



MindWise  
INNOVATIONS



# THE 2021 BEHAVIORAL HEALTH GUIDEBOOK

How to prioritize employee mental health  
in the workplace (and in a post-COVID era).

Written by Nick Hanzel-Snider and Jennifer Erickson

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 03 > Introduction
- 04 > How to Balance Employee Mental Health with Getting the Job Done
- 07 > Reducing Healthcare Costs
- 10 > Maximizing Existing Investments
- 13 > Promoting Healthier Employees
- 18 > Building a Roadmap to ROI
- 20 > About MindWise

# Hey 2021, let's do this.

This year, we're celebrating not only the beginning of a new year (and the fact the 2020 is behind us), but also the start of more businesses recognizing that it's no longer optional to play a role in prioritizing mental health in the workplace.

There's no question that last year drove an increase in remote work and more flexible schedules as we navigated the challenges of living in a pandemic. But with those changes also came new conversations and questions in the workplace like, "how are you *really* doing?" And especially as diversity and inclusion became critical topics, so did empathy and resilience.

Industries all over searched for ways to better support employees. And we saw thousands tune into our webinars, download resources, and most importantly start asking us HOW to talk about behavioral health at work.

Every organization knows they have to keep up with the times. For decades we've had to evolve with technology, marketplace trends, and both cultural and environmental shifts in society.

And with Covid-19, **work changed forever** – forcing us to acknowledge that the topic of behavioral health will continue to be a driving influence on not only our current workforce, but also future workforces to come.

**Read on for our full guide to operationalizing that change.**

# How to balance employee mental health with getting the job done.

We know what you're thinking. *Of course*, employee mental health is important, but so is doing the work we're hired to do - meeting deadlines, closing sales, and supporting customers.

So how do you balance the need for your team to show up ready to work, while also caring about employees on a personal level? And the even bigger question of what can you talk about and what health questions can legally be asked without becoming a liability?

## **Behavioral health / noun:**

A state of mental/emotional being and/or choices and actions that affect wellness. Behavioral health problems include substance abuse or misuse, alcohol and drug addiction, serious psychological distress, suicide, and mental and substance use disorders. [SAMHSA](#)<sup>1</sup>

At MindWise, we use behavioral health as the umbrella term that includes both mental health and substance use. And if you're wondering just **how many of your employees are impacted by a behavioral health condition, the pre-pandemic answer was one in five.**<sup>2</sup>

We know that mental health and substance use are already prevalent in the workplace. They're just not being talked about. So, the reality is that addressing behavioral health in 2021 is an opportunity to better support your workforce, leading to healthier employees, and resulting in more productive, higher performing teams that DO get the job done.

And the good news is that you probably already have a solid foundation to do this. Implementing a Workplace Behavioral Health Program ties your benefits together to bridge the gaps and create a more effective and measurable solution that can:

- reduce overall healthcare costs,
- maximize existing investments,
- and promote a healthier current and future workforce.

**Let's get to it. We've got questions to answer and norms to break.**



“Even prior to the pandemic, there was a significant need for workplace mental health. **The outcome of not addressing mental health issues is that the struggles are going to show up in the workplace.**

And the way they show up is absenteeism, presenteeism, low morale, decreased productivity, and less satisfaction with work which leads to higher turnover.

So for businesses, there’s a human imperative and a financial imperative to address behavioral health.”<sup>3</sup>



> **DR. LISA DESAI, Psy.D.**

Director of Behavioral Health Consulting  
MindWise Innovations

## Presenteeism / noun

The practice of coming to work despite illness, injury, anxiety, etc., often resulting in reduced productivity.<sup>4</sup>

# Reducing Healthcare Costs

Companies lose \$17,241 annually in incremental healthcare and productivity costs for each person with a major depressive disorder. [AHA](#)<sup>5</sup>



**Let's start with your healthcare benefits.** Easy right? Your team is probably old pros at educating employees on their benefits and encouraging them to prioritize health and wellness. Because in addition to helping lower premiums, healthier employees take fewer sick days, arguably spread less germs in the office, and have the potential to be more productive. And that's just talking about physical health.

Employers have spent years wondering what their role is when it comes to mental health in the workplace. And really your job and the key to helping reduce healthcare costs is to emphasize the importance of behavioral health *just as much as you promote physical health.*

**"Considering mental illness accounts for roughly one-third of short and long-term disability claims and 70% of workplace disability costs, the opportunity to generate savings is clear."** [DELOITTE INSIGHTS](#)<sup>6</sup>

No matter what business you're in, safety is unquestionably a priority in the office or on the job site. And while there are benefits to cover illness and protocols to prevent injury, many organizations don't spend nearly as much time talking about the impact of less visible conditions such as anxiety, depression, the impact of stress, and substance use.

But the truth is you should. Similar to prevention for physical health and precautions for safety, well-being and recovery are more likely when mental health and substance use conditions are identified early.

And just like with physical health, when you support employees across all aspects of behavioral health “from promotion of well-being to intervention and care, as well as mitigating risk factors in the workplace” <sup>7</sup>, it **leads to decreases in direct and indirect costs, less short and long-term disability claims, and reducing the likelihood of future serious mental illness** – reinforcing Deloitte’s analysis that “what’s good for your people is good for your business.”

In a recent MindWise poll, **90% of employers reported they knew several employees that would benefit from additional mental health programs**, with 38% noting that the impact of COVID-19 alone has made mental health a bigger priority. <sup>8</sup>

**Pandemic aside, companies that actively choose NOT to invest in employee behavioral health face what Deloitte recently called the “rising cost of doing nothing.”** [DELOITTE INSIGHTS](#) <sup>9</sup>

This is where promoting a healthy workplace that reinforces the equal importance of physical and behavioral health can make a difference in reducing long term healthcare costs.

And where a Workplace Behavioral Health program can help you take the necessary steps to make a measurable impact.



# How to Start Reducing Healthcare Costs

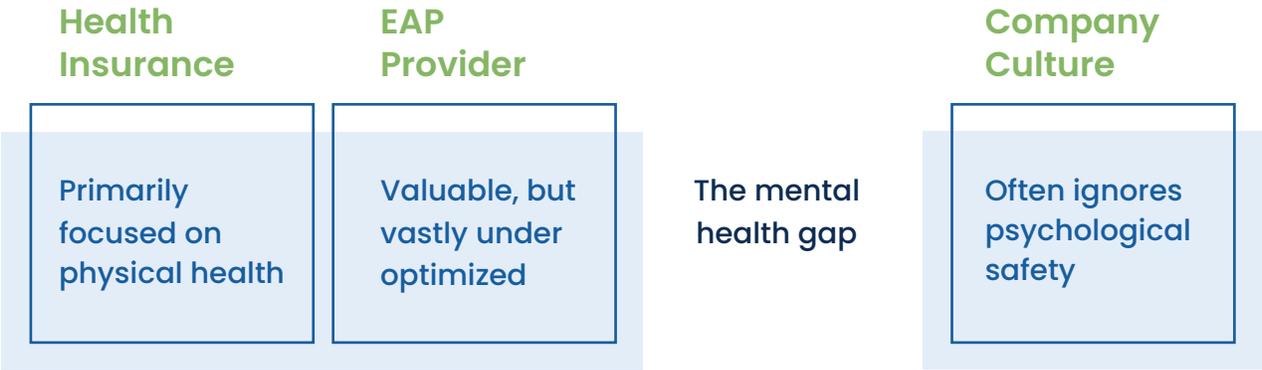
- 01 > Be proactive. Don't wait for an issue to arise to address employee mental health. Start by openly communicating with teams about how to equally emphasize physical and behavioral health.
- 02 > Educate leadership on behavioral health literacy and HIPPA compliance standards as they begin talking more about mental health in the workplace.
- 03 > Emphasize the early detection of conditions such as depression and anxiety by providing access to tools like anonymous screening resources.

# Maximizing Existing Investments

**The next step to developing a Workplace Behavioral Health Program is to evaluate your existing investments.** For decades the majority of businesses have offered standard benefits like health insurance and short and long-term disability plans. And while these services offer valuable care, the downside is they focus primarily on physical health.

And while other benefits, like Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) do offer support for mental health and substance use issues, they often aren't optimized for success. Many organizations simply aren't having the conversations necessary, both with their employees and with their EAP, to connect the dots between the behavioral health services their workforce needs and what's being provided.

Understanding that gap between services and need is a critical component to maximizing your benefits. Especially since EAPs can offer substantial value and significantly improve issues like presenteeism, work engagement, workplace distress, absenteeism, and overall life satisfaction.<sup>10</sup>



Additionally, despite the investments most businesses make in benefits, a recent Harvard Business Review study showed that 46% of companies still don't proactively share their mental health resources with employees.<sup>11</sup> This further contributes to the growing gap in information and support, exacerbating the fact that **shame and stigma still prevent many employees from using their benefits to seek treatment.**<sup>12</sup>

And while the terms "shame" and "stigma" around mental health feel like throwbacks to a different era, they are still extremely prevalent in the workplace and result in a lack of employee focus, irritability, lower productivity, missed work, tension with co-workers, and slower career advancement.<sup>13</sup>

**So why are your employees not speaking up?** According to a 2019 Paychex study of more than 1,000 employees:<sup>14</sup>



Overall, the lack of information, perceived stigma, and cultural attitude towards behavioral healthcare are gaps that CAN be closed in 2021. Your employees need it, and new millennial hires expect it.

# How to start maximizing existing investments

- 01 > Set a schedule for reminding employees what their benefits include and how to access them. Include information on topics such as how their EAP works and whether things like therapy sessions are covered.
- 02 > Have an honest conversation with your EAP about how they are connecting with your workforce. Work with them to make services more visible and use your EAP's behavioral health data to make more informed decisions (just as you would use your financial data).<sup>15</sup>
- 03 > Reassure employees that there is no stigma associated with taking advantage of resources and there should never be negative repercussions in doing so. Company leadership and individual managers should reinforce this.

# Promoting Healthier Employees

**Mental health issues cost employers more than \$100 billion and 217 million lost workdays each year. [NAMI](#) <sup>16</sup>**



Finally, with behavioral health impacting everything in the workplace from morale and retention to productivity and profitability – **let’s talk about how a Workplace Behavioral Health Program can help foster a culture that not only promotes healthy employees, but where the topic of mental health is a normal one.**

We saw proof of the need to normalize conversations around mental health prior to the pandemic, and it’s something that we’ll need to address at a higher level in a post-COVID world. One consistent takeaway from our 2019 client conversations was that employees had a substantial desire to communicate more openly about mental health and substance use, but just didn’t know how; saying things like, **“we don’t have the language to discuss this stuff”** or **“you get mentally overwhelmed by the work.”** <sup>17</sup>

There are three ways to better support your workforce in this department and these strategies can make a huge difference in an employee feeling comfortable saying they’re taking a mental health day vs. sick day.

**1. Trust:** Building and fostering trust is a foundational step to creating healthy relationships and functional employees. It’s also key to engaging and effectively managing teams, building morale, creating a shared sense of purpose, and nurturing a commitment to the organization.

## Psychological safety / noun:

“A shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking.” [AMY EDMONDSON](#)<sup>18</sup>

**2. Psychological safety:** A psychologically safe work environment is one where leaders and managers encourage employees to be themselves, offer empathy in response to openness and honesty, and empower employees to take risks. When organizations recognize that behavioral health is as much a priority as physical health, employees can be more open about how they're feeling, communicate their needs, and ask for help.

And most importantly, a psychologically safe workplace can also *prevent* issues such as stoking anxiety, fear, and stress. This leads to stronger teams, more openness to feedback, and increased productivity.

**3. A bottom up approach:** As employers, leaders, and managers, it's your job to provide strategic guidance and direction from the top. But you also need to understand what's happening on the front lines, where employees are both meeting job demands and sometimes struggling. And that information is only going to come from one place - your workforce.

One way to hear this type of feedback is by leaning on input from your Employee Resource Groups or Affinity Groups. Empowering them to vocalize employee needs, provide critical insights, or offer suggestions allows them to have a direct influence on their benefits, impact company support systems, and even bolster DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) initiatives.

All of these efforts make your organization better and foster a culture that people want to work in. Taking a bottom up approach allows you to meet your employees in the middle, give them the space to speak openly, and eliminate the very common fears that whatever they say could jeopardize their job or their future with the organization. *This* is what engenders psychological safety and creates trust.

What leadership should be doing is modeling the behaviors they want to see in employees. How does your executive team walk the walk when it comes to talking about mental health or prioritizing self-care? Remember, your employees are looking for cues on what's appropriate to do, ask for, and especially talk about. If you talk openly about anxiety, stress, or needing to take a break and go for a walk - your employees will too. This builds resilience and, in turn, stronger teams.

## **Employee Resource Groups**

Voluntary, employee-led groups made up of individuals who join together based on common interests, backgrounds or demographic factors such as gender, race or ethnicity. <sup>19</sup>

## **Affinity Groups**

A group of people having a common interest or goal or acting together for a specific purpose. <sup>20</sup>

# How to start promoting healthier employees

- 01 > Host trainings for leadership on the concept of psychological safety. This is the first step to creating a bottom up approach and reinforcing the fact that behavioral health isn't just an HR issue or initiative.

To create a true culture shift that fosters a safe and supportive workplace, psychological safety has to be reinforced across all functions. This includes leadership, finance, HR, managers, etc.

Remember, you're playing the long game. And to see a return, everyone needs to be on board.

- 02 > Identify a high-level internal champion. Having someone from your executive team endorse these efforts can be a critical influence in helping to normalize behavioral health conversations and reinforce their importance.

- 03 > Approach your Employee Resource Group or Affinity Group for insight into where employees feel your organization could be doing better. How do your teams think company morale is? Do people feel they can safely provide critical feedback?**
- 04 > Begin talking about behavioral health and psychological safety in team conversations, Town Hall meetings, and in company wide communications. Remember, the best way to normalize something is to talk about it.**

# Building a roadmap to ROI

**The takeaway: implementing a Workplace Behavioral Health Program doesn't need to be difficult, time-intensive, or expensive.** You just need a consistent plan and a way to assess your overall impact. The most successful Workplace Behavioral Health programs drive ROI by diligently tracking KPIs and using program utilization data to inform strategy, measure effectiveness, and maximize existing investments.

**In 2018 Deloitte profiled Bell Canada, a telecommunications company, which launched a large mental health initiative for employees in 2010.**

**Over the next seven years they tracked 90 metrics across the program, recognizing an ROI of \$4.10 for every dollar invested. They also saw a 190% increase in EFAP utilization, a 50% decrease in short-term disability reoccurrence, and a 20% decrease in short-term disability claims. [DELOITTE INSIGHTS](#) <sup>21</sup>**

With Workplace Behavioral Health programs maturing over time, studies indicate it takes an average of three years to see a positive ROI. But as you measure YoY impact, expect a rise in financial outcomes, employee productivity, retention rates, stronger talent, and more effective risk management with direct and indirect costs decreasing.



Sources:

<sup>1</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

<sup>2,5</sup> American Heart Association, CEO Roundtable (2018)

<sup>3</sup> MindWise Innovations (2020)

<sup>4</sup> Dictionary.com (2021)

<sup>6,7,9,21</sup> Deloitte Insights (2019)

<sup>8</sup> MindWise Industry Insights (2020)

<sup>10</sup> Annual Report for the Workplace Outcome Suite (2020)

<sup>11</sup> Mind Share Partners, Qualtrics, SAP Study of Global Employees (2020)

<sup>12,16</sup> National Alliance on Mental Illness

<sup>13</sup> Unum Mental Health Report (2019)

<sup>14</sup> Paychex Study (2019)

<sup>15</sup> EBN, Empathy: A Business Imperative (2021)

<sup>17</sup> MindWise Innovations Confidential Client Survey (2019)

<sup>18</sup> Amy Edmondson (1999)

<sup>19</sup> SHRM Society for Human Resource Management (2016)

<sup>20</sup> Merriam-Webster (2020)

# About Us

MindWise Innovations offers a comprehensive approach to mental health, substance use, and suicide prevention.

Our suite of expert-led services supports early intervention, education, and crisis management to promote improved health outcomes and help shape the future of behavioral healthcare.

Powered by the non-profit Riverside Community Care, MindWise delivers services to more than 1.5 million students and 600 corporations, states, and universities across 18 countries.

**Visit [MindWise.org](https://www.mindwise.org) for more information on our behavioral health consulting services, trainings, and resources.**