

# FOSTERING MENTALLY HEALTHY WORKPLACES

Mind Share Partners

# IT'S MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER FOR SMALL AND MEDIUM BUSINESS OWNERS TO SUPPORT MENTAL HEALTH IN THEIR WORKPLACES

In 2021, employers plan to do more to support mental health. According to a recent survey by Xero, SMB owners are planning to focus more on their own mental health as well as on support in solving a variety of other challenges they've experienced on the heels of a tumultuous year.

Another study, focused on the mental health of entrepreneurs before the pandemic, found that they are nearly 50 percent more likely in the workplace to report having a mental-health condition in their lifetime.<sup>1</sup> The effects on Black Americans and Asian Americans of the pandemic and the protests following the death of George Floyd have resulted in a disproportionate emotional and mental toll.<sup>2</sup>

As we continue to experience what the *New York Times* calls "the fourth wave" of the pandemic—and its toll on mental health—it's more important than ever for SMB owners to support mental health in their workplaces.<sup>3</sup>

*In this guide we've created three activities to help you focus on supporting your own mental health each day and better equip yourself as a leader to support mental health throughout your workplace.*

## 1 CREATING A SELF-CARE ACTION PLAN

As an SMB leader, you are your most powerful asset. One of your main priorities must involve getting proactive and taking care of your own mental health.

A self-care plan can help you stay one step ahead of workplace stressors and design habits within your workday and workweek that diffuse those stressors before they lead to burnout. When we refer to self-care in this guide, we are talking about identifying your most common work stressors and creating a plan to proactively manage them. Since you set the culture of your organization, advocating for your own mental health can have a ripple effect and both catalyze safety and inspire others in your organization to follow in your footsteps.

**“TOO MANY FOUNDERS WAIT FOR A ‘CRISIS’ BEFORE THEY START THE PROCESS OF THERAPY, AND I THINK THAT’S THE WRONG APPROACH. IT’S LIKE WAITING FOR A HEART ATTACK BEFORE YOU CHECK YOUR BLOOD PRESSURE,”**

**ANAND KULKARNI, CEO  
AT START-UP CROWDBOTICS, IN INC. MAGAZINE.**

Justin Kan, founder and CEO of Atrium, identified that the guilt of “burdening others with company problems” stopped him from delegating more, which took a toll on his own mental health. “Before going to therapy, my instinct was to do everything myself. When I run my businesses today, I make sure to partner with people who are better than me at all of the things that I don’t like doing.”<sup>4</sup>

## 2 BECOMING A MENTAL HEALTH LEADER ALLY IN YOUR WORKPLACE

“Coronavirus aside, 2020 has already been a tough year for me. My mental health has been tenuous at best. I’ve intentionally made my team aware of this to be transparent and to normalize it,” said Kelly Greenwood, founder and CEO of Mind Share Partners. “It’s important for leaders to show that they’re human. Being vulnerable doesn’t make you a weaker leader, but a much stronger, braver and authentic one.” When it comes to workplace mental health, SMB leaders can make it safe for others in the company to talk about it. There is a common misconception that leaders must be infallible in order to be good leaders. Being open about your own mental health is not a weakness; it’s a strength for both you and your organization. In this activity you’ll learn how to model healthy behaviors, to communicate openly and supportively about mental health and to think holistically about mental health in your workplace.

**“IT’S IMPORTANT FOR LEADERS TO SHOW THAT THEY’RE HUMAN. BEING VULNERABLE DOESN’T MAKE YOU A WEAKER LEADER, BUT A MUCH STRONGER, BRAVER AND AUTHENTIC ONE.”**

**KELLY GREENWOOD, FOUNDER  
AND CEO OF MIND SHARE PARTNERS**

### **3 CHECKING IN WITH YOUR TEAM AND TALKING ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH**

Last but definitely not least, it’s important to check in with your team members and understand what they need to be successful. Having a remote workforce has led to seeing colleagues much less often, which makes it harder to notice if someone is struggling. This activity will help you learn how to effectively check in with individuals and teams. “Every time I use an hour to talk to someone in my network to see a bigger picture, I always come back stronger,” said Paola Santana, the founder and CEO of Social Glass, on Bloomberg. “I’ve been able to adapt and be flexible in the middle of a pandemic.”<sup>6</sup>



*Mind Share Partners is a national nonprofit that is changing the culture of workplace mental health so that both employees and organizations can thrive. It does this by providing workplace training and strategic advising, offering professional communities and building public awareness.*

Sources mentioned:

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# CREATING A SELF-CARE PLAN

In partnership with the work of SAP and Qualtrics, the Mind Share Partners 2019 *Mental Health at Work Report* found that, contrary to popular belief, mental health symptoms are equally prevalent across seniority levels within companies, from individual contributors to the C-level.<sup>1</sup>

There are many factors in the workplace that have a unique and independent impact on the mental health of employees and are the root cause of burnout.<sup>2</sup> As an SMB leader, you are as prone to the impact the workplace can have on mental health as any other employee.

Self-care is one of the components of mental health care. Creating a self-care plan as a business leader is a proactive way to support your mental health and combat workplace factors that could ultimately lead to burnout. Complete the following activity to help you identify your common stressors at work and create a plan to manage them.

## MIND SHARE PARTNERS SELF-CARE ACTION PLAN

**What are your common stressors at work?**

*(Examples: End-of-month deadlines, taking on too much work, working long hours)*

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What were the early signs indicating that you were struggling? Think about specific times. "I should proactively care for my mental health when I notice \_\_\_\_."

(Examples: I start feeling overwhelmed; I feel guilt when thinking about delegating work to my team; it becomes difficult to wake up in the morning)

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What would have been helpful in that moment, and what proactive strategies could be implemented earlier that would help?

Self-care strategy	Proactive or reactive	Solution or relief
<i>(Example: Take a mental health day)</i>	<i>Reactive</i>	<i>Relief</i>
<i>(Example: Delegate work outside your expertise)</i>	<i>Proactive</i>	<i>Solution</i>

Sources mentioned:  
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# BECOME A MENTAL HEALTH LEADER ALLY

A CEO's role includes being the organization's culture setter.<sup>1</sup> Leadership is just as important and vital when it comes to creating a mentally healthy workplace. Eight in ten employees don't seek treatment, because of fear and shame.<sup>2</sup> Leaders have the unique opportunity to create safety around the topic of mental health and dismantle stigma in their workplace through leading by example.

## 1. START WITH YOUR WHY.

Why does creating a mentally healthy culture matter to you? Create a personal mission statement. (Example: *Creating a mentally healthy workplace culture matters to me as a leader because I have experienced challenges with anxiety and burnout before, and I want my business to be one where my employees feel safe, happy, and healthy working in.*)

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## 2. BE VULNERABLE, AND MODEL HEALTHY BEHAVIORS.

Be honest about the challenges you are experiencing or have experienced personally. Remember them when sharing your own story. Two examples include the CEO of Buffer<sup>3</sup> and the founder of Alley.<sup>4</sup> Joel Gascoigne, cofounder and CEO of social media software company Buffer, took a leave of absence due to burnout, which led to his building a culture in which employees could bring their full selves to work. When thinking about what to share, ask yourself, "What does my story affirm about mental health?" Make sure that that affirmation is hopeful. Employees will model what leadership does. Practice and commit to healthy working norms.

What is one story you can share about how you are managing your own mental health?

(Ensure that this story is both honest and hopeful.)

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### 3. TALK OPENLY, CONSISTENTLY AND PROACTIVELY ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF SUPPORTING MENTAL HEALTH.

*(Examples: Use the words “mental health”; share resources; be mindful about language, e.g., avoid “Today has been crazy” or “I’m so bipolar/OCD”)*

What are some specific ways you will commit to starting and continuing the conversation around mental health as a leader in your workplace? *(Examples: I will send a company email sharing a personal story and detailing my company’s available resources to support mental health; I will implement a company-wide mental health training for leadership and managers)*

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### 4. THINK HOLISTICALLY ABOUT WORKPLACE FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO POOR MENTAL HEALTH OUTCOMES, AND ENACT SOLUTIONS BEYOND MENTAL HEALTH DAYS AND BENEFITS.

Think about culture through leadership, managers, employees, policies, practices (i.e., daily working norms), benefits and accountability (i.e., ownership of mental health strategy, goals and outcomes).

If you think about your company culture as a whole, what cultural forces and norms may be exacerbating mental health stigmas at your organization? (Examples: A cultural norm of encouraging working long and late hours, answering emails after working hours, team members not taking time off despite vacation policy)

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Where can you have the greatest impact, given your role as a leader, and what is a change you want to make toward creating a mentally healthy culture? (Example: My greatest impact is as a culture setter and as someone encouraging healthy workplace policies, practices and resources.)

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# CHECKING IN WITH YOUR TEAM AND TALKING ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

With an uncertain and anxiety-provoking year—including the pandemic, trauma around racial injustice, wildfires, hurricanes, political unrest and more—and a growing mental health pandemic, checking in with your team isn't optional. It's vital.

A continuing remote workforce also means that we will see our colleagues much less often, which makes it harder to notice if someone is struggling.

The Mind Share Partners 2019 *Mental Health at Work Report* found that before the pandemic employees were least comfortable talking with their company's HR and senior leaders about mental health at work, regardless of their level of seniority. When conversations about mental health did occur, fewer than half were described as positive experiences.

Now more than ever, it's important for leaders to create safety and have conversations around mental health in their workplace. When having these conversations, it's also important to remember that every demographic group—and those at their intersections—experience mental health in the workplace differently.

This activity will help you effectively check in with your team members, both individually and as a group.

## 1. WAYS TO SUPPORT INDIVIDUALS.

Create a safe space by being vulnerable and empathetic and by asking open-ended questions focused on work.

Don't diagnose colleagues or assume what they need. Remember that it's not your job to be a therapist or solve their mental health problems. Respect their privacy and let them share what they want to or do not about their health.

- Create intentional opportunities for 1:1 check-ins throughout the workweek
- Be intentional about the questions you ask beyond "How are you?" For example, "How has the transition been? What support would be helpful to you?"

**What is one thing you can start doing within your organization to check in with employees individually?** *(Examples: Create a weekly or biweekly 1:1 with those you work closely with; encourage managers to check in with their team members)*

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**What is one question you can ask to open a conversation?** *(Examples: I noticed that you've been quieter in meetings—how are you?; I noticed that you've been working late a lot—what support would be helpful to you?)*

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Reassure them about the validity of what they're experiencing and their value to the company. Make sure to follow up. Remember that you don't have to be a therapist or solve their mental health problems. Respect their privacy and let them share what they want to or do not about their health. *(Example: I hear you. That must be difficult. You are valued here, and I want to make sure I can support you. Can we check in tomorrow so I can think through some solutions to help you?)*

In cases where an employee discloses a mental health condition to you, tell the employee that you will notify HR and that you will work together with HR and the employee on a plan forward. Express your gratitude and appreciation for the employee.

## 2. WAYS TO SUPPORT TEAMS.

Be creative about leveraging technology to check in with teams. We may not see our colleagues as much, making it harder to notice if someone is struggling.

**What’s one way you will leverage technology to check in with your teams?**

*(Examples: Virtual happy hours, virtual working sessions, virtual company all-hands meetings)*

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Share company resources for mental health and encourage their use. Remind employees about the company’s mental health resources regularly and through multiple channels. Make them easy to find.

It’s also an opportunity to adopt new resources or adapt existing ones to bolster resources during this time. Some ways you can do this are:

- Virtual therapy or coaching for mental-health support
- Employee-resource groups focused on mental health—see the Mind Share Partners “How to Create an ERG for Mental Health” tool kit
- Mental health training and awareness programs

**What are two ways you can ensure that employees know about the resources your company offers?**

*(Examples: Send an email about the current resources your company offers; include mental health resources in onboarding materials; cover mental health resources available in your next company all-hands meeting.)*

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