

STRIVING FOR MENTAL HEALTH EXCELLENCE IN THE WORKPLACE



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CEOs Advancing Health Equity is a group of executives from some of the nation's largest non-governmental, nonprofit organizations who joined forces during the COVID-19 pandemic to raise awareness and improve health equity, with a focus on vaccines. In response to the pandemic, these CEOs are calling for a workplace culture shift to address mental health stigma and support employee well-being.



5 ways to improve employee mental health

Positive and supportive workplace practices can boost employee mental health, company morale, and your bottom line.

America's mental health is in crisis. Close to two thirds of adults (63%) surveyed in [APA's 2022 Stress in America poll](#) said their life has been forever changed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many reported worse mental health, lower physical activity, disturbed sleep, and increased reliance on unhealthy habits—all of which have an impact on employees' health and well-being, the workplace environment, and productivity.

As a leader in your organization, you're likely invested in the well-being of your employees. The workplace—where many spend the majority of their waking hours each week—is often the most structured and controlled environment in workers' lives, and it is often their primary means of social and emotional support. As such, the workplace is a critical setting for understanding and supporting mental health. Basic care for employees' psychological well-being is the fundamental expectation—aka table stakes—for today's competitive and successful businesses.

Equipping workers to manage daily stress and handle the inevitable challenges that affect their mental health costs money, time, and energy. But evidence shows that the cost of failing to support employees' psychological well-being is often far higher.

Employees with high levels of stress are more likely to miss work or to show lower engagement and commitment while at work, which can negatively affect your organization's bottom line. Even before the pandemic, employee stress levels were high. A [2017 analysis](#) found the estimated cost of job stress nationwide may be as much as \$187 billion, with 70% to 90% of those losses resulting from declines in productivity. And the pandemic has only worsened the situation.

Mental health conditions, sometimes incited or exacerbated by stress-inducing or unsupportive work environments, can be just as costly to employers. The [American Psychiatric Association Foundation's Center for Workplace Mental Health](#) reports that the cost of depression alone to the U.S. economy is more than \$210 billion annually in absenteeism and lost productivity. Accord-

ing to the [Integrated Benefits Institute](#), depression costs employers \$17 per employee per year in disability leave payments. People with anxiety and depression are also [more likely to develop](#) potentially costly problems with their physical health.

Positive and supportive workplace practices, on the other hand, can boost employee physical and psychological health, company morale—and your bottom line. [APA's 2021 Work and Well-being Survey](#) found that people who feel tense or stressed during the workday are more than 3 times as likely to say they plan to look for another job, while employees who feel supported are more likely to stay, reducing the costs of employee turnover. Fostering a positive work environment and making mental health resources available can also help attract top talent to your organization—especially important during the current labor shortage.

Even if you're already committed to protecting and enhancing your employees' mental health, it can often be difficult to identify practical ways to take action and enact meaningful ways to make a difference. Applied psychological research in work settings strongly supports five components that are essential to these efforts.

1 **Train your managers to promote health and well-being**

Your organization's leadership needs to be on board to create a psychologically healthy culture. Managers and supervisors who work directly with employees are key to implementing and sustaining your policies and procedures and creating a generally supportive environment. Midlevel managers are often the gatekeepers of employee well-being—they determine whether employees can actually utilize the benefits and resources your organization offers. Without their buy-in, these opportunities are moot for many staff.

[Research](#) demonstrates the impact of supervisor and manager training in employee wellness and mental health. Teaching supervisors how to support employees and recognize the signs of stress and mental health issues helps reduce turnover and absenteeism.



Consider training your managers in skill sets that support mental health and positive relationships. [Research](#) shows leaders with even 3 hours of [mental health awareness training \(MHAT\)](#) report improved attitudes about mental health and a higher motivation to promote mental health at work.

Educating managers in respecting work-life harmony—essentially, why it's important for them to view their employees as whole people with complex lives—can help employees better manage their work and life responsibilities and goals and improve job performance and employee satisfaction. A [study](#) on the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) [Total Worker Health](#) program showed that leadership training improved employees' personal and job well-being (i.e., the program increased job satisfaction and reduced turnover intentions).

Training managers in physical- and mental-health-promoting practices can also help them lead by example. One [study](#) found that U.S. Army leaders who were randomly assigned to training about the importance of sleep not only improved their own sleep habits but also passed on those improvements to their soldiers as well. Other work [shows](#) leadership training that includes sleep promotion can reduce turnover and improve job satisfaction.

Equity, diversity, and inclusion trainings are also connected to supporting employee mental health. They require leaders and managers to understand and carry out their organizations inclusive policies and practices, welcome diverse points of view, and foster a psychologically safe

workplace. A welcoming and safe work climate builds trust among leadership and employees, contributes to job satisfaction, and helps minimize job-related stress.

Also, it's not enough to offer resources without connecting the dots. Organizations should coach managers and supervisors to understand the range of health benefits and programs and to nurture their employees to access those resources.

2

Increase employees' options for where, when, and how they work

COVID-19 has brought unexpected responsibilities and unprecedented stressors into employees' lives, and the workplace must adapt accordingly. According to the [APA's 2021 Work and Well-being Survey](#), 34% of employees say that flexible hours would help their mental health. Additionally, according to an [October 2021 Gallup poll](#), 54% of employees working remotely said they would like to divide their time between home and office and 37% say they want to keep working from home full time.

Research has long supported providing employees with a degree of control over their work environments. An individual's [sense of autonomy](#) has been shown, for example, to increase their motivation and performance, which can directly impact an organization's bottom line. Relatedly, [survey data](#) suggest that organizations that are investing in remote-friendly (i.e., more autonomous) work are viewed as creating more psychologically safe and inclusive work environments.

Virtual or hybrid work can provide flexibility for people with caregiving responsibilities, bypass location bias, and even facilitate opportunities for employees of all levels to share ideas by taking meetings out of the often-intimidating conference room setting. But virtual and hybrid work may not be the solution for everyone. The value of a virtual or hybrid approach may depend on an employee's role, personality, current life circumstances, and work style. Similarly, flexible work schedules may be important for some but not all employees or may be important to a particular employee at one point in time but not at another point in time. The key is to give

employees the agency to select from among an array of reasonable options that balance business needs with their personal circumstances.

Take a critical look at what you require from your staff and prioritize effectiveness. Ensure that principles of flexibility and support for effective use of such flexibility are infused throughout the work environment, for instance by ensuring your managers understand the importance of flexibility for themselves and their direct reports. [Research](#) suggests that workers with supervisors who prioritize family/work harmony experience greater job satisfaction and are less likely to leave their jobs (and incite costly turnover expenses). Agencies should allow employees to choose from among reasonable work options that balance business needs and employee well-being.

3

Reexamine health insurance policies with a focus on employee mental health

For many employees, benefits that promote well-being are more important than ever. According to a [February 2022 Gallup Poll](#), 64% of U.S. employees ranked pay and benefits as very important when deciding whether to take a job with a different organization. Further, 61% cite work-life balance and better personal well-being as "very important." Employees are looking to employers for support. [APA's 2021 Work and Well-being Survey](#) found that 87% of employees say that certain actions from their employer would help their mental health.

[Research](#) supports the connection between mental health disorders and decreased work productivity. Treatment for conditions like depression is significantly associated with improved productivity.

Providing a range of policies, resources, and management trainings that foster a healthy and flexible work culture are fundamental strategies for supporting employee mental health. Occupational psychology considers these primary intervention strategies aimed at preventing major stress and mental health conditions. But even with excellent preventive strategies in place, mental health conditions will arise, and employees will

need support, making comprehensive health insurance benefits that cover psychological services essential.

At a minimum, your organization's health insurance benefits should reflect the [Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act](#), which requires health insurers to provide coverage for mental health, behavioral health, and substance use disorders that is comparable to their physical health coverage. This law applies to all commercial insurance plans, union-negotiated plans, and the Federal Employees Health Benefits Program.

If your organization's insurance coverage already aligns with federal policy, consider enhancing your plan to remove both perceived and actual barriers to employees looking for psychological support. For example, choose a plan with out-of-network mental health benefits so employees can access clinicians who may not be in network with your provider. You should also ensure that mental health benefits and resources are easily accessible (i.e., easy to locate), understandable, and support employees across the continuum of mental wellness.

APA offers a [guide for employers](#) on what they need to know about mental health parity laws.

4

Listen to what your employees need and use their feedback to evolve

Forty-eight percent of employees say lack of involvement in decisions contributes to stress in the workplace (APA, Oct. 2021). In fact, a robust [body of research](#) suggests that when employees feel they have a voice in organizational decisions, they're more likely to remain in those jobs. [Research shows](#) that the psychological benefits are especially great when leaders not only solicit employee feedback but explicitly use it to inform their decisions.

As one example, you can ask staff for their input on company-wide policies. Use tools like anonymous surveys, town hall suggestion boxes, and focus groups to gather feedback and create specific opportunities to listen to employees of diverse backgrounds. Then, share the results in a transparent way, develop a plan to address one or more of the issues identified, and take action. It's not

enough to use employee feedback—you must communicate any positive policy changes you've made based on employee input.

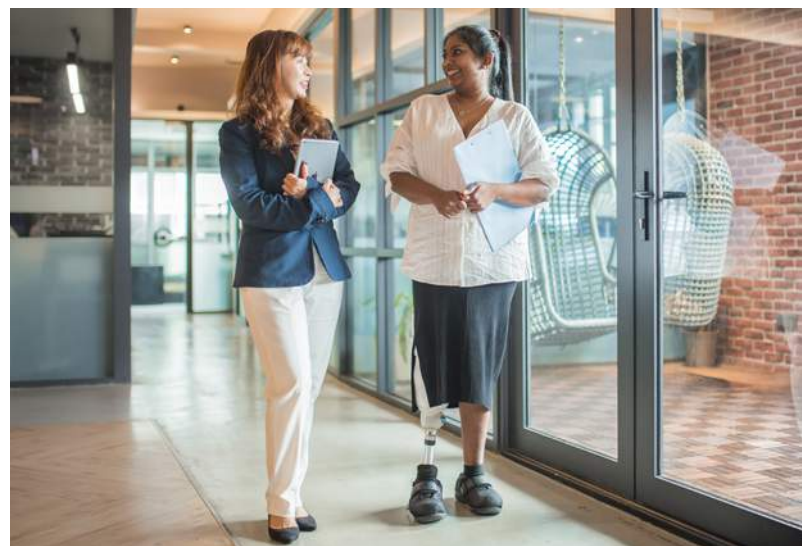
Proactively communicating support to your employees also matters. [Survey data](#) during the COVID-19 pandemic found that employees value optimistic, supportive messages from senior leadership. In companies where CEOs regularly sent encouraging company-wide emails, employees reported higher rates of engagement and a deepened commitment to the organization. All-hands meetings, video messages, and social media can be effective ways to communicate empathy and support.

5

Take a critical look at equity, diversity, and inclusion policies

Providing an inclusive and equitable work environment is integral to fostering a psychologically healthy workplace and supporting the mental well-being of employees. Experiences of interpersonal and organizational inequity and discrimination are highly connected to stress and can propel people to leave their jobs.

[APA's 2021 Work and Well-being Survey](#) found that Black, Hispanic, and LGBTQ+ workers, along with employees with disabilities, are more likely to plan on leaving their jobs—especially if they've experienced discrimination in the workplace.



[Data](#) are clear that companies with high levels of diversity perform better, especially when management is diverse. [Research](#) has found that companies with diverse management tend to be more productive, by up to \$1,590 per employee each year. Policies that effectively ensure equity among all employees encourage the participation of more diverse voices and the generation of innovative ideas, both of which can benefit overall organizational health. Diversity is not just a “good thing to do” but necessary to help businesses thrive. When employees of different abilities or socioeconomic backgrounds feel they have equal access to job promotions and other related incentives, they’ll be more likely to contribute meaningfully while at work. Provide practical tools and resources to develop equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) skills and knowledge and to foster inclusivity, such as [APA’s inclusive language guidelines](#).

Evaluate your company policies and programs to ensure best and current practices around EDI, including supporting people of color, LGBTQ+ populations, and people with disabilities. Engage advisers and consultants with relevant knowledge and expertise to guide your review process.

Consider conducting an audit of your organization’s ongoing EDI work. An audit helps identify areas of high engagement as well as gaps in your EDI policies. It can also inform your organization’s EDI goals and determine where to make changes and improvements.

Revisit your recruitment policies to include diverse areas and universities to ensure you are seeking out talent with a variety of experiences and from a variety of backgrounds. If you are enacting company-wide diversity initiatives, ensure that C-suite leaders participate alongside managers and other employees to encourage and demonstrate buy-in at the top of the organization.

As you implement components like those listed here, keep in mind the difference between what it takes to launch a short-term initiative and to sustain long-term change. Read on to discover additional actions you can take and to learn about other high-performing companies, how they got started, and the positive changes in employee well-being and organizational performance that have resulted from their focus on mental health in the workplace.





Leveling up: Supporting employees' psychological well-being for maximum returns

Even with foundational steps in place, psychological science can provide answers to take your organization to the next level.

Enhancing your employees' mental well-being is a talent management issue. It requires strategic investments of time and money. And the steps you take to better support your employees at work can empower them to thrive in other areas of their lives, thus ensuring the long-term health and success of your employees and your organization.

You are committed to the essential work to create a mentally healthy and welcoming company culture. Now, you're ready for the next level. Here are five additional steps you can take to improve employee mental health beyond table stakes—or the minimum offering—for the good of your people and your organization.

TAKE YOUR EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM A STEP FURTHER

Having mental health resources is one thing. Making it easy to access mental health resources is another. Thirty-seven percent of employees say that employer-provided mental health resources can contribute to a better work environment (APA, October 2021). Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) are a valuable tool to help achieve this. However, while [research](#) shows EAP services can successfully improve a range of employee

issues associated with lower productivity, a [low percentage](#) of employees use them.

Unused EAP services can be costly to both workers and organizations. Data from the [National Bureau of Economic Research](#) suggest that employees who don't use their well-being programs (such as EAPs) tend to require higher rates of medical care; annual medical costs are about \$1,400 higher for such employees (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2020). These costs build

upon the effects of unaddressed mental health challenges on employee productivity and performance.

To maximize employee engagement in the EAP and encourage positive outcomes, regularly audit your EAP to ensure you are providing the maximum benefit for your workers. This includes evaluating your EAP providers to verify they follow best practices and draw on current research.

- **CONSIDER** launching a cross-departmental benefits committee to review EAP offerings and ensure a diverse group of mental health professionals is enlisted to meet the needs of employees with different identities and backgrounds. Ask the benefits committee to find creative ways to remove the stigma around seeking mental health services and encourage employees to take advantage of EAP offerings. This is an opportunity to give employees a voice and then directly respond to their needs.
- **USE** multiple methods to communicate to employees what services the EAP provides, what topics EAP professionals can cover (i.e., stress, mental health, finances, family issues) and that EAP services are available and confidential. It's important to use messaging that normalizes the use of mental health benefits and to remove any possible barriers for employees.
- **RETHINK** how you promote your EAP, so information is easy to find and understand. AI-driven survey tools can guide your employees to appropriate resources for their unique scenarios. Remove barriers by ensuring flexibility so employees can use EAP services during the workday and not be penalized for prioritizing their mental health.
- **COACH** your managers and supervisors on how to use well-being resources offered through the EAP so they are well-equipped to promote EAP resources.

OFFER MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID TRAINING TO ALL EMPLOYEES

Just as CPR helps people assist someone having a heart attack, [Mental Health First Aid \(MHFA\)](#) can help managers and supervisors assist someone experiencing a mental health or substance use challenge or crisis. MHFA is an evidence-based training administered by the [National Council for Mental Wellbeing](#) that teaches people how to identify, understand, and respond to signs of mental health issues and substance use challenges. [Scientific reviews](#) show the effectiveness of MHFA training in improving mental health literacy and support for those with mental health problems up to 6 months after training. [One analysis](#) revealed that MHFA increases mental health knowledge, decreases negative attitudes, and increases supportive behaviors toward individuals with mental health problems.

MHFA is not just for leaders and managers. According to the National Council for Mental Wellbeing, more than 2.6 million people across the United States have been trained in MHFA by a dedicated base of more than 15,000 instructors. Offering MHFA training to all employees equips your entire organization with mental health knowledge and fosters empathy and understanding.



INSTILL A SENSE OF BELONGING FOR EMPLOYEES OF ALL BACKGROUNDS

[Research](#) suggests there is a relationship between equity, diversity, inclusion (EDI), and organizational health. Fostering a welcoming and inclusive workplace helps employees feel a sense of belonging and contributes to a healthy work culture. Taking a multifaceted approach that engages employees across your organization reaffirms your organization's commitment to EDI while supporting employee well-being.

You can start by using inclusive terminology. Words matter. Psychological science shows that the language people use is critically important as individuals strive to create a more equitable, diverse, and inclusive world. In an effort to build a common vocabulary, APA introduced the [inclusive language guidelines](#), a place to find the most relevant language to use when communicating about EDI. This resource is available publicly to all organizations.

Employee resource groups (ERG) create a space for underrepresented employees to find one another, share common experiences, and seek advice. Typically organized around a shared identity, such as race, gender, or age, ERGs are a powerful addition to the workplace with many benefits to the organization, including creating greater inclusivity and higher retention of employees.

Recognize and [celebrate a variety of identities](#). Include important cultural and religious days to your organization's shared calendar. Be mindful of scheduling meetings, deadlines, and events on these days, even if they only impact some employees. [Kazoohr.com](#) provides a good starting point of dates to skip when scheduling meetings or events.

Be aware of unconscious bias in your organization and educate your entire team in the importance of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) initiatives. [Survey data](#) show unconscious bias training can be an effective way to improve team members' mindsets about the importance of EDI. When you're training team members about issues that might incite defensiveness, be aware of communication methods that support attitude changes. [Some experts](#) say that sharing messaging that explains we all have unconscious biases helps learners to avoid becoming defensive and rejecting the training.

Regularly reviewing your organization's hiring practices and ensuring equitable pay supports EDI and contributes to job satisfaction.

Finally, make sure your efforts are sustainable by promoting team buy-in. People may be more receptive to EDI initiatives when they know it's a long-term investment in your organization.

ENCOURAGE EMPLOYEES TO UNPLUG

Productivity is more complex than logging as many hours as possible. Encouraging employees to carve out time for their well-being not only protects their mental health but can also improve job performance. For example, workers who take short breaks throughout the day are more productive, have fewer health issues, and suffer lower rates of burnout ([Journal of Applied Psychology](#), Vol. 101, No. 2, 2016).



If employees feel they'll be reprimanded for missing work, they may continue working when they feel unwell, which is known as presenteeism. Presenteeism, in multiple [studies](#), is [associated](#) with worse health (and higher health care costs) along with productivity losses worse than if the employee had taken appropriate time off work.

Creating a culture where workers have access to paid time off—and, just as important, feel encouraged to take it—helps with [psychological recovery](#), which can enhance job performance later. [APA's 2018 Work and Well-Being Survey](#) found that taking time off helps work-

ers recover from stress and experience positive effects that improve their well-being and job performance, but for nearly two-thirds of working adults, the benefits of time away dissipate within a few days. The number of emails and impending workload people face post-vacation can make employees regret taking time off.

Company-wide mental health days, even if your organization has a generous PTO benefit, are an opportunity for the entire organization to unplug on the same day and for employees to truly focus on their well-being, not having to worry about catching up the following day. It's important for the CEO to communicate to all staff that the mental health day will only be effective if no one works or sends emails that day.

Another way to encourage self-care is by separating paid vacation days from paid sick time. According to 2021 data from the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), 35% of workers have not used paid time off for rest and relaxation since the start of the pandemic. Employees may hesitate to take days off for mental health if they're saving them for vacation or hesitate to plan more days off if they're worried about needing sick days in the future. Employees who worry about being perceived as less committed may not take vacations as readily. Encourage the use of vacation leave by taking time off yourself and encouraging managers to do the same.

When you're off the clock, lead by example. Research on [telepressure](#) has found that when leaders send emails outside normal hours, employees follow suit—even to the detriment of their well-being. Be wary of sending emails outside working hours and on vacation or sick time and clarify ahead of time with your organization what warrants a true business necessity for emailing outside of these windows. If you do need to send emails outside of hours, use the delayed send function in Outlook so your employees do not feel pressure to respond outside of work hours.



CONTINUE EVALUATING OUTCOMES

With any occupational communication open, whether via email, Slack or Microsoft Teams, ongoing staff conversations with leadership, and/or an employee intranet, and create channels for your managers to regularly share feedback.

Keep channels of both bottom-up and top-down communication open, whether via email, Slack or Microsoft Teams, ongoing staff conversations with leadership, and/or an employee intranet, and create channels for your managers to regularly share feedback.

Just as important, make changes if you aren't seeing positive results and as staff needs evolve. Your employees are the heartbeat of your organization, and your best resource for understanding how to improve the well-being of your business.



Considering digital mental health tools for your employees

Research and insights into using digital tools to bolster employee mental health and wellness.

Digital mental health tools—direct-to-consumer wellness such as phone apps and computer software—can be useful to fill the gaps in employee mental health needs. Whether employees use them in concert with an existing therapeutic relationship or as a stand-alone tool, they may benefit from the ease of accessibility. Digital mental health tools that utilize evidence-based interventions can be particularly useful at providing mental health education such as teaching coping skills and coaching relaxation and emotion regulation—valuable skills for the entire workforce, not just those in need of professional services.

Employers wishing to augment a robust mental health benefit—including coverage for therapy—are increasingly considering the addition of digital mental health tools for their employees.

DO THEY WORK?

Studies have repeatedly shown that telehealth treatment—e.g., therapy conducted over video call—is as effective as in-person treatment. However, the research on digital mental health tools is a little less straightforward. Because there is a wide range of offerings and approaches, overall efficacy can be difficult to assess. Yet, we have gained some key insights.

“A large number of randomized controlled trials have consistently shown that coached digital mental health treatments, offered through websites and apps, are effec-

tive in treating common mental health problems such as depression and anxiety,” said David Mohr, PhD, director of the Center for Behavioral Intervention Technologies at Northwestern University.

Coaching conducted by paraprofessionals (trained and supervised by a licensed clinician) usually helps users stay engaged with digital tools and can also include support around learning psychological skills. This type of coaching typically consists of contact via messaging and occasional brief phone calls.

The few studies that have compared coached digital mental health tools with psychotherapy show a similar magnitude of improvements in treatment of depression and anxiety.

Conversely, studies of fully automated digital tools (i.e., uncoached) have shown less-promising results.

“This is likely because large numbers of people do not stay engaged in digital mental health tools without coaching long enough to gain benefit,” said Mohr. “Thus, fully automated digital mental health tools may be effective for those who stay engaged with them, but the great majority will not stay engaged without a coach.”

The digital mental health tools available in the app store are unregulated; therefore, we see a high degree of variability in quality. So, whether coached or not, to be truly effective, it is crucial that digital tools utilize only evidence-based approaches.

Direct-to-consumer wellness apps are not to be confused with specific software-based therapeutic interventions known as “digital therapeutics”—which are regulated by the Food and Drug Administration (as “Software as a Medical Device”) with the expectation that they demonstrate a high degree of effectiveness.

While the consumer app industry is not regulated, there are tools to help sift through what is available. And there are reputable resources that provide expert review of consumer mental health apps, such as [One Mind PsyberGuide](#) for employers or APA’s own [Let’s Get Technical](#) column, which is geared toward mental health professionals.

OFFERING DIGITAL TOOLS TO EMPLOYEES

Employers are among the largest purchasers of digital mental health tools. Despite the potential for additional expense, there are benefits to consider.

Employees whose mental health needs are being met are more productive, more present, and more organizationally committed to their workplaces. So, up-front costs have great potential to yield savings over the longer term.

Digital mental health tools can reach individuals who might not otherwise engage in any mental or behavioral health treatment. And some tools can act as triage by helping to identify employees who need more personal-



ized care but might otherwise go untreated. Other digital tools can augment treatment already being provided at a relatively low cost.

Because digital mental health tools are a relatively recent phenomenon, there is no single method of providing them to your employees. Some employers include them as part of their health care benefits package. Others may merely suggest a particular app to their workers. Most insurance providers do not cover the general purchase/usage fees of mental health apps; however, some now include specific, recommended apps within their offerings. Employers considering a digital mental health tool for their workers should first consult with their existing insurance providers.

This landscape may change, however. Legislation is working its way through Congress to require Medicare and Medicaid coverage for digital therapeutics. Unlike more generalized mental health and wellness apps, digital therapeutics include specific software-based treatment interventions that are recommended by a health care professional within the framework of an existing therapeutic relationship. Although this coverage has not yet passed, the fact that it is being considered may indicate growing support for coverage of more generalized digital mental health tools.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Any mental health app you provide your employees should utilize methods that are backed by research, so look for the developer’s commitment to using evidence-based approaches. Also, match the purpose of the app

to best meet your employee needs (e.g., mindfulness, meditation, sleep, stress), and check for the appropriateness of content and cultural responsiveness.

If considering a digital tool with a coaching component, be sure that coaches are trained and supervised by licensed clinicians.

When considering pricing, understand that there is no single model. Some apps are free, others allow limited free usage but charge for greater functionality, while others offer free usage but promote paid coaching or therapy. Employers offering a tool to a large number of people may find pricing as a flat fee, on a per-user basis, or as some hybrid of the two.

And “free” may not be “free.” As with any app, review data privacy and security policies, which are of importance if users will be sharing personal behavioral information within the app.

LOOKING FORWARD

There is a push for increased and expanded access to mental health care with a greater focus on early intervention and prevention of serious illness. The crucible of the COVID-19 pandemic created an acute need for viable socially distanced mental health care tools including wearables and digital interventions, which, in turn, demonstrated rich possibilities in complex mental health treatment areas such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety, depression, and substance abuse.

However, the effects of the pandemic have also created an epidemic-level need for greater mental health services. Employers wishing to help meet that need can begin by offering their employees robust mental health benefits anchored by coverage of therapy (both in-person and telehealth). For those looking to expand employee mental health benefits further, with the appropriate considerations, the right digital mental health tool can play a vital role in filling health care and well-being gaps for your employees.





How organizations are leading in making employee mental health a priority

Learn more from these case studies of successful leaders promoting mental health among workers.

Psychological evidence suggests employee mental health is a critical component for organizational functioning and success. As with any positive business outcome, promoting mental health among your workers often requires a significant investment of time and resources.

If you're dedicated to equipping your employees and organization to thrive but you don't know exactly where to begin your efforts, learn from these organizations, who have taken steps to prioritize employee mental health.

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APA's science-led, empathy-based culture informs its approach to employee mental health and provides a robust package of mental health benefits. Employees can access mental health care for a low copay through APA's insurance provider or through an additional mental health care insurer that enables employees to access any mental health professional for only a \$20 copay (with the exception of employees enrolled in a high-deductible Health Savings Account plan, to which APA contributes). In addition, APA's employee assistance program provides employees and their household members with free, confidential, 24/7 support to help with personal or professional matters.

APA conducts regular "pulse" polls to survey employees about the level of support they receive from managers and the organization and what they need to feel more supported, from computer hardware to more flexible working hours. Employees also have an opportunity to hear updates from and share concerns directly with APA's CEO in a biweekly, virtual chat. To address the multiple layers of stressors employees face, APA initiated staff conversations around racism and related current events, inviting experts to speak about the issues and how to take action. And employee resource groups were formed to support employees and provide community.

APA assembled a work group to use lessons learned during the pandemic and employee feedback to plan the future of the organization's workplace. Most employees (75%) participated, sharing perspectives about the future of work via focus groups, conversations with leadership and surveys.

APA is evolving its concept of the workplace rather than returning to pre-pandemic office norms. It established a flexible work policy that allows employees to move outside the Washington, D.C. area to one of 40 approved states, maintain their current salary and same level of employee benefits. APA also implemented a Meet with Purpose campaign. Meetings have a designated agenda, start on the hour or half-hour, and last for 25 or 50 minutes to ensure employees have breaks between meetings to tend to personal or family needs.



Employees can access mental health care for a low copay through APA's insurance provider or through an additional mental health care insurer that enables employees to access any mental health professional for only a \$20 copay.

BlackRock®

BLACKROCK

Blackrock, an international investment management organization, also recognized the urgency of prioritizing employee well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. As the organization pivoted to remote or socially distanced work, it conducted periodic employee surveys to gather feedback that would inform new policies and procedures.

For example, Blackrock extended its health care coverage to ensure employees working out-of-state or out of the country, along with their families, could access health care. To better support employees' mental well-being, Blackrock onboarded a new employee assistance provider to help deliver a range of new mental health benefits, including care navigation, easy online appointment booking, virtual care delivery, and a high-quality network of providers integrated into its medical plans. The firm also offered a company-paid subscription to the Calm app and launched a peer network of Mental Health Ambassadors.

To support employees with family responsibilities, the organization expanded the number of company-paid back-up care days, implemented more flexible work-from-home schedules, and encouraged the use of the existing flexible time off policy that allows all employees—regardless of title or tenure—access to paid time off as needed. To encourage employee collaboration, Blackrock also created online forums for sharing ideas and resources to support parenting and childcare.

Building on psychological research about the importance of manager support, Blackrock launched a series of enablement sessions to train supervisors in keeping their teams informed and motivated. The firm also created an intranet resource hub to streamline internal communications, so employees can quickly access information they need to do their jobs well and ask for help as needed.



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YMCA OF THE USA

YMCA of the USA, (Y-USA), the national resource office for the nation's YMCAs, pivoted to fully remote work in March 2020. Recognizing the increased need for social and emotional support, YMCA immediately began heavily promoting its employee assistance program (EAP) services through frequent newsletters, emphasizing free access to confidential services for employees' entire families.

To learn more about additional unmet needs, Y-USA leaders also utilized pulse surveys in which employees rate various areas of well-being. Using this feedback, leaders made distinct efforts to implement changes. For example, when one survey found that many work-from-home employees needed additional office equipment to perform their jobs well, the organization provided it. Another survey made clear that employees weren't ready to return to in-office work in 2021, so YMCA changed its plans and extended its flexible work policies.

In response to employee concerns about lack of camaraderie, Y-USA created weekly virtual Coffee Chats to connect employees with one another and Tech Tuesdays, an opportunity for employees to learn or refresh tech skills, ask tech questions, and learn about efficient hybrid work practices.

Biannual culture surveys conducted by a third party also guide Y-USA's practices. To continue to ensure employee feedback is carefully implemented, Y recently formed a Culture Counsel of volunteer employees, who help review areas for improvement and discuss possible changes. After learning of employees' continued desire for work flexibility, organization leaders extended the work-from-home practice, encouraging employees to visit the office as needed.

In addition, Y-USA convened a Mental Health Thought Leader Cohort, made up of local Y staff who curate and package "To Go" mental health kits, a grab and go resource for local Y leaders to implement with staff, such as "[Dinner Table Resilience](#)" which offers short videos, tools, and strategies for Y-USA staff and members to use at the dinner table with families to build resilience skills.



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F5 NETWORKS

F5 Networks, a large technology company in the Seattle area, also uses employee surveys extensively to promote its “human-first, high-performance” culture. Along with regularly surveying existing employees, leaders also seek input from candidates who weren’t hired, employees who left the company, and individuals who left and came back.

After learning how growth opportunities led to employee retention, F5 developed a company-wide mentorship program, increased its budget to allow employees to pursue continued education in their field, and created quarterly learning days on which employees have no internal meetings but instead focus on learning.

In response to an increased need for time off—without the stress of returning to an inbox full of emails—F5 also launched company-wide quarterly wellness weekends allowing all employees an extra paid consecutive Friday and Monday off.

Ongoing survey data suggest positive business outcomes. F5 employees report feeling more refreshed and ready to tackle projects when they return to work after time off, for example. In general, F5 staffers report feeling supported by their managers and the organization as a whole.

On its U.S. medical plans, F5 also removed out-of-network restrictions for psychotherapy to ensure employees could connect with diverse therapists and therapists not accepting insurance. Rather than paying a large deductible and being partially reimbursed for services, employees on the Preferred Provider Organization plan pay a \$15 copay for any therapist (plus any additional fees if the therapist charges more than what the benefits cover). Additionally, F5 increased its EAP therapy visit max from three to five annual sessions per employee.



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ERNST & YOUNG

The consulting firm Ernst & Young (EY) offers a full suite of mental health and well-being resources for employees and their families. In addition to EY's health care plan that includes mental health benefits, EY has an internal team of clinicians that conduct presentations and interactive sessions promoting mental health in the organization.

EY also works with a private vendor to offer up to 25 psychotherapy sessions for each employee and each person in their household per year. Because employees' family lives can impact their well-being and work performance, the firm extended the mental health benefit to include all family members in the household including children, domestic partners, and relatives, regardless of their age or whether they're on the employees' health care plan. The network of clinicians represent a variety of backgrounds that can meet employees' diverse needs. They use evidence-based psychotherapy practices to ensure the best outcomes.

EY recognizes the role of psychological concepts like resilience in staving off stress and burnout. EY allows employees to access mental health coaching sessions to prevent issues that could interfere with well-being and work performance and increase overall well-being in their daily lives. Data suggest employees working with a mental health coach or therapist saw an 85% improvement or recovery from the initial reason they sought care.

For people who would rather use digital tools, EY offers a positive psychology-informed app that educates employees about coping with stress and promoting resilience through articles and activities. Similarly, a digital sleep resource provides personalized guidance for improving sleep. On average, people using this digital tool are getting an average of four more hours of sleep per week.

An internal initiative called We Care educates employees on important topics such as recognizing signs of mental health concern and addiction and best practices for offering support. Employees share their own mental health stories to destigmatize the topic. To encourage time away from work, EY also reimburses employees for vacations and travel; the company also reimburses for physical wellness-related activities, such as gym memberships, fitness equipment, and even mattresses.



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NATIONAL LEAGUE OF CITIES

The National League of Cities (NLC), the nonprofit advocate for municipal governments, is committed to supporting and nurturing a work culture that prioritizes the mental and physical health of its employees. It has done so through several targeted approaches. Like many organizations, NLC moved its entire 130-person Washington, D.C.-based staff to virtual work at the start of the pandemic. Employees were encouraged to maximize and leverage flexible schedules. As the pandemic evolved, NLC developed a hybrid model in which staff could continue to work remotely and also use the NLC offices for collaboration and other onsite work.

The organization's health insurance plan covers mental health services on par with its coverage of physical health. NLC subsidizes coverage for employees and family members, including access to licensed mental health providers who offer services via telehealth. NLC also offers an EAP, which it promotes regularly (and even more frequently during the pandemic) to employees.

At the start and during the height of the pandemic, NLC gathered employee input. NLC surveyed employees in 2020 and 2021 to learn about their telework experience and hear their return-to-office concerns and suggestions. More than 90% of the staff participated. To determine the cultural norms for hybrid work, NLC used a dispersed decision-making method that employed focus groups to gather ideas from every employee in the organization. One resulting cultural norm the company has established, is that employees are highly encouraged to use their paid time off from work to unplug and refresh.



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AMERICAN PUBLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION

The American Public Health Association (APHA), a Washington, D.C.-based organization for public health professionals, champions the health of all people and all communities.

When COVID-19 struck, APHA's staff worked harder than ever to develop essential COVID-19 resources for members. At the same time, employees were experiencing the loss of loved ones, isolation, racial inequity, financial burden, family job loss, and the need to provide around-the-clock family support. These strains caused a real need for mental health services and support.

How did APHA support its staff? APHA's EAP, a free service for staff, offers three immediate counseling sessions with a licensed mental health professional. Staff can access EAP professionals 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The EAP can also provide legal assistance, online will preparation, financial tools and resources, help addressing substance misuse and other addictions, as well as resources for dependent and elder care.

APHA's mental health services through their insurer, CareFirst, are tailored for short-term and long-term mental health matters. Employees and covered family members seeing in-network professionals have no copayments and many of the providers offer telehealth visits from 7 a.m.-11 p.m. Eastern time, 7 days a week. The average therapy appointment is about 45 minutes. Psychiatrists are also available to help with mental health conditions requiring medication management.

Staff are encouraged to voice their needs. APHA instituted several internal services and activities to improve how management listened and responded to employee needs. "Courageous Conversation," started after the George Floyd and Black Lives Matter protests, are discussions with peers in an honest and safe environment about experiences that relate to race. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Half-day Fridays gave staff a mental health break from the stress of having inseparable work and home space. A mindfulness video APHA shared with staff reminded them to be present in the moment, take a breath, and tackle one thing at a time. While working from home, No Meeting Tuesday Afternoons ensured staff had a block of time to focus on one task at a time as they navigated the stresses of the pandemic and increased virtual meetings. Optional forums and surveys allowed staff to communicate their mental health needs and challenges. Complimentary Stretch Class—a free monthly service—gives staff a 45-minute break to relieve stress and tension.



"Courageous Conversation," started after the George Floyd and Black Lives Matter protests, are discussions with peers in an honest and safe environment about experiences that relate to race. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic,

RESOURCES

- [Center for Supportive Leadership](#)
- [Employee well-being report](#), Glint
- [Employers are increasing support for mental health](#), APA
- [It's a new era for mental health at work](#), Harvard Business Review
- [Mental health in the workplace](#), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- [Psychology in the workplace](#), APA
- [The Luv u Project](#), Johns Hopkins University
- [Work, Family & Health Network](#), Harvard University
- [Your Workpath](#), Oregon Healthy Workforce Center

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