

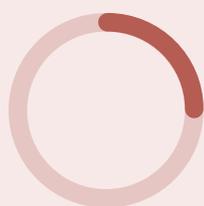
C-SUITE MENTAL HEALTH PERSPECTIVE

How Tackling Mental Health Stigma Can Boost Your Global Workforce's Well-Being



People all over the world face mental health challenges that can affect their well-being and ability to engage at work. Access to mental health care is also a problem worldwide, and stigma—the [shame](#) associated with needing mental health support—remains a pervasive barrier to employees seeking treatment.

[One in four](#) people across the globe experience a mental health disorder each year, yet [eight out of 10](#) workers won't reach out for support because of the stigma surrounding mental illness. Companies that view stigma as an individual problem outside their scope of influence are missing a critical opportunity. Employers can be a powerful force in overcoming mental health stigma—and the rewards for doing so are great.



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The impact of mental health stigma

Stigma affects the way people feel about themselves (self-stigma), the reaction the rest of the population has to people with mental health conditions (public stigma), and the way systems such as workplaces approach mental health (structural stigma). [Research shows](#) that most people in Western European nations—even some trained medical and mental health professionals—hold stigmatizing attitudes about mental illness. In contrast to the public’s more sympathetic attitudes toward physical disabilities, [people often perceive](#) those with mental illness to be in control of their condition, responsible for causing it, and undeserving of help. Workers and their employers pay a hefty price for stigma through:

Employee suffering

Untreated mental health conditions can cause a lot of suffering for employees, including behaviors like substance use, difficulty sleeping, work and relationship problems, and worsening mental health. Stigma fuels [misconceptions about mental illness](#), such as the false idea that people with mental health conditions are weak, flawed, irresponsible, or incapable of being productive employees.

Reluctance to start or complete treatment

As a result of stigma, many employees suffer in silence—often for fear that their reputation, relationships, or job status could be in jeopardy if they disclose having a mental health condition. This can worsen their symptoms and make them [less likely](#) to get treatment and [recover](#). Stigma can also lead to other [barriers](#) to treatment, including:

Low self-esteem, often due to [prejudice and discrimination](#)

Problems with social relationships and isolation

Bullying, harassment, or physical violence

Feelings of hopelessness

Inadequate health insurance

Limited access to [resources](#) such as housing and employment

“Stigma is the biggest killer out there,” former U.S. Surgeon General Jerome Adams, MD, told [McKinsey](#). “Stigma kills more people than cigarettes, than heroin, than any other risk factor. Because it keeps people in the shadows, it keeps people from asking for help, it keeps good people from being willing to offer help.”

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Business costs

When people go without the mental health care they need, their ability to work creatively and effectively suffers. While stigma is an individual challenge, it’s also an organizational problem. Untreated mental illness contributes to:

- **Higher health care costs** - In addition to the emotional toll, people with untreated mental health conditions are more likely to suffer from serious physical health issues, such as [heart disease](#) and [diabetes](#). They’re also [more likely to](#) seek care for mental health symptoms in the emergency department, which can be costly and ineffective.
- **Lost productivity** - The World Health Organization (WHO) [estimates](#) that lost productivity due to depression and anxiety alone costs the global economy \$1 trillion each year. Mental health disorders also account for [62 percent](#) of lost work days due to absenteeism. Presenteeism is even more costly, accounting for [4.6 times](#) as many hours lost as absenteeism among workers with depression.
- **Workplace accidents** - In one study, drivers with severe depression symptoms were [4.5 times](#) more likely to experience an accident or near-miss than drivers without depression.

- **Disability claims** – Mental health disorders are a [leading cause](#) of worker disability. In addition to a high volume of claims, disability episodes for mental health disorders are [longer](#) than those for other types of conditions (67 days vs. 33.8 days). In [one study](#), people with an anxiety disorder lost 18 days of work due to disability in the past three months, compared to 5.7 disability days in people without a mental health disorder.
- **Higher employee turnover** – Employees with depression experience [higher job turnover](#) than those without it. This means more recruiting, hiring, and training, which [conservative estimates](#) put at 50 percent or more of an employee's annual salary.

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Mental health stigma is a workplace issue

Given the price of stigma, companies can't afford not to talk about mental illness. "Stigma exists for everyone," said Corine Tan, co-founder at Kona, a software startup. "At companies that don't actively fight against it, you see employees trying to show up with a smile on their face even though they're struggling. We have to prioritize people and their health and happiness—not just the outcomes of their work—to make positive progress."

Unfortunately, many companies today aren't addressing this stigma effectively. A [survey by McKinsey](#) found that most employers acknowledge that stigma is an issue in the workplace, yet less than one in 10 employees report that their workplace is free of mental health stigma.

In a poll by the American Psychiatric Association, [about half](#) of employees were concerned about discussing mental health issues at work. More than one in three worried about retaliation or job loss if they sought mental health care. Most employees were willing to help a co-worker access helpful resources, but one in four didn't know where to turn for help.

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“Mental health concerns are not often visible on the surface,” said Joe Coletta, founder and CEO of 180 Engineering. “This means that employers cannot take a reactive approach, as often they will not even be aware that a situation is unfolding. Instead, the best approach is to be proactive so that employees feel comfortable and supported from the very first time they experience a concern.”

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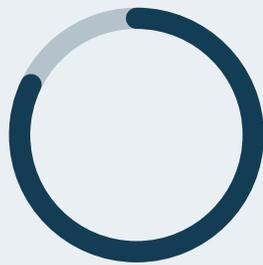
The rewards of addressing mental health stigma

When employees can raise their hands to say they’re struggling with a mental health issue, they’re more likely to get treatment. And research shows treatment works. Over [80 percent](#) of employees who receive mental health treatment say they’re more effective and satisfied at work. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), the treatment efficacy for mental illness [exceeds the rates](#) for heart disease.

Treatment is also cost-effective. Not only can it transform the lives of employees and their loved ones, but it can play a powerful role in helping businesses manage costs. Through several rigorous studies, Lyra Health has found that investing in employee mental health results in significant cost savings, including:

- **Lower health plan spending** - A recent [independent study](#) by professional services firm Aon shows better utilization, lower overall medical claims costs, and a lower incidence of inpatient/outpatient mental health spending among the surveyed employers that offer Lyra.

- **Reduced turnover** - Employees who use their Lyra benefit are almost twice as likely to stay with the company over a 12-month period as those who don't use the benefit.
- **Improved engagement** - Seventy percent of members in the clinical range on the [Work Limitations Questionnaire](#) (WLQ) who seek care with Lyra show improved productivity levels.



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Cultural considerations for global companies

It's even more crucial for global companies to address mental health stigma. Cultural influences impact how people cope with mental health symptoms and whether they seek treatment. Without support from their employers, workers in many parts of the world may not get the treatment they need to be healthy and engaged.

Every culture has different views on mental health, which can affect how people feel about and describe their symptoms. For instance, [research](#) by the U.S. Surgeon General's Office shows that Asian patients are more likely to discuss physical symptoms such as dizziness—only describing emotional symptoms later or when specifically asked. It is also more acceptable in some cultures to try to cope with mental distress alone, or with spiritual support, rather than seeking professional mental health care. It's important to be sensitive to these differences—an approach that is effective in one region may be considered taboo in another.

Cultural factors can influence how much support employees get from friends, family, and their community if they discuss their mental health. Cultures also differ in their perspectives on the causes, risk factors, nature, and meaning of mental

illness. For example, [research](#) shows that people in Eastern countries are more likely to view mental illness as shameful or a moral failing than in Western countries. People in Asian countries face especially heavy stigma; for example, as many as [80 percent of psychiatric patients](#) in China experience discrimination.

Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities face [unique stigmas](#) that make it difficult to access mental health care. For example, BIPOC communities have historically been forced to engage in “survival mode” to endure [systemic oppression](#). They have also had [less access](#) and ability to afford mental health services. This has led many BIPOC people to experience cultural communication that mental health care is a luxury or sign of weakness.

Given that [86 percent](#) of psychologists are white, when BIPOC individuals do seek professional mental health support, they may encounter challenges finding someone from their cultural background. This can lead to concerns that therapy will not be culturally competent enough to address their specific issues.

Regional challenges can also impact global workers’ mental health. Many low- and middle-income countries [lack funding for mental health](#), primarily delivering care through psychiatric institutions. In more than half the countries worldwide, there is just [one psychiatrist](#) for every 100,000

people. Many countries lack mental health policies, programs, legislation, and a sufficient number of mental health workers.

“In some cultures, people feel less comfortable talking about their feelings, but we can’t assign certain behaviors to specific geographies; there are always exceptions,” said Tan. “Ultimately, it has more to do with the company and its culture than the country and its culture.”

For international companies, a one-size-fits-all approach to mental health won’t meet the diverse needs of employees based in different parts of the world. To improve employee satisfaction and quality of life, and minimize problems like turnover and reduced productivity in your global workforce, you’ll need a more personalized approach.



How global employers can support workforce mental health

Employers play an important role in destigmatizing mental illness and nurturing a positive work environment. Global companies are increasingly offering support for employees with behavioral health conditions, but employers can only help if their people are willing to share their struggles. Here are a few ways you can address mental health stigma at work, so more of your people get the help they need.

#1: Foster a supportive work environment

In an American Psychological Association (APA) [survey](#), 65 percent of adults cited work as a significant source of stress, yet only 36 percent said their organization provided adequate resources to manage that stress. Let your employees know their health and well-being is important to you through both words and actions. Encourage them to approach their supervisors if expectations or workloads become difficult to manage, and commit to finding solutions together.

#2: Start the conversation—and keep it going

Many employees [want to have a serious conversation](#) about mental health. These can be difficult discussions to have under the best circumstances, but can feel impossible if a company doesn't talk openly about mental health or offer resources to support workers who ask for help. "In a lot of companies, there's a sense that employees have to set their personal lives aside to 'be professional,'" said Tan. "This type of toxic positivity takes a toll on workers."

When managers and company leaders talk openly about their mental health, they send a message to employees that they are welcome to discuss their own challenges as well. [Research](#) shows that this type of authentic leadership builds trust and improves employee performance. A few ways to open the lines of communication include:



Checking in with your teams regularly and proactively sharing useful mental health resources



Talking about mental health on all-company calls



Sharing internal videos of company leaders discussing their mental health, which signals that vulnerability is a strength and helps combat associations people may have with mental illness being “unknown” or “scary”



Modeling healthy behaviors by using paid time off (PTO) and encouraging employees to do the same, or telling employees you took time for a mid-day walk, therapy appointment, or other form of self-care



Accommodating PTO to focus on improving mental health, not just physical health



Taking quarterly employee surveys to understand the impact of mental health challenges and stigma, and following through with meaningful action in response to the survey findings

“When awareness and acceptance of mental health issues comes from employers, it opens up discussions between co-workers, and between employees and managers,” said Anat Mor Betzalel, LCSW, a Lyra therapist who has provided care in Israel and other countries. “These conversations create a shift that helps reduce stigma. The message is especially strong when employers reinforce it with both words and actions.”

#3: Create opportunities for team-building

Logistics like time zones can get complicated with global teams, but it’s important to create opportunities for employees to bond with each other and learn about other cultures. Consider hosting virtual learning events, birthday celebrations, or team gatherings. You can also establish special channels or employee resource groups (ERGs) where employees can socialize. Whereas isolation and feeling “other” can be enemies of mental health, nurturing casual interactions where teammates get to know one another as people helps build trust.

#4: Be flexible

Different cultures will have different workplace norms and values. For example, Americans work relatively [long hours](#) and tend to prefer a systematic approach, doing one thing at a time. Many European countries pride themselves on having more balance than Americans and prefer doing several tasks in parallel. Recognize that there are many different work styles, and that all can be effective.

Offering flexibility means approaching employees as individuals and accommodating their needs whenever possible. By doing so, [many employers see](#) lower turnover rates and higher employee engagement, commitment, and loyalty. Some examples of workplace flexibility include:

- Offering flexible working hours or condensed schedules to support work-life balance
- Providing time for parents to attend school programs
- Allowing employees to telecommute or work from non-traditional settings

#5: Prioritize diversity and cultural competence

A diverse and inclusive work environment can help [prevent mental health problems](#), the WHO has found. A few key steps include:

- Hiring a culturally diverse workforce, particularly managers and leaders, that can communicate effectively, understand cultural norms, and nurture relationships with team members in other parts of the world

- Evaluating your team's cultural knowledge and filling gaps where needed (for example, administer a standardized survey and, based on the findings, teach employees strategies and adjust company policies to reduce implicit biases)
- Launching training and coaching programs with cross-cultural experts
- Investing in diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) initiatives, which also [support mental health](#)
- Encouraging sensitivity to different customs, business etiquette, languages, time, and other issues
- Increasing access to culturally competent mental health care benefits

"Establishing a true culture of care requires deliberately building the right ecosystem to sustain it," said Juanita Simpson, director of business development and marketing at [ICAS International](#), a global employee assistance program. "The acid test of an organization's commitment to the health of its employees ultimately lies in its investment in resources aimed at helping them assess their health status, access appropriate levels of care, and develop the resilience and skill needed to grow and thrive in an uncertain world."

Lyra trains mental health providers in [culturally responsive care](#) practices and provides educational materials that can be adapted to specific cultures. Our mental health coaches and therapists offer treatments that incorporate each member's background and life experiences as part of the therapeutic process. Lyra providers can also choose to work with the groups they're most passionate about serving, which can create a more positive therapeutic experience for both the client and provider.

#6: Develop anti-stigma programs and messaging

A [recent survey](#) found that 80 percent of workers said they'd benefit from an anti-stigma awareness campaign, but only 23 percent of employers reported having this type of program. While employers can't directly treat issues like depression and anxiety, they do have the power to break down barriers to treatment. Here are a few ways to build awareness:

- Create ongoing mental health [awareness campaigns](#), trainings, or workshops that educate employees about mental illness and encourage them to seek help
- Develop a team of "mental health champions" who build awareness of mental health and are non-judgmental sources of support

- Implement ERGs to provide forums for people interested in connecting around mental health topics and advocacy efforts
- Enforce anti-discrimination policies

#7: Choose your words wisely

Be conscious of the language you and others use. Choose [person-centered language](#) when talking about mental health to avoid unintended stigmatizing. For example, saying "person with a substance use disorder" when referring to someone who is struggling with addiction, rather than "addict," recognizes the person's humanity and helps combat stereotypes. Avoid comments like, "She's being crazy today," which discourage people from asking for help for fear of being judged or excluded. Respond quickly to any inappropriate remarks about mental illness with a constructive conversation and/or training.

#8: Provide mental health literacy training

Company-wide training about the signs of mental health issues can help teams identify symptoms of mental illness and get connected to resources before they become a more serious problem. Mental health training should explain that mental health issues are common and treatable conditions, much like heart disease and diabetes. Communicating information around mental health in this way can help reduce stigma.

Also consider providing specialized training for managers to help them listen to employees in distress and have empathetic conversations about mental health with the goal of connecting employees to resources. Many employees assume their managers are receiving training on identifying mental health issues and providing referrals to helpful resources. However, surveys suggest that just [25 percent](#) of managers have actually received this type of education. Equipped with tools and knowledge about mental health, managers can assess workplace conditions that may be negatively impacting mental wellness and effectively respond to employee mental health concerns.

“Managers are the main mental health resource for many teams, but they’re spread thinner than ever,” said Tan, whose [research](#) found that managers today have

double the number of direct reports than they did pre-pandemic. “It’s important to train managers to be stewards of mental health, but also recognize their growing list of responsibilities and point employees to other resources as well.”

#9: Offer comprehensive mental health benefits to employees worldwide

International workforces need access to personalized, culturally competent mental health care. Mental health benefits were once a nice-to-have option. Today, these benefits are a must-have, especially for global companies.

“The best global companies now offer a benefits package that shows the company genuinely understands the larger needs and challenges of its employees and is providing appropriate benefits to ensure they feel valued and supported, regardless of their geographical location,” said Simpson. “In the new world of work, there is the dawning realization that organizations cannot operate effectively without the trust of their employees and without providing them with appropriate support and care. It puts people at the front and center of everything.”

Not all mental health benefits are well suited to global workforces.

Look for a solution that:

- Can address the full range of mental health issues, from stress and burnout to substance use, severe depression, and suicidality
- Uses technology to make care widely accessible in a variety of ways, such as video, telephone, live chat, and in-person
- Is culturally responsive with a network of diverse providers who can understand and adapt to different cultures' varying mental health needs
- Works with providers specially trained to address race and other social identities in care, as well as make cultural adaptations to therapies to fit their clients' needs
- Partners with providers with diverse linguistic capabilities, so they don't have to rely on translators

Make a tangible difference for your global employees

Surveys show that employees want parity between the mental health benefits and physical health plans their employers offer. Offering a mental health benefit, perhaps an employee assistance program or digital tools and apps, sends a message that employee concerns will be met with compassion and support. This alone can help reduce stigma. But these offerings often fall short in terms of quality, utilization, and effectiveness.

Offering a comprehensive benefit demonstrates that your company isn't just making a symbolic gesture of support, but is investing in employees' health and well-being.

Learn more about [Lyra's impact](#), or schedule a free consultation to find out how Lyra can support your global workforce.
partners@lyrahealth.com



About Lyra Health

Lyra Health, a leading provider of innovative mental health benefits for 2.5 million U.S. employees and dependents, is transforming mental health care by creating a frictionless experience for members, providers, and employers. Using matching technology and an innovative digital platform, Lyra connects companies and their employees—plus spouses and children—to world-class therapists, mental health coaches, and personalized medication prescribing. Leading self-insured employers partner with Lyra to tailor value-driven mental health benefits programs specific to their workforce. With Lyra, benefits leaders can offer employees fast, reliable access to clinicians who practice evidence-based mental health care approaches that have been proven effective. For more information, visit: lyrahealth.com, and follow us on [LinkedIn](#), [Facebook](#), and [Twitter](#).