their boss is sensitive to the topic and promoting mental wellness.

As humans, we interpret the world in different ways and often struggle to communicate effectively with one another. We have a lot of cognitive distortions so it's important that we make an extra effort to communicate well with others and not make assumptions. Brene Brown talks about what she calls "rumble language," or conversation starters that a person can use to improve their communication style and resonance. Statement prompts and questions to start a dialogue – such as "I'm curious about..." or "Tell me more about..." – creates space for two people to discuss the differences in how they're being heard and interpreted and presents opportunity for correction and understanding.

Tip No. 3: Enact a 10-foot rule in your workplace.

One way to help infuse mental wellness practice into the cultural environment of the workplace is to create a 10-foot rule. If you come within 10 feet of any human being, you must make eye contact and smile at that person. You don't have to say anything or make small talk. But this simple act goes a long way to promote a sense of kindness and teamwork in the workplace.

Tip No. 4: Encourage mindfulness practices as part of the normal workday.

Business owners and leaders can create a culture of mental wellness in their organizations by encouraging mindfulness practice as part of the normal workday. If you start your week or day with a regular team meeting, take a minute to do some breathing exercises together. Take a moment to be quiet and still together, or maybe even do some grounding techniques. When the practices are led by the business owner or leader, it shows your staff that you're prioritizing mental wellness.

Tip No. 5: Promote frequent breaks during the workday.

It's incredibly important for mental wellness for employees to get up from their desks, stretch, get some steps in, get that blood flowing, rather than remaining sedentary every day. Constantly being tied to a desk will only increase rates of burnout and often causes physical muscular issues. Anyone who suffers chronic pain will tell you they also struggle with depression - those two things go hand in hand. We can easily combat any physical medical issues by making sure that a person is moving their body in a meaningful way several times a day.

Tip No. 6: Create psychological safety with vulnerability.

As an employer or business owner, if you want to create space for your employees to feel comfortable approaching you with their mental health issues, you yourself need to be vulnerable. That goes back to modeling wellness yourself. One way to create psychological safety is to model vulnerability yourself. That invites others to be vulnerable, open and honest with you right back. Psychological safety in a workplace ensures your employees feel comfortable approaching you with their personal struggles. And consequently, making accommodations as much as possible, whether that's flexible work hours, working from home, or other things someone might need to get through a situation – these go a long way for a staff member who might be struggling.

Tip No. 7: Take into consideration what type of workspace each employee prefers to suit their work style.

Open concept work environments, where no one has their own space, just groupings of tables in one large room, have been popular probably because they promote a sense of collaboration and teamwork. But for somebody who struggles with anxiety or ADHD and they're very distractible or maybe they have sensory issues, throwing a person like that into an open concept workspace is really going to impede their productivity and their ability to get their work done. A business owner should take into consideration that some people prefer to work in cubicles or a more private setting, as it is a tool to limit their distractions and get their work done in a timely manner. Everyone has their own style of working, and asking your employees individually what type of workspace they would prefer rather than assuming one thing works for everyone, goes a long way in creating a culture of mental wellness.

Create a clutter-free, soothing environment with simple design for office spaces, neutral color and décor, as much natural lighting as possible, and using table lamps instead of those harsh overhead lights. All of these contribute to a work environment that puts someone's soul at peace and at rest so they can focus better, feel less anxious, be more productive, and get their work done.

Also consider the seating options available for employees. Some people have difficulty staying in an uncomfortable chair all day long, some prefer to sit on the floor, some prefer to stand or even have flexible seating and work options available to them. Rather than promoting a feeling of tension by demanding that everyone sit at a table in a chair with very fixed posture, encourage relaxed posturing and movement and take frequent breaks (especially if you're in a marathon meeting) to help everyone feel more relaxed, less anxious, and less inclined to burn out.

Tip No. 8: Take your meetings outside!

Having meetings outdoors as much as possible is really impactful for mental wellness. Keep that in mind if there is any outdoor space where you can have a meeting instead of sitting in a conference room that might have this feeling of drudgery. Fresh air, sunshine, greenery, and the sounds of nature contribute so much health and wellness. I imagine that meetings would go much better if they took place outdoors in the sunshine!

Tip No. 9: Be aware of stressors and triggers, and frequently talk with your staff about how to mitigate those for better mental wellness.

1. Overwhelmingly, I see people getting tripped up by a lack of time management skills. The typical worker who sleeps in until the last minute and leaves themselves no buffer in the morning for any sort of unexpected stressor that might arrive, whether it's a late school bus, lost keys, unfinished laundry, or anything of that nature. I would love to see people live a life with more of a buffer and improve their time management skills, so they don't feel so overwhelmed when last minute stressors creep up.
2. Commuting in gridlock traffic is definitely a stressor and can often put a person in a cranky mood upon arrival to their destination. One way I cope with my commute is to make it as productive as possible. Try to make it peaceful and do a lot of deep breathing. You can keep your eyes open and remain still by doing some diaphragmatic breathing. Focus on your posture – if you find that you tend to slouch or lean, that can lead to some backpain issues throughout the day. Take care of yourself physically during your commute and try to be productive with what you're listening to. I subscribe to a number of podcasts, so I try to make my morning commute a time of learning, then I walk into the office feeling like I've already accomplished something and have started the day off on the right foot.
3. Good sleep hygiene is paramount, especially in managing outside stressors or triggers. A lot of people wrongfully assume that sleep is something that should just come naturally to a human and we don't have to put any work or effort into it, and that's not true at all. Sleep is a sacred act. It needs to be protected and preserved. It is paramount to our overall mental wellness. Having a structured day as much as possible is going to help us manage stressors and triggers. Our brains delight in rhythm, not chaos. If you have a well-structured rhythm to your day it will make it go much easier.
4. Having a clutter-free environment is paramount to coping with any stressors or triggers. Having a cluttered and chaotic environment communicates to your brain that this is a time to be stressful or to be stressed out. Nobody wants to feel overwhelmed by a cluttered environment, so keeping things as clutter free as possible is a good recommendation for helping achieve good mental health. That applies to your car, your work environment, your desk or workspace, your home environment... anywhere you are.

Tip No. 10: Observe triggers and behaviors in employees that signal potential issues of mental health and engage meaningful conversations to resolve the issue.

Ultimately, any departure from normal behavior that an employer has observed in an employee thus far would be cause for concern. Very often when someone is bogged down with their mental health symptoms, they feel angry, they feel restless, there's a change in their overall demeanor, and that can manifest in tardiness or chronic absenteeism, disorganization, forgetfulness, even sluggishness. All of these things would be big red flags for a business owner to watch out for.

If you do observe these things, take the employee aside, and in a gentle manner, NOT an accusatory manner, check in with that person to see what's going on and ask them how they're doing. Ask, "How are you doing REALLY?" When you add the 'really' to the end of that question it implies that you don't want a

shallow response like “No, I’m fine, I’m fine...” You’re hopefully looking for honest information that would lead you to a solution to help put this employee’s mind at ease and provide any mental health solutions that are in your capacity to help with. Make “I” statements in a gentle and soothing tone to open conversation and help them feel comfortable opening up, such as “This is what I’m concerned with...”, “This is what I’m observing...”, etc. And they may not be so forthcoming with what’s going on so don’t take it personally. There is still a great deal of stigma surrounding mental health issues, and a lot of employees are fearful about being honest about their illness in a workplace setting because they’re probably worried about losing their job or being judged or being passed over for a promotion.

If there is any way that an owner can incorporate some sort of EAP counseling program into the benefits that they’re offering their employees, I would highly encourage considering that option. It might sometimes be costly but if a business owner is willing to make the investment for their staff, in the long run they would definitely see a responsiveness and a stability in their staff.

One of my favorite statements from Brene Brown is the concept that you can either spend a reasonable amount of time managing emotions, or you can spend an unreasonable amount of time managing behaviors. For an employer who is expecting a certain type of behavior from their employees, what you really need to do is consider the emotions that are driving that behavior, and address those emotions. It all starts with having a culture and environment that promotes and encourages good mental health and wellness.

About the Lindner Center of HOPE

Lindner Center of HOPE in Mason, Ohio, is a comprehensive, not-for-profit mental health center providing nationally recognized, patient-centered, scientifically advanced care for individuals suffering with mental illness. In partnership with UC Health and the UC College of Medicine, Lindner Center of HOPE offers a true, elevated system of mental health care in Greater Cincinnati. Lindner Center of HOPE is accredited by The Joint Commission for Hospital and Behavioral Health Care. Visit: <https://lindnercenterofhope.org/>

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