

Mental Health in the Workplace

Mental health is finally getting the attention it deserves at work. For decades, the **stigma** surrounding conditions such as anxiety, depression, and stress kept many employees from seeking help or even admitting they had a problem. Today, however, awareness of **well-being** at work has grown significantly, driven by rising **prevalence** rates, post-pandemic shifts in attitudes, and a growing body of research linking mental health to workplace **productivity**. Companies are beginning to understand that a workforce struggling in silence is not only a human cost but also a financial one. The phenomenon of **burnout** — a state of chronic exhaustion caused by prolonged workplace stress — has gained mainstream recognition and is now classified as an occupational hazard by the World Health Organization. High rates of **absenteeism** — days lost because employees are too unwell to attend — cost organizations billions each year. Yet many workers still fear that if they **disclose** a mental health condition, they will be judged or passed over for promotion.

When mental health goes unaddressed, the effects extend well beyond the individual. One of the most significant and least visible consequences is **presenteeism** — the practice of showing up to work while mentally unwell and unable to function properly. Unlike absenteeism, presenteeism is difficult to track, yet researchers estimate it costs employers far more in lost output. Mental health conditions can severely **impair cognitive** functions such as concentration, memory, and decision-making. When these difficulties become **chronic**, the impact deepens. High **turnover** — the rate at which employees leave and must be replaced — is another costly consequence, as burned-out workers increasingly choose to quit rather than endure a harmful environment. In some countries, mental health has become the leading cause of long-term **disability**, overtaking physical ailments as the primary reason people exit the workforce permanently. These patterns only **exacerbate** the staffing pressures many organizations already face.

Recognizing these costs, many companies have begun to take steps to **destigmatize** mental health and build systems of support. One of the most widely adopted tools is the **Employee Assistance Program**, a **confidential** service that gives employees free access to counselors, therapists, and other mental health professionals. These programs have expanded significantly in recent years, with many now offering **teletherapy** — therapy conducted remotely via video or phone — making help accessible to workers regardless of location. A more **proactive** approach goes beyond simply offering resources; it involves building a culture where conversations about mental health are normalized. Organizations are training managers to recognize warning signs, respond with empathy, and connect colleagues with support before a crisis develops. Building **resilience** — the capacity to adapt and recover from stress — is increasingly seen as a professional skill worth developing. Companies that succeed in this area do not simply **normalize** asking for help; they make it expected.

Workplace design and management practices also play a major role. Excessive **workload**, unclear expectations, and poor communication are among the leading causes of workplace stress. By contrast, giving employees greater **autonomy** — the freedom to manage their own time and make meaningful decisions — is consistently associated with better mental health outcomes. Nothing undermines this more than **micromanagement**, the habit of controlling every small detail of an employee's work, which signals a lack of trust and erodes motivation. Equally important is **psychological safety** — the shared belief within a team that members can speak up or admit mistakes without fear of punishment. Research shows that teams with this quality are more creative and significantly less likely to develop the kind of **toxic** dynamics that drive burnout. Improving **retention** by creating healthier environments has become a strategic priority, and some organizations now **benchmark** their mental health performance against industry peers.

Structured programs and data-driven strategies are helping companies move from good intentions to measurable results. Training in **mindfulness** — practices that encourage focused attention on the present moment — has moved from wellness fad to corporate mainstream, with research supporting its effectiveness in reducing stress. Targeted **intervention** programs that identify at-risk employees early and provide tailored support have proven especially effective. Many organizations have introduced **peer support** networks, in which trained colleagues serve as first points of contact for those experiencing difficulties. When senior leaders openly discuss their own mental health, a message of acceptance can **cascade** down through an organization and reshape its culture faster than any policy document. Companies that **implement** such initiatives well tend to adopt a **holistic** view of employee health, addressing physical, emotional, and social dimensions together. Evidence consistently shows a strong **ROI**, with some studies calculating returns of four to five dollars for every dollar spent.

Legal frameworks are also shifting the landscape. In a growing number of countries, **legislation** requires employers to address workplace mental health, not merely physical safety. Some governments **mandate** that companies provide minimum levels of support, including access to counseling and mental health days. Legal protections for employees with mental health conditions also increasingly require employers to provide **accommodation** — adjustments to working conditions that allow individuals to perform their roles effectively. The push for **parity** between physical and mental health treatment in insurance and employment law has gained considerable political momentum. Ensuring **compliance** with these evolving regulations has become a concern for HR departments worldwide. Disability rights groups and mental health charities continue to **advocate** for stronger protections and greater transparency from employers about the support they provide. In many places, landmark legal rulings and high-profile settlements have been described as **watershed** moments that changed how courts and employers think about their responsibilities.

The future of workplace mental health is being shaped by new technologies and changing patterns of work. The rise of **hybrid work** — arrangements combining office and remote working — has brought both new challenges and opportunities. Without clear limits between professional and personal life, many employees struggle to switch off. This **always-on culture** makes it harder to maintain the **boundary** between work and rest that protects long-term well-being. Some employers have begun to **monitor** digital indicators such as after-hours email activity as signals of potential burnout risk, though this raises ethical questions about privacy. What most experts agree on is that **transparency** — honest communication from employers about what support is available and how to access it — is foundational. Programs that are **opt-in**, allowing employees to engage voluntarily, tend to outperform mandatory ones. Organizations best positioned for the future are those building a **framework** that treats mental health as a core business value.

Beyond the Headlines

Most people know that chronic stress is bad for health, but the biology behind it is more dramatic than many realize. When the brain perceives a threat — whether a physical danger or a difficult email from a manager — it triggers the release of **cortisol**, the body's primary stress hormone. In short bursts, cortisol is useful. In sustained doses, however, it disrupts sleep, weakens the immune system, and can interfere with **neuroplasticity** — the brain's ability to form new connections and adapt to new information. People under chronic stress tend to **ruminate**, replaying worrying thoughts in a loop, partly because stress activates the **default mode network**, a brain system associated with self-referential thinking. Interestingly, even brief periods of genuine **decompression** — stepping away from screens and demands — can meaningfully restore mental capacity. Time in nature, for instance, reduces **attentional fatigue**, the tiredness that comes from sustained focus. Natural environments appear uniquely **restorative** in ways that scrolling a phone during lunch simply cannot replicate.

Vocabulary

Paragraph 1

stigma (n.)	(n.) A set of negative and unfair beliefs that a society or group has about something, causing people to feel shame or be treated differently. <i>"The stigma around mental illness stopped many workers from telling their manager they were struggling."</i>
well-being (n.)	(n.) The state of being comfortable, healthy, and content, particularly with regard to physical and mental health. <i>"The company launched several new programs aimed at improving employee well-being."</i>
prevalence (n.)	(n.) The fact of being widespread or commonly occurring within a group or area. <i>"The prevalence of anxiety among young professionals has increased sharply in recent years."</i>
productivity (n.)	(n.) The rate at which work is completed efficiently and successfully, often used to measure output relative to time or resources. <i>"Poor mental health was found to have a direct negative effect on worker productivity."</i>
absenteeism (n.)	(n.) The habit or practice of regularly staying away from work or school without good reason, or the rate at which this occurs. <i>"High levels of absenteeism across the department signaled that something was seriously wrong."</i>
burnout (n.)	(n.) A state of physical and emotional exhaustion caused by prolonged exposure to stress, often resulting in reduced performance and disengagement. <i>"The company introduced mandatory rest periods after a spike in burnout cases among its customer service staff."</i>
disclose (v.)	(v.) To make something known or share information that was previously kept private or secret. <i>"She was afraid to disclose her diagnosis to her manager in case it affected her career."</i>

Paragraph 2

presenteeism (n.)	(n.) The practice of going to work while ill or mentally unwell and therefore unable to perform effectively. <i>"Presenteeism was costing the company far more in lost output than sick days ever had."</i>
impair (v.)	(v.) To weaken or damage something, especially a function or ability, making it less effective than it should be. <i>"Severe stress can impair a person's ability to concentrate for extended periods."</i>
cognitive (adj.)	(adj.) Relating to mental processes such as thinking, understanding, learning, and remembering. <i>"The research examined how burnout affects cognitive performance in high-pressure roles."</i>
chronic (adj.)	(adj.) Persisting for a long time or constantly recurring, often used to describe a condition that does not improve quickly. <i>"Chronic stress, if left untreated, can lead to serious physical and mental health conditions."</i>
turnover (n.)	(n.) The rate at which employees leave an organization and are replaced by new hires, often used as an indicator of workplace satisfaction. <i>"High turnover in the sales team prompted management to investigate working conditions."</i>
disability (n.)	(n.) A physical or mental condition that limits a person's movements, senses, or activities in a significant and lasting way. <i>"Mental health conditions have</i>

	<i>become the most common cause of long-term disability among working-age adults."</i>
exacerbate (v.)	(v.) To make a problem, situation, or negative feeling worse or more severe than it already is. <i>"Understaffing only served to exacerbate the stress already felt by remaining team members."</i>

Paragraph 3

destigmatize (v.)	(v.) To reduce or remove the negative social associations attached to a condition, behavior, or group, making it more accepted. <i>"The campaign aimed to destigmatize depression by encouraging public figures to share their experiences."</i>
Employee Assistance Program (n. phrase)	(n. phrase) A workplace benefit that provides employees with free, confidential access to counseling and support services for personal or work-related problems. <i>"After the restructuring, the company promoted its Employee Assistance Program to help staff cope with uncertainty."</i>
confidential (adj.)	(adj.) Intended to be kept private and not shared with others; meant only for the people directly concerned. <i>"Employees were assured that any information shared with the counselor would remain strictly confidential."</i>
teletherapy (n.)	(n.) Therapy or counseling services delivered remotely via technology such as video calls or phone, rather than in person. <i>"The expansion of teletherapy meant that employees in rural areas could finally access professional mental health support."</i>
proactive (adj.)	(adj.) Acting in advance to deal with an expected problem or need, rather than waiting until it occurs and then reacting. <i>"A proactive approach to employee wellness can prevent burnout before it reaches a critical level."</i>
resilience (n.)	(n.) The ability to recover quickly from difficulties or adapt successfully to challenging conditions and stressful events. <i>"Building resilience in teams was identified as one of the most effective ways to reduce long-term stress."</i>
normalize (v.)	(v.) To cause something to conform to what is standard or expected, or to make something seem usual or acceptable within a social context. <i>"Regular check-ins with line managers can help normalize conversations about mental health at work."</i>

Paragraph 4

workload (n.)	(n.) The amount of work that a person or organization has to do within a given period of time. <i>"An unrealistic workload was the single most common complaint among employees in the annual survey."</i>
autonomy (n.)	(n.) The freedom to make one's own decisions and act independently without needing constant approval or direction from others. <i>"Giving staff greater autonomy over their schedules was linked to measurable improvements in job satisfaction."</i>
micromanagement (n.)	(n.) A management style in which a supervisor controls every small detail of employees' work, leaving little room for independent judgment. <i>"The team's creativity was being stifled by constant micromanagement from their department head."</i>

psychological safety (n. phrase)	(n. phrase) A shared belief within a team that members can take risks, speak up, or admit mistakes without fear of negative consequences. <i>“Teams with high levels of psychological safety consistently outperformed those where employees feared speaking up.”</i>
toxic (adj.)	(adj.) Extremely harmful or unpleasant, particularly in relation to a working environment characterized by hostility, dishonesty, or persistent negativity. <i>“A toxic workplace culture drove several senior employees to resign within the same month.”</i>
retention (n.)	(n.) The ability of an organization to keep its employees rather than losing them to other companies or opportunities. <i>“Retention rates improved significantly after the company introduced flexible working arrangements.”</i>
benchmark (v.)	(v.) To measure or evaluate something by comparing it with a standard or with the performance of other organizations in the same field. <i>“HR directors were encouraged to benchmark their wellness programs against the best performers in their industry.”</i>

Paragraph 5

mindfulness (n.)	(n.) A mental practice involving focused attention on the present moment and one's thoughts, feelings, and surroundings, used to reduce stress. <i>“After introducing mindfulness sessions, the firm reported a significant drop in employee-reported stress levels.”</i>
intervention (n.)	(n.) A deliberate action taken to improve a situation or change a behavior, particularly one involving professional support. <i>“Early intervention was found to be far more effective than waiting until an employee reached a breaking point.”</i>
peer support (n. phrase)	(n. phrase) A system in which people with shared experiences offer emotional and practical help to each other, often in an informal or semi-formal setting. <i>“The peer support network trained volunteers to recognize the signs of burnout in their colleagues.”</i>
cascade (v.)	(v.) To pass something downward through successive levels of an organization, or for something to spread progressively from one group to another. <i>“When the CEO spoke openly about his own anxiety, his honesty seemed to cascade through every level of the company.”</i>
implement (v.)	(v.) To put a plan, decision, or policy into action; to begin carrying out something that has been decided or designed. <i>“The board voted to implement a mental health strategy across all three of its regional offices.”</i>
holistic (adj.)	(adj.) Addressing or considering all parts of something rather than focusing on individual elements in isolation; relating to the whole person. <i>“A holistic approach to employee health includes not just physical fitness, but emotional and social well-being too.”</i>
ROI (n.)	(n.) Short for return on investment; the financial gain or benefit achieved relative to the cost of an action or program. <i>“The consultancy calculated the ROI of the wellness program at four dollars for every dollar spent.”</i>

Paragraph 6

legislation (n.)	(n.) Laws that have been officially enacted by a government or legislative body; the process of making laws. <i>“New legislation in several European countries now requires employers to conduct mental health risk assessments.”</i>
mandate (v.)	(v.) To officially require or authorize something by law, regulation, or authority; to give a legal or official instruction. <i>“The new regulations mandate that all organizations with more than fifty employees offer access to counseling services.”</i>
accommodation (n.)	(n.) A change or adjustment to working conditions or tasks made to enable someone with a disability or health condition to perform their role effectively. <i>“The employee requested an accommodation that would allow her to start the workday later due to her medication schedule.”</i>
parity (n.)	(n.) The state of being equal, particularly in terms of status, pay, or treatment given to different groups or things. <i>“Mental health advocates argued that full parity with physical health treatment in insurance plans was long overdue.”</i>
compliance (n.)	(n.) The act of obeying a law, rule, or official requirement; conforming to standards or regulations set by an authority. <i>“Ensuring compliance with the new mental health regulations required companies to update their HR policies significantly.”</i>
advocate (v.)	(v.) To publicly recommend, support, or speak in favor of a cause, policy, or group, particularly to bring about change. <i>“Mental health charities advocate for stronger workplace protections for employees with depression or anxiety.”</i>
watershed (n.)	(n.) An event or moment that marks a significant turning point after which everything changes; a decisive moment in history. <i>“The landmark ruling was seen as a watershed in how employers’ duty of care toward mental health was legally defined.”</i>

Paragraph 7

hybrid work (n. phrase)	(n. phrase) A working arrangement that combines time spent at a central workplace, such as an office, with time working remotely, typically from home. <i>“The shift to hybrid work created new questions about how to maintain team culture and support employee well-being.”</i>
always-on culture (n. phrase)	(n. phrase) A workplace environment in which employees feel implicitly or explicitly expected to be contactable and responsive at all times, including outside official working hours. <i>“The always-on culture at the firm meant that few employees ever truly disconnected, even during vacations.”</i>
boundary (n.)	(n.) A line that marks the limits of an area or concept; in a professional context, a rule or limit that defines what is acceptable between work and personal life. <i>“Without a clear boundary between work and home, many remote workers found it impossible to switch off in the evenings.”</i>
monitor (v.)	(v.) To observe, check, or track something over a period of time in order to gather information or identify potential problems. <i>“Some employers have begun to monitor patterns of after-hours communication as an indicator of burnout risk.”</i>

transparency (n.)	(n.) The quality of being open, honest, and clear in communication; operating in a way that is easy for others to see and understand. <i>“Greater transparency about the support available helped employees feel comfortable enough to seek help.”</i>
opt-in (adj.)	(adj.) Describing a system or program that people choose to join voluntarily, rather than being enrolled automatically or required to participate. <i>“Research found that opt-in wellness programs generated higher engagement than those that were compulsory.”</i>
framework (n.)	(n.) A system of rules, guidelines, or principles used as a basis for developing something or making decisions; a supporting structure. <i>“The new framework for workplace mental health gave managers clear guidance on how to support struggling team members.”</i>

Beyond the Headlines

cortisol (n.)	(n.) A hormone produced by the body in response to stress, which in high or sustained levels can have harmful effects on physical and mental health. <i>“Prolonged exposure to high cortisol levels has been linked to memory problems, weight gain, and weakened immunity.”</i>
neuroplasticity (n.)	(n.) The brain's ability to reorganize itself by forming new neural connections throughout life, allowing it to adapt to new experiences and recover from damage. <i>“Scientists have found that chronic stress can interfere with neuroplasticity, making it harder to learn new skills.”</i>
ruminate (v.)	(v.) To think deeply and repeatedly about something, especially a problem or difficulty, in a way that is difficult to stop and tends to worsen mood. <i>“People who ruminate on work problems at home tend to sleep less well and recover more slowly from stress.”</i>
default mode network (n. phrase)	(n. phrase) A network of brain regions that becomes active when a person is not focused on the outside world, associated with self-referential thinking, daydreaming, and mind-wandering. <i>“The default mode network becomes overactive during stress, causing the mind to focus excessively on worries and regrets.”</i>
decompression (n.)	(n.) The process of relieving stress and tension, particularly by resting, relaxing, or disengaging from demands after a period of pressure. <i>“Experts recommend at least thirty minutes of genuine decompression between finishing work and going to sleep.”</i>
attentional fatigue (n. phrase)	(n. phrase) A state of mental tiredness caused by sustained focus or concentration over a long period, which reduces the ability to pay attention effectively. <i>“Hours of back-to-back video calls can cause attentional fatigue, leaving workers mentally exhausted by midafternoon.”</i>
restorative (adj.)	(adj.) Having the effect of restoring energy, health, or mental capacity; able to repair or refresh something that has been depleted. <i>“Nature walks are considered especially restorative because they engage the senses without demanding focused attention.”</i>

Language Review

Exercise A — Collocations

Match each item in Column A with the word or phrase in Column B that forms a natural collocation from the article. Write the correct letter next to each number.

Column A	Column B
1. mental health	a. wellness program
2. employee	b. moment
3. psychological	c. stigma
4. chronic	d. assistance program
5. peer	e. safety
6. opt-in	f. stress
7. attentional	g. support
8. watershed	h. fatigue

Exercise B — Vocabulary Quiz

Choose the best answer (a, b, c, or d) for each question. Some questions may have more than one correct answer — select all that apply.

1. An employee goes to the office every day despite feeling severely anxious and unable to concentrate. This is an example of:
 - a. absenteeism
 - b. presenteeism
 - c. turnover
 - d. disclosure
2. Which of the following best describes "psychological safety" in a workplace?
 - a. A policy that prevents physical accidents at work
 - b. A team culture where people feel safe to speak up without fear
 - c. A legal requirement for mental health first aid training
 - d. An Employee Assistance Program offering counseling
3. The word "exacerbate" is closest in meaning to:
 - a. resolve
 - b. analyze
 - c. worsen
 - d. reduce
4. A company adjusts an employee's working hours to allow her to attend regular therapy appointments. This adjustment is best described as:
 - a. parity

- b. compliance
 - c. accommodation
 - d. a mandate
5. Which phrase best describes an "always-on culture"?
- a. A workplace where staff are expected to be available at all times
 - b. A system in which employees opt into voluntary wellness programs
 - c. A policy that mandates minimum rest periods for workers
 - d. A hybrid work arrangement with set office days
6. Cortisol is described as useful in short bursts. What does this imply about its effects in sustained doses?
- a. It improves neuroplasticity over time
 - b. It remains beneficial if levels are carefully monitored
 - c. It becomes harmful when the body is exposed to it continuously
 - d. It prevents attentional fatigue in demanding roles
7. Which of the following sentences uses "cascade" correctly as it appears in the article?
- a. The new policy was cascaded across all departments after board approval.
 - b. She cascaded the workload by distributing it among her team members.
 - c. The manager decided to cascade the meeting to the following week.
 - d. Cascade programs are typically opt-in and confidential.
8. An organization measures its mental health program results by comparing them to top-performing competitors. This is an example of:
- a. implementing a framework
 - b. benchmarking
 - c. mandating compliance
 - d. disclosing ROI

Exercise C — Discussion Questions

Discuss the following questions with a partner or in a small group. Use evidence from the article to support your ideas.

1. Have attitudes toward mental health in the workplace changed in your country or industry in recent years? What has driven any changes you have noticed?
2. Would you feel comfortable disclosing a mental health condition to your manager or employer? What factors would influence your decision?
3. The article suggests that presenteeism may cost employers more than absenteeism. Why do you think this might be difficult for companies to recognize or measure?
4. Some employers now monitor after-hours digital activity to detect burnout risk. Do you think this is helpful, or does it raise serious concerns about privacy and trust?
5. What do you think is the single most important thing an organization can do to support employee mental health? Use evidence or examples to support your view.