

5 Common Mental Health Challenges in the Workplace

By Paul Bergeron September 22, 2021



You can't see mental health challenges, but they are happening all around you.

Speaking during a session at the recent SHRM Annual Conference & Expo 2021, Andrea Sides Herron, SHRM-CP, told the plight of her sister, who has struggled with mental health issues for nearly her entire life. Then COVID-19 made them worse. Herron's sister initially hid how she was feeling from friends and family, but eventually the warning signs became clearly visible and she asked for help.

Mental health issues are afflicting people in your office, too, Herron said. Pre-pandemic, 1 in 5 people in the U.S. had some form of mental disorder; the numbers have skyrocketed since then.

Identifying Employees Who Are Experiencing Mental Health Challenges

"Many of you are being squished by mental illness," Herron said. "You have more than you can handle."

One way HR teams and supervisors can identify staff members experiencing mental health challenges, she said, is by paying attention to each person's base lines. What is the person's typical behavior? Learning this becomes more difficult with remote workers, she said, but there are signs that should cause concern.

"Have you noticed that a person's appearance has shifted?" she asked. "Are they choosing not to have their camera on during videoconference meetings when they usually did? Is there evidence that they're drinking too much or [have] picked up smoking again? Maybe they've told you about the 12 Amazon deliveries that show up at their house each day. These are signs."

Herron, a seasoned HR executive, author and host of the HR Scoop podcast, advised HR and managers to be careful when reacting or responding to an employee's changed behavior. "Do not add to the shame that can come with mental health's stigma," she said.

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Addressing Struggling Employees

Herron described five fictional employees, explored some of their behaviors and suggested ways of dealing with those behaviors.

Masa: He's been an employee at the company for three years. He's been a solid performer, but his manager has noticed changes in his behavior and there are rumors that he's getting a divorce.

Check in with him. Managers should keep an open-door policy and let employees know they are there for support, Herron said.

"Employers should never make that first one-on-one meeting ... because an employee did something wrong," she said. "Try to meet earlier on with employees under friendly terms to help to establish a better relationship."

Carlyn: She's been working at the company for two years. She's a high-performer, and she has asked for an off-cycle raise. You sense that she's under financial strain.

It turns out her partner was fired and her household is lacking income. She's become uncharacteristically angry at her co-workers.

"We know there is a strong link between financial stress and mental health," Herron said.

Herron suggested that the employer might:

- Offer her a promotion with more responsibilities since she is a high-performer, if it makes business sense.
- Think about whether the company is doing enough to offer resources that support financial wellness.
- Consider offering tuition reimbursement or student loan payoffs or other benefits in addition to a traditional 401(k).

Employees can be high-performers and have mental illness, Herron said. They may or may not have an official mental health diagnosis.

Ricardo: He has delivered seven years of solid service. Ricardo's manager, however, noticed a decline in his performance. He's up one week and down the next. It depends on the day. Does he have one foot out the door? If so, should he simply be managed out?

Herron suggested that the supervisor be curious about Ricardo. "Show empathy and care," she said. "Maybe offer him some noise-canceling headphones so he can better concentrate if that's a concern. Ultimately, you can be empathetic and also have a discussion about the performance issue if it doesn't improve."

LaVonda: She's new to the company with only six months of service working by herself in the retail section. Things have been OK so far, but LaVonda recently disclosed post-traumatic stress disorder, triggered by being alone in small spaces with men.

Herron suggested giving her a radio code word to speak when she is anxious or perhaps moving her to another equivalent position in the company.

"Work together to find some middle ground and a solution," Herron said. "Keep in mind, these employees don't like surprises. They like to be given a head's-up. Be transparent about the reasons behind the actions you take. Clear is kind. Unclear is unkind."

Some employees with psychiatric disorders (diagnosed or undiagnosed) will experience episodes of disruptive behavior at work. When facing a crisis of emotions, they can go from anger to tears.

"As the supervisor, you must stay as calm as possible while they rage," Herron said. "Hopefully this brings down the temperature. Don't join their emotional level. Show them, 'I didn't come to your anger party.' And, of course, document everything, following up with any and all witnesses to the event."

Ted: He has two years of service. He's an average performer and has the reputation of being aggressive in tone and body language. Suddenly one day, Ted yells and throws a chair across the room.

Herron said the behavior must be addressed but not head-on by accusing him of having mental health issues. First you must de-escalate the situation and make sure everyone remains safe, she said.

If you're worried about legal implications when discussing mental health concerns, "a rule of thumb is to tie any questions you ask to observable behaviors that are related to work performance," Herron said. For example, questions that probe wanting to understand why performance has dipped, a new or noticeable level of disengagement, or speaking more often in a sharp tone are on the right path.

She said to steer away from rumors, personal assumptions or detailed health questions. Don't make comments that offer a medical diagnosis or ask questions about relationship status or medications.

Inappropriate dialogue would be, for example, "Are you depressed?" "Why are you so angry?" or "Have you been taking your meds?"

Nothing Positive About Toxic Positivity

A recent trend starting to pop up is toxic positivity. It's one when office workers must only—and always—express positive feelings.

"These can't be the only emotions that are allowed, because this does not demonstrate a full range of emotions," Herron said. "Not everything deserves a silver lining. Everyone can't always be feeling great all the time."

Herron said one way to modify that environment is to tell employees, "Your feelings are valid and are allowed. It's OK to feel bad sometimes. Things can get really tough. I'm here for you." Not every circumstance needs a silver lining. You can acknowledge someone's experience even if it's different from your own.

"And then when employees come to you and start to unload, don't try to solve things for them," she added. "Ask, 'Do you just want me to listen or do you want me to help you solve it?'"

To show you are a reliably compassionate listener, stay 100 percent focused on the other person. "People know when you're distracted," Herron said. "Practice being present for best results. Don't talk over others when they are unloading. If you do, they know you are not really listening."

HR's Heavy Burden

Some industry professionals experience compassion fatigue. It is characterized by physical and emotional exhaustion and a profound decrease in the ability to empathize.

"If this happens, take time off," Herron said. "Things have been steadily difficult for many for a long time. Know your limits. During the pandemic and beyond, we see that resiliency practices are needed."

She suggested those who feel overburdened can improve their resiliency by journaling daily, taking breaks, paying attention to self-care, prioritizing sleep, setting and achieving exercise goals, and forming tiny habits that can help with coping.

Peer connections have never been more valuable, she added. "It's a wild time to be in HR," she said. "And remember, you don't have to go it alone. Connect with your peers. Remind yourself you are making a difference."

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<https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/employee-relations/pages/5-common-mental-health-challenges-in-the-workplace.aspx>

