Research to Practice: Supporting the Mental Health of Employees from Underserved Communities

The Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion (EARN) conducted four listening sessions to explore how workplace mental health supports can best serve all employees, particularly those with intersecting marginalized identities (for example, a person with a disability who is also a member of a marginalized racial or ethnic group or the LGBTQI+ community). This document provides ten ways to support the mental health needs of employees with multiply marginalized identities. These best practices emerged during the listening sessions.

Ten ways to better support the mental health needs of employees from underserved communities:

1. **Build trust and ensure privacy and confidentiality when an employee discloses.**

   While many employees may experience privacy concerns when accessing mental health resources, employees of color often experience these concerns to a greater degree. Creating an environment of trust and psychological safety is essential to a successful workplace mental health initiative. This step includes providing resources to support mental well-being and allows employees facing additional challenges, including those from underserved communities, to feel more comfortable at work. Organizations must prioritize the confidentiality of employee information so that employees are more willing to disclose mental health conditions.

   These sessions made it clear that people who are multiply marginalized often lack trust in employers’ ability or willingness to protect them from the possible repercussions of sharing personal information at work. To combat this problem, organizations should emphasize transparency in their processes. They should clarify how personal data is maintained confidentially and provide written assurance to workers that disclosing personal information will not impact their job security or advancement opportunities.

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2. **Acknowledge factors that impact employee mental health beyond the workplace.**

Awareness of the histories and trauma of employees from historically underserved communities is an important element in creating a psychologically safe workplace. Employers should consciously cultivate a mental health-friendly and inclusive work culture. Such a culture includes considering the history of trauma that may cause emotional distress for people in specific communities, such as those affected by racial injustice and violence, geopolitical conflicts and wars, and acts of discrimination or hate crimes. Sensitivity from managers is important when acknowledging painful events that impact employees. Managers should implement practices such as checking in with affected employees, offering flexibility with work schedules or time off if needed, providing access to mental health resources and counseling services, and facilitating optional discussions or support groups. Implementing such practices can provide an environment in which workers feel genuinely supported during challenging times.

3. **Recognize the diversity of each cultural group.**

Employers should appreciate the complexities of diverse communities and welcome their cross-cultural experiences into the organization, as these benefit the overall workplace culture. They should recognize that diversity exists within each cultural group and avoid making assumptions or buying into stereotypes. For example, some Native American communities have culturally specific healing practices, such as talking circles, which may not be a practice in other Native American communities.

Employers should work toward understanding their employees’ unique experiences and respect their heritage. For example, when applicable, an employer could refer to an employee as “Lao” rather than broadly using the term “Southeast Asian.” Doing so helps establish an atmosphere of empathy and shows respect for that person’s identity and culture.

4. **Support organizational programs.**

Listening session participants emphasized the importance of creating a workplace that supports staff with diverse backgrounds. Employers should invest in diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) programs and employee resource groups (ERGs).

It is important for employers to recognize the positive impact of DEIA initiatives on employee mental health. This does not mean DEIA efforts must be directly tied to employee mental health initiatives. ERGs can help inform an organization about issues their members are experiencing. This provides an opportunity to brainstorm potential programs or policies that may help. ERGs may also help develop training to address issues their members face. Including ERGs in strategic planning will help ensure that the organization’s approach is the best option for all, including employees from underserved communities.

5. **Build partnerships and clear communication channels.**

The listening sessions highlighted the essential role that partnerships between employers and employees can play in promoting mental health awareness and building a more supportive work environment. These collaborative efforts will help to ensure that initiatives related to DEIA, ERGs, and well-being programs are not conducted in isolation, but form an integrated system designed to support all workers.

Organizations should proactively communicate information and resources related to mental health internally and externally. Language around mental health should be explicitly included in existing documents about resources and benefits, with an emphasis on support systems that foster well-being. ERGs can assist in identifying effective communication channels that reach their members. Leaders within organizations also have an important role when
it comes to creating a safe atmosphere for open communication about these issues. Leaders who advocate for good workplace mental health, promote a safe work environment, and sponsor ERGs send staff and the surrounding community a positive message on the organization’s priorities. These actions encourage employees to seek support without fear of repercussion or judgment.

6 Provide culturally responsive mental health services and training.
Employees and employers should work together to develop appropriate strategies and support systems for mental well-being at work. These systems should be culturally responsive and account for individual experiences of marginalization; otherwise, they may be ineffective. Being culturally responsive is the way by which organizations acknowledge, understand, and apply practices and strategies that respect and incorporate the cultural backgrounds of different people. This includes considering their race/ethnicity, first language, gender identity, socioeconomic status, nationality, religion, and more when designing and implementing various systems, interventions, and services.

A lack of culturally responsive materials and services can be detrimental to fostering open communication and meaningful conversations around mental health and well-being. Employers should consider cultural differences and be willing to learn, listen, and adjust to the needs of employees. Doing so will support a flexible approach to workplace mental health - an approach that considers intersecting identities and the experiences and perspectives of all workers.

7 Provide flexible work options.
Listening session participants emphasized the importance of having flexible work arrangements, such as telework or flexible work hours, to promote mental well-being. When possible, employers should develop flexible work policies to address worker needs. Specifically, remote work or telework options can help some disabled people. These options can be short-term or long-term and may also support the success of employees who are parents or caregivers. Flexible workplace policies also help organizations attract a wider talent pool, including people with disabilities, as they demonstrate a commitment to an inclusive workplace culture.

8 Offer mental health supports.
While incorporating feedback from the listening sessions, it became evident that employers have the opportunity to provide or increase well-being benefits and services to support the mental health of their employees. This may include additional time off for mental health and no-cost telehealth counseling sessions or other supports offered through an organization’s employee assistance program (EAP). In general, offering more flexible options for accessing mental health care is beneficial.

9 Consider language needs when developing mental health resources.
Language barriers impede access to mental health services. Listening session participants shared their experiences facing obstacles, such as a need for Spanish-speaking counselors or sign language interpreters when they sought help. Employers should ensure everyone has equal access to needed resources by professionally translating support information into other languages. Additionally, ensure that lists of available providers include those who offer services in all employees’ first languages.
Get leadership buy-in.

Leadership buy-in is essential to effective organizational change. To promote workplace mental health holistically, employers must address inclusion in areas such as hiring and candidate evaluation practices. This includes ensuring hiring managers and others involved in the hiring process keep an open mind when it comes to candidates who disclose disabilities or mental health conditions, who are non-native English speakers, or who may otherwise be “non-traditional” candidates (such as older workers).

References