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Corporate Sanity

Five steps to a more
mental health-friendly workplace
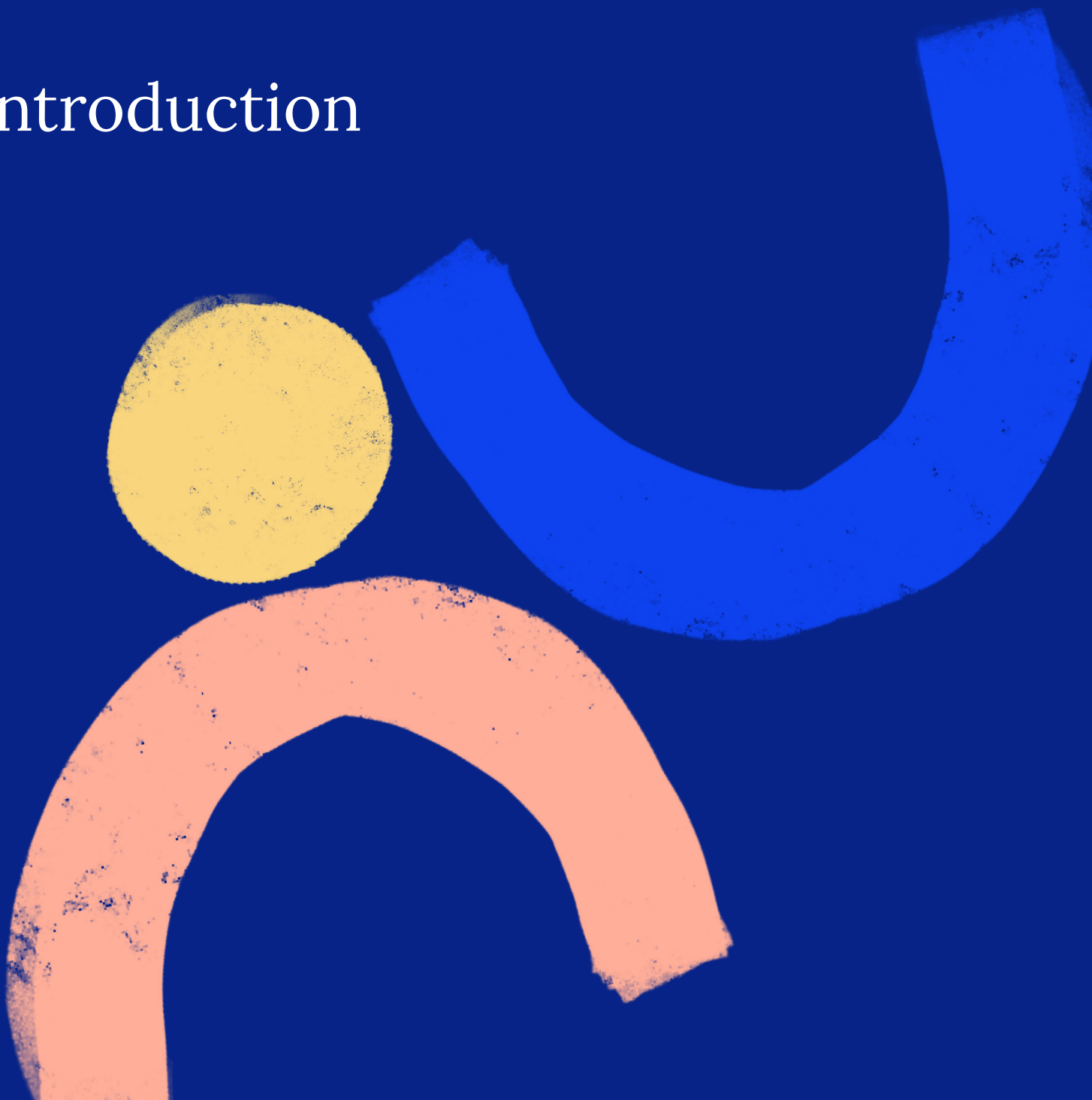
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Introduction

After the holidays, many of us return to the office with a spring in our step and a head full of fresh ideas to implement over the coming months. Whether you immersed yourself in family time or enjoyed some solitude over the past weeks, there's nothing like breaking out of the workaday routine to shift your perspective and get ideas flowing.

Maybe you've even asked yourself: how can I keep this post-holiday ease and clarity with me all year-round? Well, there is a way you can work towards achieving this – just as brushing your teeth daily keeps cavities at bay, practicing good "mental hygiene" also helps keep things from building up and bogging you down.

Physical health has long been recognised as an important factor in workplace performance, with the result that approximately half of all current workplace health promotion initiatives are aimed at boosting physical activity[1] – easily observable in the ubiquity of employer-sponsored gym memberships.

Spotlight on mental health
With the success of every company built on the attendance and engagement of its people, promoting regular exercise and healthy snacks, as so many companies do, is an important measure. Increasingly, however, workplace mental health and well-being is being included in a more holistic health equation, thanks to an avalanche of emerging data that suggests this is in everyone's best interests. A 2017 independent government review of mental health and employers in the UK was able to quantify, with support from a study by Deloitte, how investing in supporting mental health at work is good for both business and productivity.[2] Perhaps the most heartening findings of the study are that, "the return on investment of workplace mental health interventions is overwhelmingly positive, with an average ROI of 4:1." On a similar note, the results of the

"Investments in improving mental health show a consistently positive net ROI"

Investment in workplace mental health
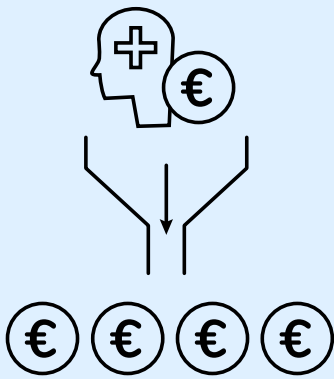
Has an average ROI of 4:1

Mind Share Partners' 2021 Mental Health at Work Report, published in the Harvard Business Review this past October, indicates that workers who feel supported by their employer on mental health topics tend to be "less likely to experience mental health symptoms, less likely to underperform and miss work, [as well as have] higher job satisfaction and intentions to stay at their company."[3]

What's more, companies who focus on their culture and mental health experience double their growth over three years as compared to their counterparts, according to a 2021 survey by global leadership consultants Heidrick & Struggles.[4]

The pandemic's hidden potential
The Mind Share Partners' report highlights that the first pandemic year of 2020 played a major role in

bringing mental health topics to the surface – a cloud which comes with a silver lining: at last, this shadowy area of work life is in the spotlight.

In Germany, the pandemic's mental health toll on professionals can be observed in a study by one of the country's biggest health insurance providers, DAK, which revealed that in 2020, for every 100 insured individuals, on average 265 days of work were missed due to mental illness.[5] What's more, 75% of the people who stated they were in need of mental health support, communicated that they were (still) not getting it at the time the survey was conducted.[6] Sadly, absences due to psychological illnesses have doubled in the last 20 years in Germany and make up an increasingly large proportion of sick leave.[7] All the more reason, if you're not already doing so, to start addressing the topic of mental health in your organisation. But why – you may well be asking yourself – should an employer have to compensate for gaps in the medical system or even get involved with something as intimate as an individual's mental health?

The quick answer is that it's in your company's – and your own – best interests: the costs of absences, under-performance and replacing lost talent are well-known. Above and beyond that, to meet the unique business challenges of today's world, you must take a human-centric approach to leadership. This message – already widely championed by academics at the world's leading business schools for decades – was recently reaffirmed

by another Gallup survey, which concluded that employees need four things to succeed in the current business and social climate: trust, stability, hope and compassion.[8]

Your role as leader
Leadership is built on relationships: in order to cultivate others' engagement and growth and involve them in designing and building projects and

"Leadership is built on relationships"

systems that innovate and deliver value, leaders must create an environment where individuals feel both emotionally safe and challenged to grow.

Considering the number of hours people spend at work, it shouldn't be a surprising conclusion that, "employers play a central role in shaping the whole person."[9] And while self-reflection and personal stress management are precious commodities in today's workplaces, should anyone be penalised for not being born a "mental-health maestro" or not having a chance to learn and develop these skills after putting in an eight-hour day?

Of course not: we don't expect employees to come to work with fully-realised expertise in every area of their work, nor should we assume they've got a Master's in mental health to complement their area of professional specialisation.

And simply splashing out on a few mindfulness sessions or offering yoga classes in the lunch break is not enough. The authors of the Mind Share Partners' report found that,
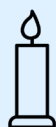
Employees need four things to succeed in the current world climate:

trust   stability   hope   compassion

"Corporate mental health starts at the top"

"Regardless of how robust a company's [mental health] benefits are, it is culture that ultimately reduces stigma,"[10] noting that, the mental health "resource" most desired by respondents (31%) was, "a more open culture around mental health."[11]

By now it should be clear that you, as leader, are the starting point for building a mental health-friendly workplace – and it's a critical task you can't afford to postpone. The potentially uncomfortable news is that it's going to take some of your own time and effort. The uplifting news – especially if the thought of adding one more thing to your to-do list makes you sweat – is that the first place you have to address mental health and well-being is in your own life. In the first section of this guide, we'll look at what optimising your own relationship to mental health and well-being entails before we move on to assessing your organisation's mental health status quo, embracing effective measures to optimise the workplace mental health ecosystem, best-practices for responding to crises when they arise and, last but certainly not least, ensuring that the measures you've adopted are sustainably in place for the long term:

STEP 1:	STEP 2:	STEP 3:	STEP 4:	STEP 5:
Walk the talk	Assess	Prevent	Respond	Implement
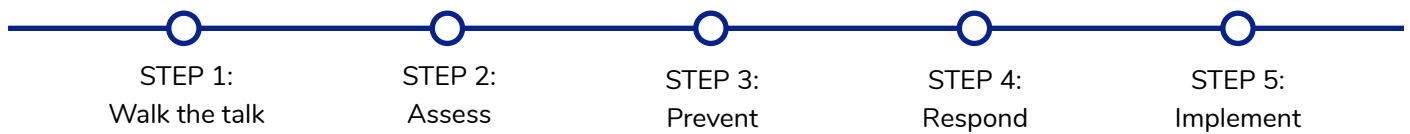
Walking the talk: Staying healthy as a leader and smashing the stigma around mental health
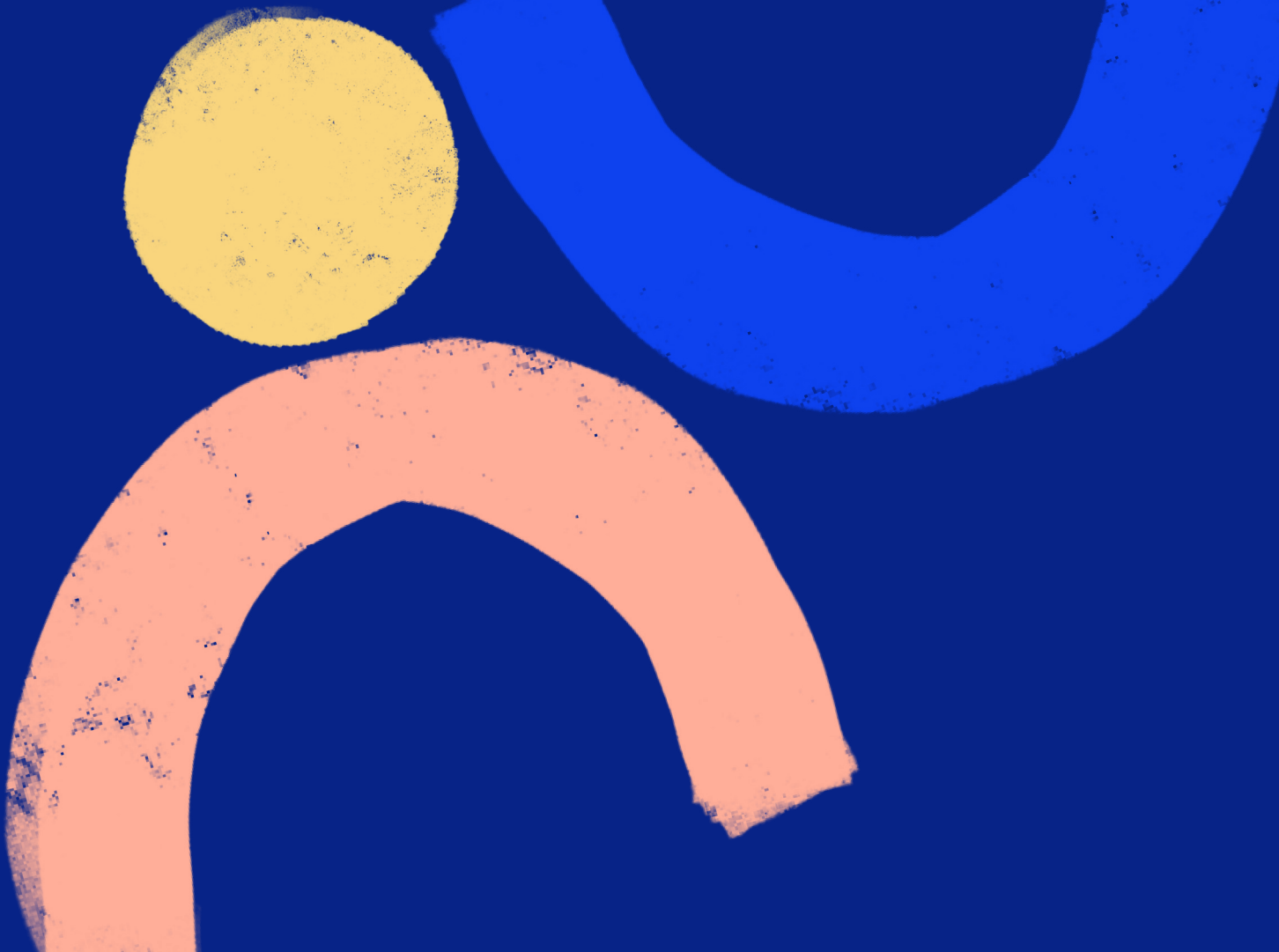
> ## "It's time to put the stigma to rest and admit that mental health is a topic that affects each and every one of us – and needs to be urgently addressed."

Alarmingly, the 2021 Mind Share Partners' Mental Health at Work study discloses that leaders at C-level are now *even more* likely than their employees to suffer at least one adverse mental health symptom – up from 2019 when employees and leaders were on par. The implications of this statistic are worrying: who steers the ship if our leaders are not in the condition to do it themselves – especially with the high relapse rate of workplace mental health issues such as burnout? To avert (further) disaster, the study's authors urge, "It's time to put the stigma to rest and admit that mental health is a topic that affects each and every one of us – and needs to be urgently addressed."[12]

Before you jump into action to roll out mental health-friendly measures across your organisation, it's critical for you first to consider how well-integrated they are in your own life – to ensure you are able to "walk the talk".

Take a moment now to assess where you stand on these key mental health maintenance areas in the survey below:

Evaluate your "fitness" in the key mental health-maintenance areas

Prevention – Boosting your resources and recharging your batteries

Do you:
- [ ] Take "proper" breaks?
- [ ] Maintain your physical health via regular exercise and a healthy diet?
- [ ] Practice relaxation techniques?
- [ ] Practice good sleep hygiene?[36]
- [ ] Maintain a healthy work/life balance

Troubleshooting – Cultivating self awareness/mindfulness

Do you:
- [ ] Identify sources of stress and address them proactively?
- [ ] Recognise and treat any early warning signs of stress and burnout?
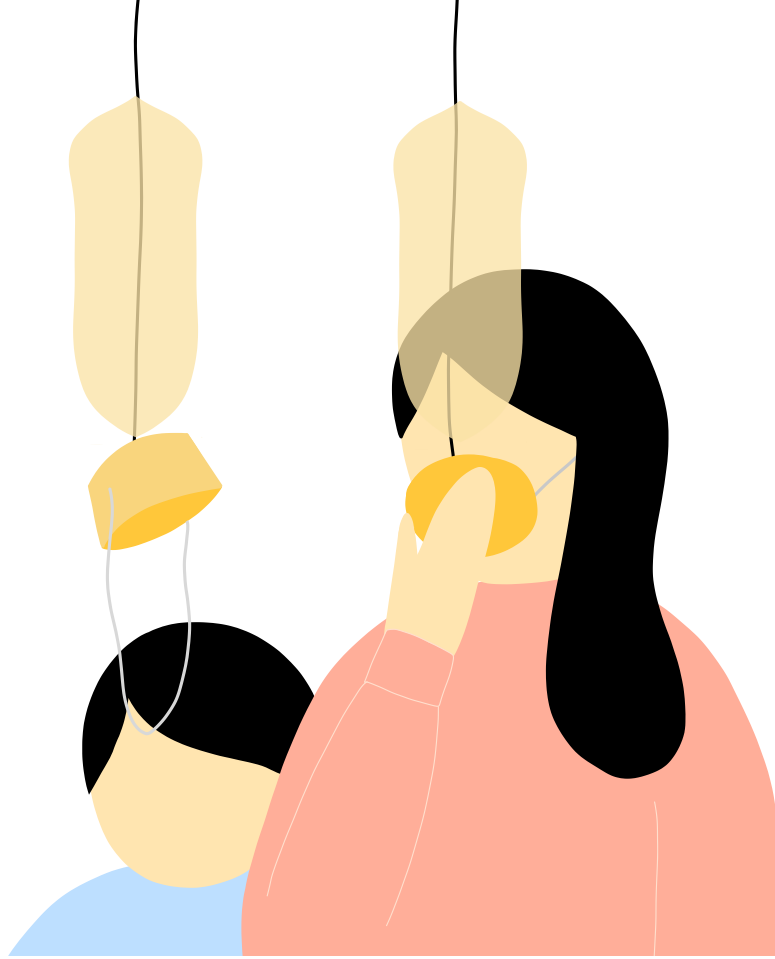
Communication

Do you:
- [ ] Practice transparency, vulnerability and openness?

Relationships

Do you:
- [ ] Maintain healthy non-work relationships?
- [ ] Have a support network in place to get support as and when you need it, whether in the form of counselors, coaches, teachers and/or friends?

"Make sure to put on your own oxygen mask, before helping others with theirs."

It's important to emphasise that none of the points listed above are "nice to haves". If you answered "no" to any of them, finding sustainable ways to integrate them into your life should be a top priority. As the airline announcements say: "Make sure to put on your own oxygen mask, before helping others with theirs." Mental health is sustenance, not a luxury. Happily, addressing some of these areas in your life, if they are not yet optimal, may be a natural outcome of addressing the mental health of your organisation. For example, if your work/life balance suffers because you're still answering work emails at 10pm, implementing a "no email after hours" policy will positively impact that. If you don't get enough proper breaks and/or exercise, having organisation-wide "no-meeting days" or offering more flexible working hours could go a long way.

Start the conversation
Given that culture change demands both a top-down and bottom-up approach, the authors of the Mind Share Partners' report suggest that CEOs

serve as "normalizers-in-chief" for mental health topics, supported by their CHROs, concluding that, "leaders must model these and other mentally healthy behaviours for employees to truly feel like they can do the same."[13]

It can't be said enough that the first and most effective step you should make towards supporting the topic of mental health among employees is ensuring that the topic itself is not taboo. If you haven't done so already, make it clear that you understand that everyone – including yourself – comes into the office with a whole spectrum of complex non-work-related concerns and sometimes turbulent experiences. Consider dedicating an all-hands meeting to affirming this, sending out an email or building it into your company values.

Now that you understand your role in promoting mental health and have some insight into how you can practice the basics in your own life, it's time to move on to assessing the status quo at your workplace.

Assess: How safe is your organisation?

Once you've committed to making mental health a central priority at your workplace, it's time to examine your organisation's current mental health behaviours and attitudes in a deep and rigorously honest way.

In the past, you may have employed tools like quarterly culture surveys to measure and improve employee satisfaction and/or your own leadership performance, however, a culture survey is often a broad tool that doesn't get to the heart of complex issues like psychological safety and diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI).

What is safe?

Measuring employees' feelings of "psychological safety" is the means by which experts frequently evaluate whether a workplace is mental health-friendly. An employee who feels psychologically safe feels able to be and express their true self at work, without fear of negative consequences – whether in terms of reputation, status or career prospects.

When psychological safety is present, individuals feel accepted and respected as they are. And there are further benefits: an internal study conducted by Google[14] found that teams who enjoyed high rates of psychological safety were:

- better than other teams at implementing diverse ideas and driving high performance
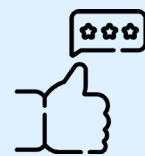
- more likely to stay with the company

Unfortunately, although psychological safety sounds like a *sine qua non* to any workplace experience, it is less common than you might think, with only three in 10 U.S. workers in a Gallup study evaluating workplace psychological safety "strongly agreeing" that their opinions seem to count at work. [15]

There's a straightforward and reliable way to assess the presence or absence of psychological safety in your organisation: Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson's psychological safety assessment survey. You'll find the survey and instructions on how to evaluate employees' answers below.

The psychological safety assessment survey

One of the most widely-used assessment tools for workplace psychological safety was created by Amy Edmondson, Novartis Professor of Leadership at Harvard Business School. Edmondson has studied the topic extensively and written several books on the subject.

As a first step to gauge the current level of psychological safety, we recommend giving this survey to each member of your team.

Based on the results of the survey, you can begin to arrive at a shared set of beliefs around it as an organisation, define what you can change and focus on specific improvements to the working structures and the environment. For example, if you dis-

cover that your team scored low on the question of whether team members can bring up problems, you could investigate the setup and dynamic of team meetings. You may discover that meetings are run hierarchically with senior team members having an obvious advantage over junior members in terms of the length of time they get to speak and the weight of their decisions.

Another example: if you discover that your team scored low on whether it's okay to ask other members for help, you could investigate the way you measure and incentivise good performance.

The survey is designed to help you to be as specific as possible in identifying the root of any problems, making

it easier for you and your team to find concrete solutions.

It should be emphasised that although assessing and addressing your team's feelings of psychological safety provides an excellent foundation for building a more mental health-friendly organisation, there are other essential topics you must consider as well, such as work-life balance and having appropriate procedures and resources in place for dealing with both pre-existing and newly arising mental health conditions. We will discuss some of these other aspects of workplace mental health in more detail in the following sections.

The survey uses a scale of
1 (strongly disagree)
to **7** (strongly agree)
to measure psychological safety. ⟶

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1. If you make a mistake on this team, it is often held against you. **(R)**	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
2. Members of this team are able to bring up problems and tough issues.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
3. People on this team sometimes reject others for being different. **(R)**	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
4. It is safe to take a risk on this team.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
5. It is difficult to ask other members of this team for help. **(R)**	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
6. No one on this team would deliberately act in a way that undermines my efforts.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
7. Working with members of this team, my unique skills and talents are valued and utilized.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

A score of **0 to 15** is poor

A score of **16 to 29** is reasonable but needs improvement

⟵

A score of **30** indicates psychological safety

Here's how to score it:
- Questions 1, 3, and 5 are denoted with (R) meaning that they need to be scored in reverse. For example, a rating of 3 will be scored as 5, a rating of 7 will be scored as 1, and a 1 as 7.
- Add up questions 2, 4, 6, and 7.
- The sum of the ratings equals the level of psychological safety the individual perceives in their team. A score of 0 to 15 is poor; a score of 16 to 29 is reasonable but needs improvement; and a score of 30 indicates psychological safety.

Prevent:
How to ensure your employees and organisation thrive

Just as you supply healthy snacks and work-appropriate seating to optimise physical health, some basic infrastructure at your organisation will support and even promote mental health.

We have identified four key pillars to address when building or enhancing a mental health-friendly workplace:
- Establishing a communication & feedback culture
- Providing access to mental health resources
- Adopting & implementing DEI policies and procedures
- Embracing purpose & supporting work-life balance

Each topic is explored in detail below.

Establishing a communication & feedback culture

Being able to communicate authentically, to express and be heard, lies at the heart of feelings of psychological safety. As the authors of the Mind Share Partners' report assert, "A culture of connection is key – from regular check-ins that make time for the question, "How are you?" to healthy working relationships to meaningful interactions among teams."[16]

Communication is a complex topic – a mixture of being able to read the room as a leader, ensuring the implementation of structures to accommodate different communication needs and styles and simply enabling space for catching up over coffee.[17] And then there are the challenges of remote working...more on that shortly.

So what practical steps can you take to make sure your communication culture is robust, inclusive and mental health-friendly?

For starters, here are a few basic guidelines for enhancing communication in your organisation:

Make space for every voice to be heard:
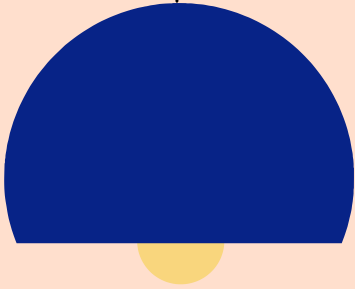
Promote more inclusivity by:
- having people introduce themselves with their preferred personal pronouns.
- taking neurodiversity into account. Not everyone feels comfortable talking during meetings or working on chatty teams. While a meeting or workshops can be exciting for developing ideas, consider checking in with participants beforehand on their preferred approach or supplementing any working or feedback sessions with tools that enable different forms of participation and interaction – for example shared documents or collaboration software.
- making space for employees to discuss challenging social and political topics at work (more on this in the DEI section below).

Ensure all team members have roughly equal speaking time in meetings by designating someone as a moderator or setting a timer.

Communicate your own personal growth opportunities/ areas of improvement and show vulnerability and compassion.

Be sensitive to social and emotional cues and expressions. Everyone has good days and bad — team dynamics can shift without your knowledge. Lead based on the dynamics in the room on a given day and avoid making assumptions.

Revamp and revitalise virtual meetings

The rise of virtual meetings has brought its own set of communication challenges, the most obvious amongst them being the inability to read body language and micro expressions or make eye contact – not to mention the resulting energy-drain on the brain.

Here are some ways to help democratise communication and reinforce psychological safety in virtual meetings:

- Enlist/nominate a facilitator to keep things running smoothly and make sure everyone is included as equally as possible.

- If you notice someone is unusually or perpetually quiet, follow-up with them individually to see if you can find the source and/or suggest a workaround.

- Promote more inclusivity by inviting employees to include their preferred personal pronoun next to their username on screen.

- Try going audio-only occasionally to combat Zoom fatigue and change things up a little.

- Introduce games, singing, dancing (camera optional!), meditation and even team-rituals[18] that help raise energy levels, de-stress and connect the group more deeply.

- Organise breakout rooms for 3-5-person discussions.

- Use polls (these can also be anonymous) for yes/no answers or opinions.

Build a flourishing feedback culture

While the tools above will certainly help grease the wheels of communication in your organisation, making constructive feedback an essential, everyday practice in the workplace is the engine that will help workers' feelings of psychological safety run smoothly and be sustained in the long term.

Provide feedback. Two techniques endorsed in recent years by psychologists and coaches for their effectiveness are "benevolent feedback" and "radical honesty". Consider giving these a try in your organisation. In any case, remember that for most employees, no news is NOT good news. Even if you think someone is doing an amazing job and nothing needs to change, tell them that – and ask if they have feedback for you[19,20] (more on that in the next point). It's amazing how such a simple exchange can transform the workplace dynamic.

In addition to ensuring one-on-one feedback sessions are scheduled between management/team leads and teams on a regular basis, consider suggesting a **go-to person** outside the team or department, such as a mid-senior or senior-level HR officer (e.g. the Human Resource Business Partner), who can be trusted to uphold confidentiality – to be a listening ear should employees feel the need to speak to someone outside the team. The HR resource is simply a supplementary option. Ensure in any case that employees feel they can approach their managers as topics arise, not just during the scheduled feedback sessions. The best-case scenario is that employees feel their team-lead is accessible and can be trusted with any issues.

As always, **lead by example** by actively seeking feedback about yourself. If you ask someone for feedback spontaneously and they look like a deer caught in the headlights, don't take it personally. Remember that in your leadership role you may seem intimidating or simply unavailable. Invite them to put it in an email if they prefer and leave it at that: providing non-anonymous workplace feedback shouldn't be an obligation. Keep an open door policy as much as it's possible to do so, while also maintaining healthy boundaries that give you space to recharge and focus on other work. One way to manage this might be to highlight the times you're available for discussion in a shared team calendar.

Change the "fixed" perception of you as a leader by sharing company updates and strategies in **different formats** to ensure you're not always standing at the front of the room giving presentations to the group. Get creative! A walking meeting[21] can be a powerful way to handle one-on-ones. Again, consider neurodiversity needs.

Listen and reflect back: providing **non-violent communication training** is one simple way to ensure a healthy practice permeates the company. Again, these skills are not always in-born or learned in professional settings – this way you can ensure team spaces are better primed for success and mental well-being.

Set healthy boundaries

Encourage team members to discuss and define their optimal mental health-friendly collaboration ingredients. Teams may also want to draw up working agreements, a "short set of guidelines created by the team, for the team, that establishes what the expectations of the team are for one another [helping] establish, as well as reinforce, a clear, shared understanding between all team members about what they acknowledge is good behaviour and communication."[22]

Working agreements could address the following aspects:

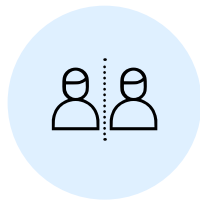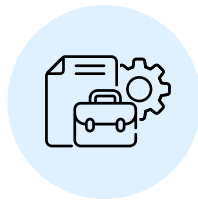|				
Communication	Meeting styles	Feedback	Problem solving	Asking for help/ delegation
Mutual support	Drawing boundaries	Working styles and signals	Workload management	Appreciation and celebration styles

It's OK to:

- ☐ keep your camera off during a meeting
- ☐ not respond to Slack messages or emails out of hours or right away
- ☐ have regular quiet hours
- ☐ keep your headphones on as a 'do-not-disturb' signal

Providing access to mental health resources

A 2020 McKinsey study highlights the fact that mental health resources and/or benefits have become increasingly standard fare in workplaces, describing this culture shift as a "revolution".[23] The authors emphasise that such measures are essential, given both the added pandemic stress factors and the immense (and rising) hidden costs of mental health issues for employers. They also point out that such resources are about much more than merely providing a safety net – once again: when employees thrive, companies thrive.

Training someone in-house to be a Mental Well-being Ambassador or Mental Health First Aider can be a useful stopgap while you transform culture to become more mental health-friendly. Some companies even hire their own in-house therapists, but it should be said that there are also definitely advantages to having an expert available outside the organisation. Indeed, a highly-skilled, out-of-house professional – reliably available and unaffected by in-house deadlines and dynamics – is often an attractive and effective option for employees. It's also a great way to show your understanding of and commitment to the mental health topic while assessing interest and uptake.

We created nilo.health specifically for this purpose: as a dedicated, comprehensive mental health services partner to support companies, with a range of resources capable of handling both long-term processes and interim crisis management.

When employees thrive, companies thrive.

Adopting & implementing DEI policies & procedures

Diversity, equity and inclusion

Diversity: The presence of differences within a given setting. In the workplace, this can mean differences in race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, age and socioeconomic class.

Equity: The act of ensuring that processes and programs are impartial, fair and provide equal possible outcomes for every individual.

Inclusion: The practice of ensuring that people feel a sense of belonging in the workplace. This means that every employee feels comfortable and supported by the organisation when it comes to being their authentic selves.[24]

Diversity, equity and inclusion has become a huge talking point in organisations in recent years – and rightly so. Aside from the obvious ethical dimensions, there are clear business arguments for building diverse teams and ensuring their mental health is protected and promoted. All three elements – diversity, equity and inclusion – have a significant effect on your company culture and are absolutely things you want to strive for. Their presence not only enables and enhances feelings of psychological safety but also creativity, innovation and therefore your bottom line – as several studies have shown.

Diversity covers a range of topics, and individuals may be impacted by any one of these topics:

- Mental health challenges
- Physical and cognitive disabilities, including forms of neurodiversity
- Ethnicity and the need to code-switch (code switching is adjusting your language and expression to a style that accommodates and aligns with the expectations of the dominant demographic – for example white people – in order to be treated fairly, respected and advance in your career).
- Family dynamics (parenting, caring for dependants)
- Religion and spiritual beliefs (for example having different special holidays and/or obligations)
- Gender, sexuality & gender identity
- Age
- Socioeconomic class

According to Catalina Colman, a Chicago-based Director of HR and Inclusion, "Equity is why we go to work […] We want to get compensated fairly for our work, we want to be challenged, to learn and to contribute. People often choose an employer based on those things." [25]

Sadly, the Mind Share Partners' report found that historically underrepresented groups such as minori-

ty ethnic groups and LGBTQIA+ are significantly more likely to experience mental health symptoms as well as leave their workplace for mental health reasons.[26]

So what can you do to proactively address this?

To start with, ensure you can have powerful DEI policies and procedures in place. McKinsey's 2020 DEI report offers some helpful systematic, business-led approaches, drawing on best practices from companies they have identified as leaders in diversity and inclusion.[27]

The authors of the Mind Share Partners' report recommend that, "employees should be empowered to form mental health employee resource groups (ERGs) and other affinity groups, become mental health champions and start peer listening initiatives.

Scholz & Friends, a major German creative agency, recently took formal, institutional steps to codify its approach to inclusivity, which had amazing results.

CASE STUDY: Scholz & Friends

In 2020, Scholz & Friends took several steps to codify their approach to DEI:

Scholz & Friends

- Mandatory "unconscious bias" training for all managers and employees.
- "Unconscious Bias" training and anti-discrimination training for all employees via the Scholz & Friends Academy. Individual training in the topics of "Active Listening," "Servant Leadership," and "Mindfulness".
- Regular "Listening Sessions" with the management.

- @WoW tables: exchange between female employees as part of the existing "Work of Women" program.
- *Powered by Communities* were established: voluntary, employee-led groups that foster a diverse, inclusive workplace aiming to break down barriers, promote exchange and celebrate diverse influences.

Embracing purpose & supporting work-life balance

There's one final aspect essential to building a mental health-friendly workplace on both a personal and organisational level: understanding how work fits into our lives at all, in terms of the time it demands, the effort we are willing to put into it, how it connects to the larger story of our lives and even how it can potentially contribute to the greater good. Do we view work as merely a way to pay the bills so we can do the things we really enjoy or are there other, more deeply motivating, reasons to get out of bed in the morning and give our all?

What is purpose?
In a recent article on purpose in the Harvard Business Review by senior Harvard Business School lecturer, Hubert Joly, Joly asserts that, "No matter our jobs, we can and must choose to approach work as an essential element of our humanity, a key to our search for meaning as individuals, and a way to find fulfillment in our life." Joly proposes a four-step approach for leaders to address the topic of purpose in their organisation:

1. Identify their own personal purpose
2. Lead their employees to do the same – on an individual, and a team level too, if desired
3. Identify the larger purpose of the company
4. Help employees to connect their own personal missions with the larger purpose of the company

During this process, it's important to understand that purpose is different from mission, which "focuses largely on how a business will generate economic value".[28] This can seem counterintuitive to leaders, as the authors of an HBR article on creating a purpose-driven organisation explain,

> **"People who find meaning in their work** don't hoard their energy and dedication. They give them freely, defying conventional economic assumptions about self-interest. They grow rather than stagnate. **They do more—and they do it better**."

"Many executives avoid working on their firms' purpose […] Because it defies what they have learned in business school and, perhaps, in subsequent experience: that work is fundamentally contractual, and employees will seek to minimize personal costs and effort." However, they go on to say that, based on numerous case studies, "People who find meaning in their work don't hoard their energy and dedication. They give them freely, defying conventional economic assumptions about self-interest. They grow rather than stagnate. They do more—and they do it better."[29] Professor Hannes Zacher, psychologist and Professor of Work and Organisational Psychology at the University of Leipzig says, "it's often not the quantity, but the quality of their work life that determines whether people burn out. If people feel like their work is meaningful and valued, they feel less stressed."

How to define purpose

To define your personal purpose, Professor Joly recommends you start by asking yourself, "What do you truly and profoundly aspire to? What gives you energy and joy — in short, what drives you?", then encourage your colleagues to ask themselves the same questions and share the results with each other. The scope and formality of this exercise is completely up to you, but in any case, discussing personal topics such as these can be a bonding experience for a group, assuming the conditions for a psychologically safe workplace have already been met.

When it comes to identifying team and company-wide purposes, note

that: "You do not invent a higher purpose; it already exists. You can discover it through empathy – by feeling and understanding the deepest common needs of your workforce. That involves asking provocative questions, listening and reflecting."[30] It's clear that this process alone can already work powerful changes throughout the entire organisation, but you can take it one step further: "Clearly articulating and feeding the connection between personal and company purpose is […] one of the most crucial roles of any leader," Joly maintains.

Finally, it's important to ensure your purpose is relevant, credible and integrated at every level of your organisation. Here, Joly cautions: "a top-down mandate does not work. Employees need to help drive this process, because then the purpose is more likely to permeate the culture, shaping behaviour even when managers aren't right there to watch how people are handling things."

The balancing act

The next question is how does purpose tie in with work-life balance or – as it's sometimes called today – work-life integration? As mentioned, when people feel like their work is meaningful and valued, they feel less stressed. Defining purpose may subtly help shift employee attitudes towards their work-life balance by bringing them more pleasure in what they do, but it's not a fix-all. At the end of the day, the "balance" is obviously about the distribution of the limited number of hours in a day across various professional and personal obligations and needs – some of which, such as parenting demands, are non-negotiable. As an employer committed to upholding employees' optimal mental and physical health and wellbeing, you must start the conversation around work-life balance first by looking at your organisation's attitudes towards flexible working hours and in-presence attendance, if you haven't already.

The authors of the Mind Share Partners' report suggest that, in order to promote mental health, it's time for employers to change their ways of working to be more sustainable, noting that, "a critical component is providing flexibility, which many workers experienced with remote work for the first time during the pandemic." Relatedly, many of the survey respondents reported that "their company's return-to-office plans were negatively impacting their mental health", in part due to decreased flexibility/life-work balance.[31]

Such flexibility allows workers to figure out for themselves how to weave together their different roles in a way that works optimally for them.

Supporting your employees

At a panel discussion on Mental Health Day hosted by the nilo.health team in October, Professor Zacher explained that, "From a psychological perspective, it's good to have many roles in life – to have a private life, to have work, but also to know the boundaries between those different life roles and especially to not define yourself only through work. People who build their identity on more than one role are usually more resilient." You can listen to the whole panel discussion here. Improving the design of work by facilitating people's ability to inhabit multiple roles could also mean introducing work-life balance programs and initiatives to help employees better assess their own situation and find a healthy compatibility between their professional and personal activities. The important thing to remember, once more, is that creating an environment that promotes work-life balance is an ongoing conversation through all levels of the organisation. Not a top-down, "one-and-done" decision.

Respond:
Tips and guidelines for mental health interventions and conversations
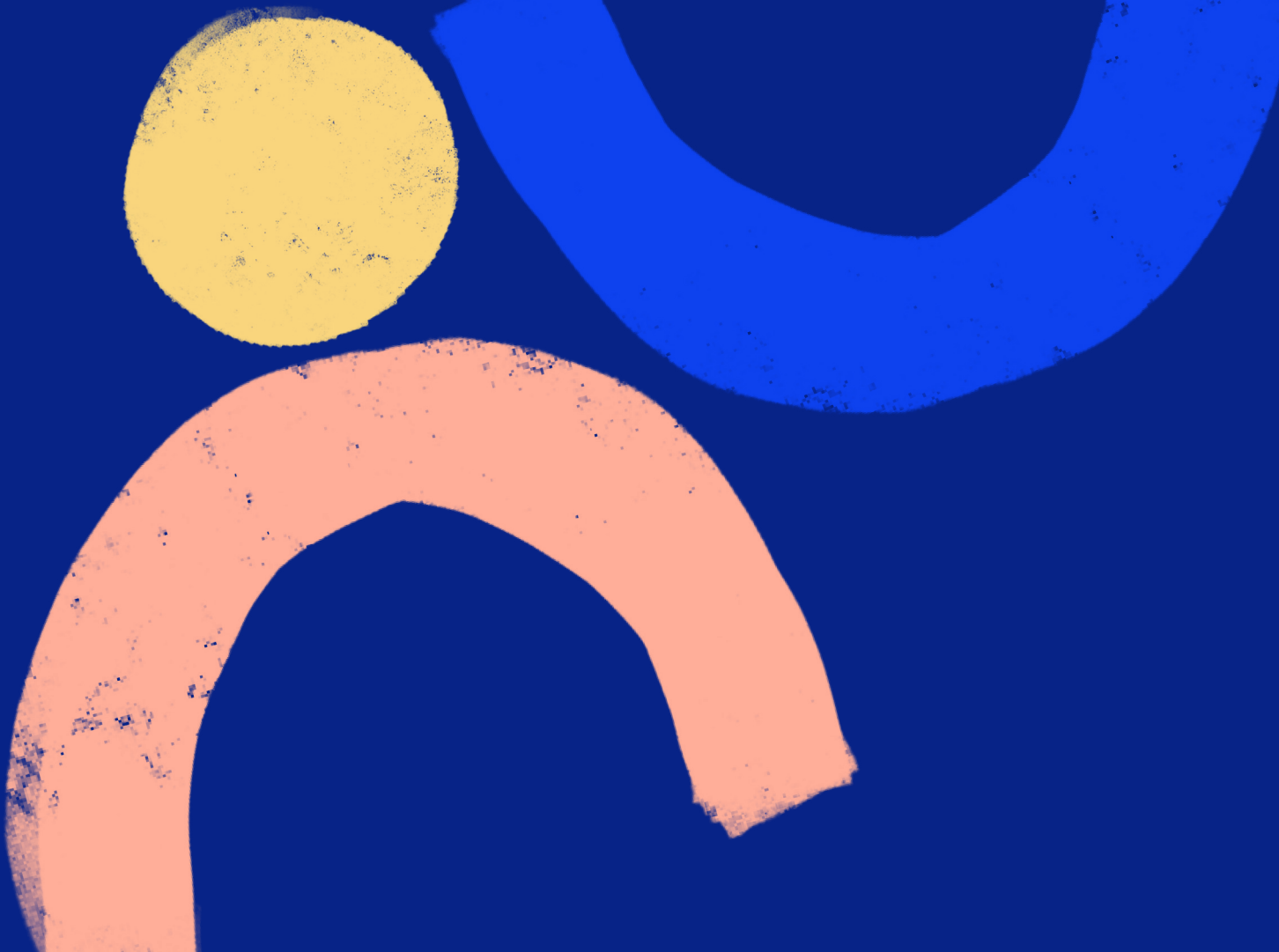
Now that we've looked at the myriad ways in which you can establish a work environment and culture that holistically promotes mental health and well-being, it's time to consider some of the hard conversations you may need to have – whether intervening on a mental health matter in real-time or supporting someone with ongoing needs in this area. Remember that no matter what steps you take, people will face mental health challenges in the workplace – brought on by both personal and professional matters.

Ask, listen, respond

Establishing the right atmosphere and tools will already make it much easier to be aware of and address the mental health topic in general. The authors of the Mind Share Partners' report recommend that, "How are you?" should always be followed up with "How can I help you?" especially at the manager level, adding that, "The importance of empathy and authenticity cannot be overstated."[32] Alongside this, it's important to be able to spot the signs that someone is struggling and learn how to have conversations on what can be very challenging topics.

Leaders at all levels of the organisation must be proactive about stepping in and offering support where it's appropriate. "[Managers] should have baseline knowledge of tools they can use during difficult conversations [...], in addition to an understanding of mental health conditions, their prevalence and impact at work, and ways to recognize and respond to employees who may be struggling," advise the Mind Share Partners' report's authors. Here are some guidelines to get you started:

Watch for the signs

In Germany alone, workplace absences due to mental illness have increased in the last 12 years by 90%. Oftentimes, an absence is a last resort. If you can detect whether someone is experiencing difficulties, you may be able to provide the needed support earlier. They may still need the absence, but crucially they won't feel like they're doing it alone.

WARNING SIGNS:

- Employee suddenly behaves "differently", for example: a usually energetic employee acts lethargic for an extended period of time
- Ongoing diminished work performance
- Difficulties concentrating
- Higher error and accident rate
- Frequent absence

- Interactions and behaviour that are untypical for that individual
- Frequent apologies for unfinished work
- Withdrawal: avoiding interaction with others

▶▶ *Consider sharing this list with HR officers and team leaders.*

Remember that all of these may be attributable to separate or multiple causes, such as physical illness or even work stress. You may wish to communicate when sharing the list that it is by no means an invitation to aggressively monitor work performance – in particular in a way that places additional pressure on the employee(s). Everyone should approach the presence of any of these indicators by giving the individual the benefit of the doubt, withholding judgement and assuming that support is first and foremost what is needed.

Have the conversations

If you've spotted some of the signs above and are concerned, you need to know how to address the issue. The examples below present a range of situations with suggestions for how to tackle them.

I noticed a concerning change in an employee's behaviour. How do I address it?
The important thing when reaching out is to create a setting that doesn't turn into a confrontation. No one should feel cornered or pressured. Focus on the person's work performance – the only area that's relevant to you – and do not reference any perceived psychological difficulties, unless they bring these into the conversation themselves. Avoid any leading statements that suggest you know the underlying reasons for someone's behaviour or are trying to give them advice, such as "you seem stressed" or "you seem tired".

A good starting point is to express your interest from a point of care, not of consternation. Start by using phrases like "I'm worried... " or "I can see that..." and show your appreciation for them. You can then indicate specific changes or irregularities you noticed. Ask for their opinion/perspective, but don't pressure them. What and how much they share is entirely up to them.

At this stage, it's crucial that you don't mention any consequences or the impact on the company. Ask them what they need to improve their situation, offer support and plan a way forward. Schedule a follow-up meeting so you can continue supporting them, showing that you're serious about continuing to help them after this initial conversation. Note that it's not necessarily important to have a long conversation about this immediately or find answers – it's really

about reinforcing that person's sense of psychological safety so you can find a way forward together.

An employee has reached out and told me they have mental health problems
Ideally, you've created a psychologically safe space where people feel like they can share with you, or their team leads, when they're going through a difficult time or coping with a long-term issue. No matter what they express, it's important to refrain from giving well-intentioned advice like, "why don't you take a holiday?". Practice active listening[33,34,35]. Ensuring that they feel heard is much more important than you providing an opinion or advice. Needless to say, take their disclosure very seriously, even if they downplay it. By now, you should have understood the potentially serious and long-term conse-

quences of mental health issues.

If it seems appropriate, refer the individual to professional help, whether that's a helpline, a go-to person in the company or an external partner. These are resources you should ideally have readily at hand and have already distributed in your onboarding materials.

In every instance, and especially if you have more than one instance on a team, use the situation to reflect on and learn about whether the structures in your workplace might be contributing to the problem. If people keep complaining about the same issues like digital overload or constant interruptions, for example, it may well be time to adjust those structures for a healthier work environment.

An employee is back from mental health leave

If worse comes to worst and one of your employees has to take a leave of absence due to mental health chal-lenges, it's essential that you have a clear roadmap in place to help them smoothly rejoin the team. It's your job to be there to listen, support and take action in the background. Start by telling them privately it's good to have them back and ask them how they're doing. Make sure they know they can reach out anytime if they need anything. Sadly, relapses are common with many mental health issues, so it's critical to create as powerful a safety net as possible.

On a larger scale, ensure that everybody involved in the employee's reintegration knows what their role in the reintegration process is, especially the manager and responsible person in HR. Ensure there is a support system in place from other team members and a safe space for the employee to work through any fears they may have of being judged by their peers or stigmatised. Naturally having already established an open culture around mental health topics will be a big help here.

Implement

This step might be the most important step of all: a look at the ways in which you can ensure that any mental health measures you adopt in your organisation become sustainably integrated.

On this subject, the authors of the Mind Share Partners' report emphasise that "accountability mechanisms such as regular pulse surveys and clear ownership" should be in place and the topic of addressing mental health, "should not just be relegated to HR." How should you be looking at it from a change management perspective? Should the upholding of mental health-promoting values and procedures perhaps be incentivised, just as creative agency Scholz & Friends introduced an incentive system for managers that made upholding the values of diversity, equity and inclusion bonus-relevant in their personal assessment?

The question certainly bears asking as there will no doubt be sceptics out there who feel that they have enough work tasks on the table without making time for one-on-one feedback sessions, or who simply feel that any "emotional" topic should be hung on the coat rack by the office front door. These individuals may need some strong convincing – whether in the form of trainings where they see theory put effectively into practice, incentivised reading on the topic (there are plenty of great books with a corporate angle on mental health topics) or, maybe, just maybe, financial rewards for doing their part as a leader.

"Accountability mechanisms such as regular pulse surveys and clear ownership" should be in place and the topic of addressing mental health, "should not just be relegated to HR."

Fundamentally, the answer also depends on the nature of your current organisational culture, the size of your organisation, and, frankly, the strength of your leadership. In any case, as a bare minimum, ensure the topic is flagged for review on a regular basis. And, as already stated, remember that any culture change demands a top-down, bottom-up approach.

The tip of the iceberg…
We've covered a lot of topics in this guide, yet – like the growing public awareness of the importance of workplace mental health itself – it's really just the tip of the iceberg. We hope that this guide will serve as a helpful starting point and resource for spearheading transformation in your organisation and perhaps also within yourself.

You can use the master checklist of the key action points to share with

managers and keep handy for your own reference.

In the months to come, we'll dive into many of the topics we've touched on here in more detail. Follow us on our social media channels (linkedIn) to stay up to date on new publications and upcoming events.

One thing is certain amidst the uncertainty all of us face as we enter 2022: the most rewarding side of addressing mental health topics – as serious and disheartening as the statistics can be – is that, in doing so, we forge more resilient relationships with others and, inevitably, a healthier relationship with ourselves.

Let's embrace the new year with all its complexity and unknowns, ready to share our brilliant ideas and even more ready to share our whole selves – in the workplace and beyond.

Company Mental Health Checklist

Stay on top of these five steps to build a thriving, resilient and psychologically safe culture.

STEP 1:
Walk the talk

Evaluate your "fitness" in the key mental health-maintenance areas

Prevention – Boosting your resources and recharging your batteries

Do you:
- [ ] Take "proper" breaks?
- [ ] Maintain your physical health via regular exercise and a healthy diet?
- [ ] Practice relaxation techniques?
- [ ] Practice good sleep hygiene?
- [ ] Maintain a healthy work/life balance?

Troubleshooting – Cultivating self awareness/mindfulness

Do you:
- [ ] Identify sources of stress and address them proactively?
- [ ] Recognise and treat any early warning signs of stress and burnout?

Communication

Do you:
- [ ] Practice transparency, vulnerability and openness?

Relationships

Do you:
- [ ] Maintain healthy non-work relationships?
- [ ] Have a support network in place to get support as and when you need it, whether in the form of counselors, coaches, teachers and/or friends?

STEP 2:
Assess

Examine your organisation's current mental health behaviours and attitudes in a deep and rigorously honest way.

⏵ Start with Amy Edmondson's Psychological Safety Assessment.

STEP 3:
Prevent

Observe the four pillars of a mental health-friendly workplace:

Establish a communication & feedback culture
- Make space for every voice to be heard
  - Ensure all team members have roughly equal speaking time in meetings
  - Promote inclusivity and allow for diverse communication styles and needs
  - Be sensitive to social and emotional cues and expressions on a daily basis
  - Communicate your own personal growth opportunities/areas of improvement and show vulnerability and compassion
- Revamp and revitalise virtual meetings
  - Enlist/nominate a facilitator
  - Try going audio-only
  - Use polls
  - Organise breakout rooms
  - Follow up with disinterested participants
  - Promote inclusivity, e.g. invite employees to include their preferred personal pronouns
  - Introduce fun and relaxing activities
- Build a feedback culture
  - Provide feedback in a motivating way. Consider "benevolent feedback" and "radical honesty"
  - Seek out feedback about yourself
  - Consider having a go-to person outside teams or departments to be a listening ear should employees feel the need to speak to someone outside the team
  - Change the "fixed" perception of you as a leader by sharing company updates and strategies in different formats
  - Listen and reflect back
- Set healthy boundaries
  Encourage teams to discuss and define their optimal mental health-friendly collaboration ingredients. This may include working agreements

Provide access to mental health resources

Adopt & implement DEI policies and procedures
In addition to top-down policies and procedures, empower employees to form mental health employee resource groups (ERGs) and affinity groups and start peer listening initiatives.

Embrace purpose & support work-life balance
- Identify your personal purpose
- Lead your employees to do the same
- Identify the larger purpose of the company
- Help employees to connect their personal missions with the larger purpose of the company
- Evaluate your organisation's flexibility around working hours and in-presence attendance

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STEP 4:
Respond

- Look and listen: observe how your employees are doing and ask department and team leaders to do the same, always with sensitivity and discretion
- Make sure you and your leaders are trained and prepared to have conversations on sensitive topics

- Provide a document to all employees during onboarding detailing the mental health resources you have available, including points of contact
- Have a reintegration roadmap in place for employees returning from mental-health leave

STEP 5:
Implement

- Employ change management processes to thoroughly integrate new policies and procedures
- At a minimum, ensure there is ownership of the topic and do frequent pulse checks
- Cherish your role as "Normaliser-in-Chief": take care of yourself, be vulnerable and walk the talk

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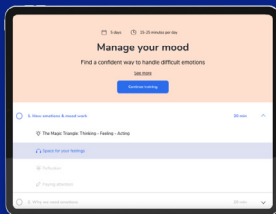
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