

# Mental Health Benefits

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Increasing Utilization to Drive Results



## The Mental Health Landscape at Work

While mental health resources are prevalent in the workplace — particularly for large businesses, where 78% of employees say they receive resources<sup>1</sup> — uptake remains low, with approximately one out of three employees participating.<sup>2</sup>

In an environment where nearly a quarter of adults live with a mental health condition<sup>3</sup> and three out of four workers experience at least one symptom of a mental health condition in a given year<sup>4</sup>, having a robust, well-used mental health benefits program isn't just a nice-to-have, it's a necessity.

When these programs are successful, they can improve employee well-being across the workplace and increase job productivity, satisfaction and retention.<sup>5</sup>

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### Five Common Challenges Impacting Uptake on Mental Health Benefits

Despite increased availability of mental health resources, many employees still face practical and perceptual barriers that prevent them from accessing care. Understanding these five common barriers can help employers build programs employees are more likely to engage with:

- 1. Workplace stigma around mental health conditions;**
- 2. Low leadership visibility and endorsement of mental health support;**
- 3. Benefits that don't meet their specific needs or expectations;**
- 4. Lack of understanding around benefits and how to use them; and**
- 5. Difficulty accessing the full suite of mental health benefits.**

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### Five Key Ways to Increase Mental Health Benefit Utilization

As employee mental health needs continue to evolve, companies have an opportunity to move beyond simply offering benefits to helping employees access and use them. Increasing utilization requires clear communication, manager engagement, reduced stigma and resources that are easy to access when employees need them most.

This resource offers practical guidance for delivering effective mental health support across five key practices to engage employees and increase utilization:

1. **Build a corporate culture that embraces mental health and well-being as a core value;**
  2. **Equip leaders, from executives to managers, to act as ambassadors for your programs;**
  3. **Shape program benefits and support offerings with messaging to match the needs of your workplace demographics;**
  4. **Maintain a steady cadence of communications on available resources and how to use them; and**
  5. **Centralize an access point for your offerings to reduce barriers and increase ease of use.**
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## Practical Guidance for Delivering Effective Mental Health Resources

### 1. Build a Corporate Culture that Embraces Mental Health

Simply having resources won't lead employees to utilize them. Companies with higher reported engagement with well-being benefits have over four times higher employee engagement and 13% higher productivity, according to global data.<sup>6</sup> Set your program up for success by positioning mental health as a core value of the organization.

#### **Action Items:**

Define mental health as a core business priority — rather than a benefits offering.

- Ensure mental health is reflected in corporate strategy, leadership messaging and company priorities.
- Reinforce that supporting mental health is part of how your organization operates and succeeds.

Make the business case for mental health tangible and visible.

- Connect mental health to outcomes around productivity, safety, retention and performance.
- Reinforce the impact of mental health on both employee well-being and business results.
- Use consistent examples and messaging to drive the connection across your organization.

### Example: Prioritizing Mental Health in Corporate Policies and Practices

If you offer mental health days, promote their usage to employees and encourage employees to treat time off for mental health the same way they treat it for physical health.

### Case Study: How Johnson & Johnson Created and Embedded an Overall Health Philosophy for Mental, Physical and Emotional Health

Johnson & Johnson's mental well-being strategy is rooted in its longstanding culture of health and well-being, with senior leadership embedding it into the company's core operating philosophy for team performance and organizational success.

#### *Key Takeaways:*

- **Destigmatized the conversation:** Positioned mental health as part of whole-person well-being, reinforcing an open, inclusive culture where employees are encouraged to proactively care for their mental health and well-being along a continuum that is dynamic and realistic to human experience.
- **Leadership visibility:** Senior leaders actively champion mental health and well-being through enterprise-wide communication, storytelling and visible participation in initiatives, signaling to employees that vulnerability is acceptable at all levels.
- **Integrated support systems:** Embedded mental health and well-being into broader health, wellness and benefits programs rather than isolating it, ensuring consistent access and alignment for the employee experience.
- **Accountability and measurement:** Updated its Healthy Mind Policy across the company globally, focusing on both individual and organizational factors that support mental health and well-being in the workplace, including continuous evolution of support based on employee needs.

Johnson & Johnson progresses culture change at scale through leadership signaling, integration across systems, and sustained accountability that makes mental health and well-being part of how the organization operates.

Learn more: <https://www.careers.jnj.com/en/life-at-jj/employee-benefits/>

### Additional Resources to Explore

[APA Center for Workplace Mental Health: The Working Well Toolkit](#) | A practical, employer-tested guide with conversation starters, manager scripts and policy templates for normalizing mental health discussions and embedding well-being into everyday workplace culture.

[SHRM: Creating a Mental-Health-Friendly Workplace](#) | An HR-focused roadmap covering stigma reduction, accommodation practices and culture-shaping policies that help organizations move from one-off programs to sustained, supportive mental health practices.

[HHS: The Surgeon General's Framework for Workplace Mental Health and Well-Being](#) | A framework built around five essentials (protection from harm, connection and community, work-life harmony, mattering at work, and opportunity for growth) that empowers leaders to build a culture with mental health at the center.

## 2. Prioritize Leadership Buy-In and Endorsement of Your Mental Health Program

When leadership embraces mental health as a priority and encourages use of resources, employee utilization can increase by nearly three times its previous level.<sup>7</sup>

### **Action Items:**

Make leadership communications on mental health consistent and specific.

- Discuss the individual offerings your company provides and encourage use of those offerings.
- Equip a broad set of leaders with messaging points to help them share what resources exist, when employees can and should use them, and that leadership wants them to access care.

Activate managers as the first line of access.

- Recognize the impact of managers on employee mental health. Studies show managers have a higher impact than doctors and therapists and as much of an impact as spouses and partners, which makes how they show up for employees especially important.<sup>8</sup>
- Build manager trainings that help support employees' mental health, including how supervisors can direct employees to relevant resources and support mental health as a productivity driver for their team.

### Example: Four Ways to Equip Leaders to be Mental Health Ambassadors

1. Conversation guides to set leaders up for success;
2. FAQs on available resources and questions employees might ask;
3. Clear guidelines on where leaders can refer employees for more information and relevant resources; and
4. Concrete guidance on when, where and how they can support employees.

### Case Study: How Merck Built a Peer-Led Mental Health Ambassador Network

Merck's mental health strategy combines enterprise-wide well-being resources with a peer-led ambassador model designed to reduce stigma, increase awareness and connect employees to support. Through its "Mind Well" program and employee-led "Mind Well Champions" network, the company has embedded mental health advocacy into workplace culture across global teams.

#### *Key Takeaways:*

- **Peer-led support network:** Leveraged the "Mind Well Champions" volunteer program to equip employees to support colleagues' emotional well-being, encourage help-seeking and promote access to mental health resources.
- **Training and awareness:** Expanded mental health first aid and awareness training through employee volunteer ambassadors and wellness champion networks designed to normalize conversations about mental health.
- **Leadership-backed culture change:** Reinforced the initiative through executive sponsorship, global awareness campaigns, employee webcasts, and enterprise well-being communications aimed at reducing stigma and promoting psychological safety.

Merck demonstrates that peer ambassador programs can be highly effective when paired with visible leadership support, employee training and accessible well-being resources. By empowering employees to serve as trusted advocates for mental health support, the company created a scalable model for promoting a positive workplace culture through peer leadership.

Learn more: [www.merck.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/124/2025/08/2024-2025-US-Annual-Wellbeing-Report.pdf](https://www.merck.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/124/2025/08/2024-2025-US-Annual-Wellbeing-Report.pdf)

### Additional Resources to Explore

[Mind Share Partners: Leaders Go First](#) | A practical guide that equips executives to model vulnerability, share their own mental health stories and visibly champion well-being.

[Mind Forward Alliance: Leadership Pledge](#) | A public commitment framework that helps CEOs and senior leaders declare accountability for workplace mental health, with concrete actions to translate endorsement into sustained organizational change.

[APA Center for Workplace Mental Health: Mental Health Works Guide](#) | A resource that gives leaders the language, business case and concrete playbook for championing mental health, including how to talk about it, invest in it and align senior leadership behind a unified strategy.

## 3. Tailor Mental Health Resources to Your Employee Populations

Mental health needs and expectations can vary across employee populations, and employees from underserved communities can feel even less supported by their employers than their peers while also experiencing mental health challenges.<sup>9,10</sup> Framing programs to be culturally competent and tailoring resources to your workforce can help ensure offerings feel relevant to the employees they are intended to support.

### **Action Items:**

Segment your workforce and tailor offerings to meet their specific needs.

- Consider how current usage and benefits needs differ across generations (e.g., Gen Z, millennials, baby boomers) and types of employees (e.g., frontline workers, shift workers, corporate employees).

Continuously assess and reassess fit and relevance of your offerings.

- Seek employee feedback to refine your offerings.
- Identify where you have resource gaps and need to introduce new offerings or retire resources that aren't delivering.

### Example: Segmenting Your Workforce to Improve Relevance

- Map your workforce by role, location and work patterns (e.g., shift vs. corporate).
- Identify differences in how groups access and use resource.
- Align offerings and communication channels to those patterns (e.g., mobile-first for frontline workers, manager-led for team-based environments).

### Additional Resources to Explore

[APA Center for Workplace Mental Health: Working Caregiver Resources](#) | A toolkit addressing the unique mental health pressures facing employees balancing work with caregiving, with guidance on policies, benefits design and manager support.

[CEO Roundtable: Company Mental Health Program Summaries](#) | A library of real-world employer case studies spanning industries and workforce types to share concrete examples of how organizations have tailored mental health resources to their employee populations.

[Modern Health: Designing Mental Health Benefits for Frontline Workers](#) | A guide for adapting mental health benefits for hourly, shift-based and deskless employees to address access barriers, communication gaps and engagement challenges.

## 4. Deliver a Clear Cadence of Communications Around Your Mental Health Resources

Employers have focused efforts on awareness — with 74% of employees saying they know how to access mental health services if they need them.<sup>11</sup> But to increase utilization, employers have an opportunity to build communications plans that consistently explain the value of resources and clarify corporate policies.

### **Action Items:**

Make each explanation of resources clear and concise.

- Every single communication should answer these three questions:
  - › What is available?
  - › When should I use it?
  - › How do I access it?

- If there is a cost associated with using the resource, be transparent (where possible) about what employees can expect to pay.

Address employees' questions and concerns around cost, privacy and confidentiality, and potential career impact explicitly in your messaging.

- Recent studies show:
  - › Twenty percent of employees have difficulty finding affordable, in-network mental health care through their employers.<sup>12</sup>
  - › Sixteen percent of all employees and 25% of Gen Z employees have concerns with privacy and confidentiality of employer-provided resources.<sup>13</sup>
  - › Nine percent of all employees and 14% of Gen Z employees are worried that using mental health services will negatively impact their career.<sup>14</sup>

### Example: Channels to Champion Your Program

- Digital/intranet platforms
- Internal newsletters
- Town halls
- Employee Resource Groups or Employee Peer Groups Forums

### Case Study: How Hilton Built a Sustained, Multi-Channel Communications

Hilton's Thrive at Hilton program — launched in 2017 and organized around body, mind and spirit to reach its more than 500,000 team members across 143 countries — is leveraging a communications rhythm that meets workers where they actually are.

#### *Key Takeaways:*

- **Multi-channel delivery:** Equipped HR partners with monthly themed communications toolkits adapted to on-property channels — including postcards, electronic bulletin boards and start-of-shift briefings.

- **Flexible formats:** Offered mental health education in varied time formats, from two-minute tip sheets to 45-minute webinars, so managers and team members can engage at the depth their schedules allow.
- **Measurable engagement:** Educated 4,500 team members through live mental health webinars on relevant and timely topics, with 99% reporting they left with a usable takeaway.

Hilton offers a blueprint for what a year-round, layered communications rhythm can look like in practice and how a consistent cadence improves engagement.

Learn more: <https://www.businessroundtable.org/mental-health-initiative>

### Additional Resources to Explore

[AMA: Components of a Communications Strategy to Promote Well-Being](#) | A structured framework for an effective well-being communications plan to move beyond one-off announcements toward sustained engagement.

[APA Center for Workplace Mental Health: Right Direction](#) | A turnkey mental health initiative with ready-to-use resources and assets to reinforce mental health awareness and drive employee engagement.

## 5. Streamline Access to Resources

Making access to mental health resources simple, fast and frictionless can help reduce complexity in how employees find and use available support.<sup>15</sup>

### **Action Items:**

Create a single, centralized entry point for employees.

- Have one place that houses access to and information for all mental health resources with clear navigation.

Keep ease and accessibility in mind.

- Minimize steps needed to access care.
- Support usage and accessibility across platforms (printed, email, desktop and mobile).

### Example: Using Data to Improve Access Over Time

If you use an employee engagement platform to share your resources, consider using platform insights on usage and traffic to identify opportunities to refine access and improve the overall employee experience.

### Additional Resources to Explore

[BenefitsPro: Health Navigation at the Crossroads of Employee Benefits](#) | An industry analysis of how navigation platforms and concierge services are reshaping benefits access, with practical guidance on selecting and integrating tools that help drive employee utilization.

[Cigna: Closing the Mental Health Literacy Gap](#) | A playbook on boosting mental health literacy across the workforce with insights on how to equip employees to recognize when they need support, understand what's available and confidently take the first step toward care.

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## Conclusion

Ultimately, organizations that succeed in improving mental health outcomes are those that treat these programs as a strategic priority rather than a passive benefit. By leveraging corporate culture, engaging leadership, shaping programming to workforce demographics and needs, communicating effectively and regularly, and offering easy access to reduce barriers to use, companies can close the gap between the availability of mental health support and utilization.

The opportunity is not just to offer support, but to ensure employees feel empowered, valued, informed and encouraged to use it, and as a result, have the opportunity to thrive in the workplace. When done effectively, this approach drives measurable gains in well-being, performance and retention, making mental health a core lever of organizational success.

## Endnotes

1. Morning Consult Poll | Mental Health Resources: Availability and Uptake, Page 3
2. Morning Consult Poll | Mental Health Resources: Availability and Uptake, Page 3
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13. Morning Consult Poll | Mental Health Resources: Availability and Uptake, Page 17
14. Morning Consult Poll | Mental Health Resources: Availability and Uptake, Page 17
15. What Works: Proven Strategies to Strengthen Workforce Mental Health, Page 1

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