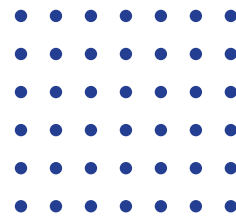




A WORKPLACE PLAYBOOK & RESOURCE GUIDE

Addressing the Needs of Early to Mid-Career Professionals





Introduction

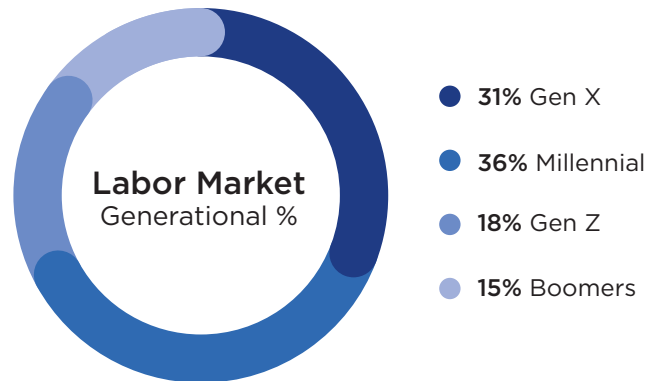
Demographic change presents a valuable opportunity for companies to respond to shifts in the labor force and take steps to ensure they remain competitive. As more early-to-mid-career professionals (those aged 24–45 years) continue through the U.S. workforce and step into leadership roles, businesses will need to take stock of the unique challenges and needs of these employees and adapt accordingly.

One critical area where change is needed is in workplace mental health and well-being services and benefits. Employees from the Millennial Generation (individuals born between 1981 and 1996; also called Millennials) and those from Generation Z (people born from 1997 to 2012; also called Zoomers) do not necessarily have the same workplace struggles, goals, and unmet needs as their predecessors. Understanding the distinctive viewpoints and experiences of young professionals can help transform your company into an environment that is not only productive but inclusive, supportive, and responsive.

With generous support from [Takeda Pharmaceuticals](#), the American Psychiatric Association Foundation’s Center for Workplace Mental Health developed this resource guide to give organizations, managers, Human Resources experts, and other business leaders an evidence-based and best practices approach to supporting the mental health needs of working young professionals. This playbook and resource guide includes recommendations and best practices for employers and other business leaders, as well as tools for young professionals themselves to navigate the challenges of workplace mental health.

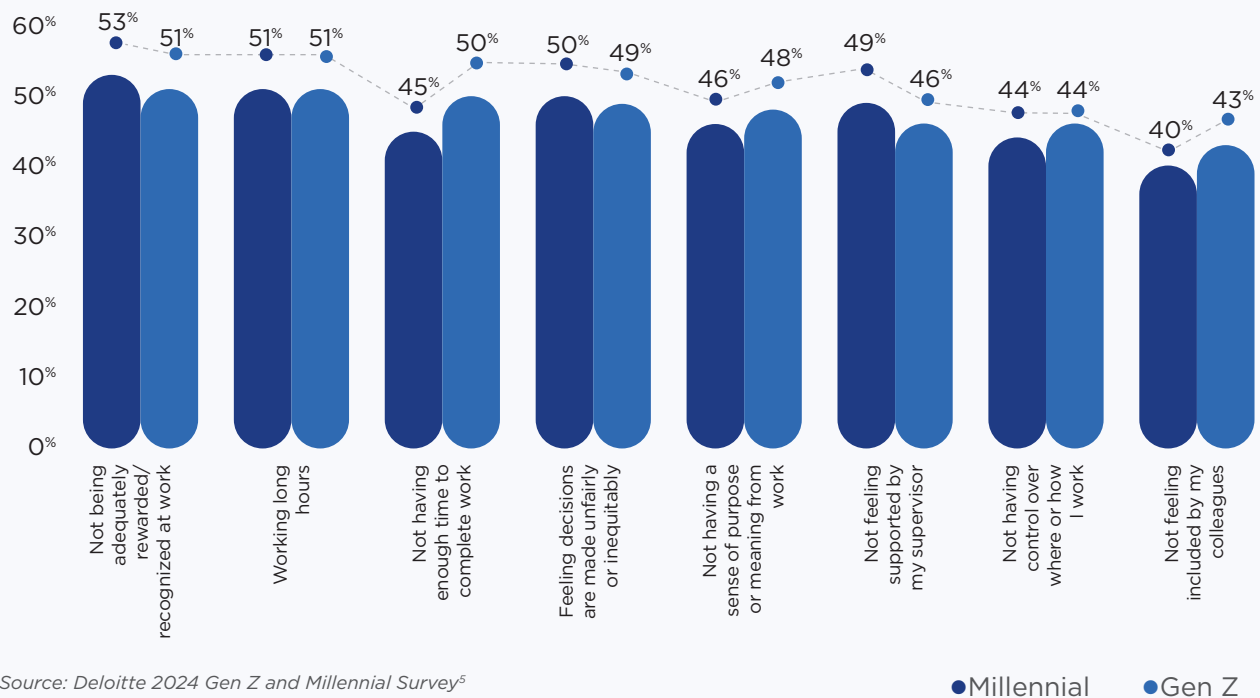
Scope of the Problem

Young professionals now dominate the U.S. labor force. By the end of 2023, there were an estimated 50 million Millennials and 17 million Zoomers in the United States working full-time.¹ These young employees comprise much of the current labor market. According to the [U.S. Department of Labor](#), Millennials workers make up 36% of the U.S. workforce and Gen Z workers 18%.² By comparison, Gen Xers (individuals born between 1965–80) occupy 31% of the workforce, and Baby Boomers (those born 1946–64) 15%.



The 2024 Gen Z and Millennial Survey from [Deloitte](#) reveals the scope of mental health and wellness challenges facing young employees. More than one-third of Zoomers (40%) and Millennials (35%) report feeling stressed or anxious “all or most of the time.”³ Those individuals say work and lack of work-life balance are the top contributors to their distress. When asked the work-related reasons for their anxiety and stress, half or nearly half of respondents from both generations list not feeling adequately recognized or rewarded at work, working too many hours, not deriving a sense of meaning or purpose from their work, and feeling unsupported by their supervisor (**Figure 1**).⁴

Figure 1. Work-Related Contributors to Anxiety and Stress Among Young Professionals



Source: Deloitte 2024 Gen Z and Millennial Survey⁵

Continuation

Scope of the Problem

In the same survey, about 4 in 10 young professionals say they do not feel comfortable speaking with their managers about anxiety, stress, or other mental health struggles. Only slightly more than half (52% Zoomers and 54% Millennials) report feeling confident that their supervisor knows how to support their mental health difficulties. And almost one-third worry that mentioning their mental health concerns to their supervisor will result in discrimination.

Depression among young employees is another growing mental health concern. Data from [Blue Cross Blue Shield](#) reveals major depressive disorder as a top health concern of Millennials.

Further, from 2014 to 2017, the prevalence of depression among Millennials increased 31%, and their rate of depression is now 18% higher than in people from Generation X. Similar trends are evident among Gen Z. In a survey of nearly 3,000 Zoomers, 39% reported struggling with depression within the past 2 years.



The CDC's National Center for Health Statistics developed a Household Pulse Survey in 2019 to track the rapid changes in mental health, including questions to measure the frequency of anxiety and depression symptoms. Starting in April 2020, through August 2024, those aged 18-39 have consistently held the highest rates of both anxiety and depression symptoms³⁶.

Clearly, many young professionals are experiencing challenges with mental health, and their work life appears to be a major contributor. This highlights the important role HR specialists, supervisors, managers, and other business leaders can play in reversing these trends and helping young employees thrive, personally and professionally.

Why Companies Should Care

There are several reasons why business executives should be concerned about preserving the mental health and happiness of their younger employees.





- 1 Addressing employee mental health is good common sense.** All individuals deserve to feel healthy, happy, and supported in their occupations. Helping workers with their mental health is not just the ethical thing to do, it is also logical. Younger professionals represent most of the U.S. workforce and are only growing in number. Gen Z in particular is projected to overtake the labor market in the United States by 2040. Failing to keep pace with demographic changes and the needs of growing generations means risking falling behind, stagnating, draining talent, and lagging in innovation. Furthermore, happy and healthy employees make for a more pleasant and productive work setting, meaning that, protecting employee mental health benefits everybody.
- 2 Sidelineing employee mental health and wellness can adversely affect your bottom line.** There is a strong business case to be made for advocating for employees' well-being. Untreated conditions like depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders cost companies nationwide \$105 billion per year. If unresolved, these conditions can lead to workers exiting the workforce. Considering lost revenues, recruitment spending, and new hire training expenses, it costs companies, on average, \$24,000 to replace employees when they leave. [The World Health Organization](#) estimates that depression and anxiety cost companies 12 billion lost workdays annually, which carries a price tag of nearly \$1 trillion in lost productivity. Further, major depression and other mental health conditions, such as substance use disorders, are primary drivers of health problems and the need for healthcare utilization among young professionals. For instance, Millennials with behavioral health conditions have approximately 2 times greater risk of hypertension, type II diabetes, and Crohn's disease/ulcerative colitis than Millennials without mental health struggles. This translates to increased healthcare costs for employers.
- 3 Protecting employees' mental health and wellness represents a sound approach to talent acquisition and retention that can make a company more attractive to young professionals.** Workplace mental health is a driving factor in young professionals choosing to join a company, which means providing wellness support can help you maintain a competitive advantage. In the [Deloitte 2024](#) survey, 19%–22% of Millennials and Zoomers said a high salary/financial benefits was a top reason for taking a job. However, other top reasons endorsed by nearly as many, if not more, respondents were a company's commitment to work-life balance (25%–31%), its positive workplace culture (19%–20%), flexible working conditions (19%), and the job giving them a sense of purpose or meaning (17%–21%). The opposite is also true—that overlooking employee well-being can potentially drive young workers away. In the same survey, 14%–18% of young professionals said they left their job because it was detrimental to their mental health, and 13%–14% left the company over a lack of work-life balance.

What Young Professionals Are Looking For

Job satisfaction is often a tipping point in Millennial and Gen Z workers' decisions about whether to join and leave a company, largely because job satisfaction is integral to their mental wellness. What exactly are young professionals looking for from their employers? **The following are examples of job features that Millennial and Gen Z employees say they value and that contribute positively to their mental health:**^{14,15,16,17}

- ✓ A flexible work environment that includes the potential for remote or hybrid work, nontraditional schedules, a compressed work week, and the like
- ✓ Companies making employee mental health and emotional well-being a priority—and being vocal and transparent about that
- ✓ Supervisors and other leadership sharing their own personal experiences with mental health issues, which helps normalize mental health struggles
- ✓ Feeling connected, engaged, and actively involved in the workplace, including having a voice in decision-making, strategizing, planning, innovating, and problem-solving
- ✓ Developing meaningful relationships with coworkers as well as with managers and supervisors
- ✓ Engaging in purpose-driven work that is valuable, has personal meaning to them, and aligns with their ethics and beliefs
- ✓ Maintaining good work-life balance
- ✓ Working in an environment that is equitable and inclusive
- ✓ Feeling empowered to be an agent for change within and outside of the company (e.g., expanding client services, helping the company improve its social or environmental impact)

To better understand how to help address the unmet mental health needs of employees, the American Psychiatric Association Foundation's Center for Workplace Mental Health spoke with Millennial and Gen Z workers about wellness at work. In multiple focus groups, young professionals shared helpful details about their mental health struggles and how they wish their employer would help. **Common mental health-related challenges reported in the focus groups included:**

-  Difficulty accessing professional help (e.g., not knowing where to find someone, finding time to access help)
-  Feeling distressed about revealing one's mental health concerns to a supervisor/manager for fear of punishment (e.g., demotion, termination)
-  Feeling discriminated against by others at work due to one's mental health condition
-  Having low self-esteem and experiencing low self-worth due to one's mental health difficulties (i.e., self-stigmatization)

Young professionals expressed an interest in the following company solutions:



Provide onsite professional counseling that is paid for by the company (in person or virtual). Not only does this help employees overcome a major access barrier (i.e., finding time before, after, or during work to speak with a professional), but it also gives employees a “safe space” where they can share their mental health concerns without fearing that doing so will adversely impact their careers.



Educate everyone in the company about mental health topics (e.g., sending around information by email, bringing in guest experts to speak about mental health topics), especially about the importance of showing empathy for and offering support to people who are struggling.



Better address the factors that contribute to poor mental health at work. For instance, provide onsite financial counseling/assistance, implement flexible work schedules and realistic workloads, include gym memberships and other fitness opportunities in company benefits packages, and create an environment conducive to good work-life balance.



Focus group participants noted that their unease about sharing mental health concerns with a supervisor or manager would be relieved if they knew that person also had experienced mental health struggles themselves. This underscores the power of company leadership opening up about their own mental health journey. For business leaders who do have their own lived experience with mental health, APA’s [Notice. Talk. Act.® at Work](#) can provide training to help better understand mental illness and how to communicate effectively with people who are struggling.



Gather employee feedback about mental health at work (e.g., surveys) and ensure responses are anonymous so workers can feel free to share their views openly.



Offer information about support groups and other offsite mental health services.



Distribute information about coping with mental health concerns, including how to avoid or mitigate feelings of burnout.

Focus group participants clearly valued mental health resources and support at work because they understood the wide-ranging impact of poor mental health in the workplace and beyond.

One participant summarized it succinctly by noting, “When I am at my best, that not only helps me, it helps the company.”

Dispelling Myths About Young Professionals

Stereotypes about early to mid-career professionals create barriers that can make it hard for them to thrive in the workplace and for companies to get the most out of their young employees. Consider the following popular myths about young professionals and their factual counterparts.

Myth

Young people are addicted to social media and want everything to be digital or remote.

Fact

Although young professionals appreciate the convenience that telecommuting offers, they report wanting more face-to-face interactions at work, not fewer. In a recent survey of about 1,100 Gen Z workers, most (56%) said they prefer to work onsite full-time. Younger professionals report wanting to build authentic connections and meaningful relationships with their colleagues and supervisors, and they know this is best done in person. Those from Gen Z, in particular, say they value hybrid work for this reason—they see the convenience of remote work combined with the social and relationship-building benefits of onsite work as the best of both worlds.

Myth

Young professionals are unserious and only interested in benefits like pool tables, free snacks, and fancy espresso machines in the breakroom.

Fact

Millennial and Gen Z workers are committed to not just their careers but to their lives outside of work as well. In fact, only 18% of Millennials say that a company being “a fun place to work” is “extremely important” to them. Rather than plying them with free coffee and a laid-back office setting, companies can make more headway with young professionals by offering real benefits that will help positively shape their future. These include guidance on or assistance with financial planning, family planning, community engagement, personal wellness, and self-care. These benefits speak directly to the mental health of young professionals, many of whom struggle with hardships unique to their generation, such as crippling student loan debt, housing shortages, the Great Recession, climate change, and the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath. Moreover, because they understand the importance of professional growth, young workers also desire benefits that foster their career advancement, such as skill development, mentoring, and the like.

Myth

Young professionals are “job hoppers” who constantly “jump ship” at the first chance.

Fact

Some data suggest Millennials change jobs more frequently than previous generations. This is not a trivial concern, as Millennial job turnover costs the United States economy more than \$30 billion annually. However, the notion that young workers lack loyalty is simply untrue. In fact, Pew Research found that Millennials stay with the same employer for 5 years or more at generally the same rate that Gen X workers did at the same age (22.0% for Millennials vs 21.8% for Gen Xers). **Young professionals prioritize job satisfaction and self-fulfillment as critical to their tenure with a company.** When these are lacking, young employees aren’t afraid to look elsewhere for a company that offers those things. Although compensation can certainly be a factor in why young professionals pursue other opportunities, feeling engaged in and connected to their workplace is just as essential for their job retention, as these directly impact their mental well-being and quality of life.

Myth

Young professionals are lazy, entitled, and do not want to work hard.

Fact

Thanks in part to the recent “quiet quitting” trend, Gen Z has been unfairly branded as detached, uncommitted, and having a poor work ethic, but these misnomers paint the wrong picture. Gen Z workers strongly desire financial independence and are considered more entrepreneurial than previous generations were at their same age. **They are risk-takers who are highly motivated to transform their hobbies and interests into business ventures. Further, they do not shy away from taking on extra jobs, gig work, and other “side hustles.”** In fact, data from the workplace research firm Seramount found 40% of Gen Z workers said they feel “inspired to work hard”—which was the same percentage found among employees in other generations.

Best Practices for Addressing the Mental Health of Young Professionals

To ensure the emotional wellness of young professionals, companies should first start with knowing how to identify when any employee is experiencing difficulties with their mental health. The American Psychiatric Association Foundation’s Center for Workplace Mental Health provides information to help employers [understand the warning signs](#) of mental health issues in the workplace, including important changes in an employee’s appearance, behavior, mood, and thinking.

Further, the Center for Workplace Mental Health also offers [Notice. Talk. Act.® at Work](#)—an online training module to help managers, supervisors, and all employees better recognize and respond to mental health concerns in their organization. It includes curricula that teach the signs that may suggest an employee could be experiencing a mental health concern, how to engage in manager or peer-to-peer conversations about mental health concerns, and what actions to take to help connect a colleague with the right services and supports. In addition, NTA® at Work is available in several languages, making it more accessible to employees across the globe.

The next step is to take action in a way that speaks directly to what Millennials and Zoomers say they want, need, and value from their employers.

Consider the following strategies and approaches: ^{28,29,30,31,32,33,34}



Consider how to build a workplace culture that embodies a sense of trust, authenticity, and purpose for younger professionals. For this population, work is much more than a way to earn a living or support oneself financially. Millennial and Gen Z workers have repeatedly stated that they want their job to give them a sense of purpose, have personal meaning to them, and allow them to feel engaged in the company. This means managers, supervisors, and other leaders have to earn their trust, demonstrate transparency, and make sure employees understand the purpose of their work and its connection to the organization’s larger goals. This type of workplace culture benefits all workers, but for young professionals in particular, it is especially critical and has a meaningful impact on their work-related mental health and willingness to remain with an employer.



Be open to offering nontraditional benefits that speak directly to the mental health needs and concerns of younger professionals. For instance, many Millennials report feeling significantly burdened by student loan debt. Implementing a student loan repayment/assistance program (in addition to or in place of participating in a 401k match) would likely be attractive to many young professionals. For instance, [Fidelity](#) offers full-time employees who have been with the company for at least 6 months up to \$2,000 a year that can be used to repay student loans, for a maximum of \$10,000.



Demonstrate corporate social responsibility. For instance, company-sponsored community events, like fundraisers, charity walks/runs, and food drives, offer employees the chance to positively impact others. [Volunteer time off programs](#), which give employees paid time off to perform volunteer work, also reflect a company's commitment to social causes, philanthropy, and community service. These are things that young professionals tend to value highly and make them feel more engaged with and loyal to an employer.



Actively involve young professionals in innovation activities and other company processes. Young professionals crave opportunities at work to fuel their creativity and share their ideas. One way to meet this need is to regularly gather employee input on novel products in development, new services under consideration, potential organizational changes, and projects about client/consumer needs and perspectives. For example, [Hewlett Packard](#) established a young professional-led advisory board that provides input to company executives on strategic and operational decisions.



Help young professionals meet their occupational goals. Millennials prioritize professional learning, growth, and development as a pivotal reason for joining and remaining with a company long term. To meet this need, businesses can consider opportunities such as on-the-job training, certificate programs, tuition reimbursement for coursework related to one's career trajectory, opportunities to participate in professional conferences and gatherings, and classes to help build and refine skills necessary for job advancement. Be sure to also reward young professionals for their professional development and improvement through promotion programs and formal recognition (e.g., merit pay increases or bonuses, company awards programs).



Be transparent about your company's mission and goals, and leverage that to enhance employee engagement and motivation. Young professionals are seeking purpose-driven careers. In fact, 86% of Millennials say they would accept a pay cut to work for a company whose mission and values are consistent with their own. One way to achieve this is for supervisors to work closely with employees to set individual performance goals that are tied to the company's vision. This helps demonstrate to young professionals how they are contributing to the company's "big picture." In return, supervisors should seek feedback from young professionals about their own personal values and goals and make sure the company is adequately aligned with young workers' priorities.



Encourage group work (especially across company departments or divisions) and group social activities. Young professionals say they want to get to know their colleagues and build collaborative relationships with them. This, in turn, prevents employees from feeling siloed, disconnected, and lonely. Millennials, in particular, hold in high regard having a sense of belongingness and community at work.



Don't forget to include senior leadership in collaborative activities. Young professionals want to feel connected to management and value being able to access them for their wisdom, experience, career advice, and other forms of professional guidance. They want to meet regularly with their managers and supervisors to ensure role clarity, discuss performance goals, solicit feedback on their work, and keep the lines of communication open.

Businesses may also want to consider offering a reverse mentoring program, where younger workers are paired with and mentor senior executives on specific topics, like using new technologies or leveraging social media tools. [Pricewaterhouse Coopers](#) launched a reverse mentoring program so younger employees could help senior leaders strengthen their digital skill development.

Reverse mentoring not only facilitates learning and relationship-building, it conveys the message that everyone in the company is truly a part of the same team.

Be honest and open about the importance of mental health, and demonstrate a commitment to employee wellness by offering a wide range of mental health-related benefits. For instance, young professionals say they want supervisors and other senior leadership to share their own stories of mental health struggles. This can be achieved through mental health information sessions, electronic newsletters, emails, Lunch and Learn sessions, and the like. They also want leadership to be more vocal about emotional wellness being a company priority, which normalizes mental health issues and helps employees feel more supported and validated.

Benefits that both show a company's investment in mental health and are valued by young professionals include:

- ✓ Flexible work schedules and environments, including remote or partial offsite work, nontraditional hours, compressed work weeks, job-sharing opportunities, and more
- ✓ Programs and resources about managing anxiety, stress, loneliness, and sleep problems
- ✓ Access to onsite and offsite resources and support via an Employee Assistance Program
- ✓ Peer-to-peer support through Employee Resource Groups and other forms of peer-based support
- ✓ Extended maternity and paternity leave
- ✓ Professional developmental and skill-building opportunities, such as leadership training and workplace coaching
- ✓ Financial management education, including programs or information about retirement planning, personal investing, managing student loan debt, and financing a home
- ✓ Employee recognition programs that spotlight (and reward) good work
- ✓ Onsite activities that break up the monotony and give employees a chance to have fun at work (e.g., a breakroom with snacks, books, and puzzles; onsite yoga, line dancing, or meditation)



Conclusion

Like all generations, Millennials and Gen Z workers have mental health struggles and concerns that are uniquely shaped by historical, sociocultural, and economic factors. Generational differences in the workplace can be challenging for employers, but they also represent an opportunity for companies to re-evaluate and innovate their recruitment, hiring, and retention strategies.

Keeping pace with the distinctive mental health needs of younger professionals is imperative, given that they will soon represent the largest proportion of working adults in the nation. Young professionals have generation-specific mental health concerns that, if unaddressed, could negatively affect their productivity and well-being, as well as that of the company.

By proactively embracing the mental health needs of early to mid-career adults in the workplace, businesses can ensure they will be more competitive, sustainable, and appealing to a pool of diverse and engaged talent.



Resources

The following tools can help managers, supervisors, administrators, and other leaders create a work environment more supportive of young professionals' mental health wants and needs.

<u>Deloitte's 2024 Gen Z and Millennial Survey</u>	The findings from this annual survey reveal important patterns about mental health struggles of young professionals and what companies can do to reverse those trends and help young workers thrive.
<u>Olive Wyman Forum's What Business Needs To Know About The Generation Changing Everything</u>	This report offers in-depth information about Gen Z in the workplace, including their mental health struggles, greatest concerns, and how companies can attract Gen Z candidates. It also includes case studies showing how businesses have adapted their work environments and recruitment and retention strategies to better meet the needs of Gen Z workers.
<u>EG Now's Millennials & Gen Z - Engaging The Two Generations In The Workforce</u>	This white paper discusses the distinctive needs and strengths of Millennial and Gen Z workers and what companies need to do adapt to and empower young professionals.
<u>Sullivan Benefits' Retaining Millennials HR Toolkit</u>	This toolkit includes actionable guidance to help companies implement benefits Millennial workers value, such as how to create a more flexible workplace and how to cultivate a more inclusive and positive workplace culture.
<u>Reseco Group's Recruiting and Retaining Generation Z HR Toolkit</u>	This toolkit offer recommendations to help companies better appeal to Gen Z workers, including effective marketing and communication strategies, benefit offerings, and workplace policies.
<u>Wellmark's Millennials in Your Workplace</u>	This e-book includes helpful statistics about Millennial workers, their specific health and mental health concerns, and how to create sustainable solutions at work to enhance their well-being and job satisfaction.

Continuation

Resources

The following tools can help Millennial and Gen Z workers better access mental health support at work. These tools include self-care resources, information about types of mental health professionals available and when to seek which kind, and guidance on how and when to disclose a mental health concern to a supervisor or administrator.

[U.S. Department of Labor's Mental Health at Work](#)

This website includes numerous resources to support employee mental health. It includes links to numerous helpful resources for employees, such as how to find and talk to a mental health professional, how to know what treatments your health insurance covers, and how to take advantage of your mental health and substance use disorder employee benefits.

[Boston University Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation's Disclosing Your Disability to an Employer](#)

This guidance document assists workers with mental health concerns in deciding whether and how to disclose their mental illness to their employer. It also includes links to resources about mental health protections under the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Job Accommodation Network.

[U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's Depression, PTSD, & Other Mental Health Conditions in the Workplace: Your Legal Rights](#)

This website offers critical guidance to help employees understand their rights against discrimination and harassment for having a mental disorder in the workplace. It includes information about revealing a mental health condition to an employer, how to obtain reasonable accommodations, and what to do if you think your rights have been violated.

[National Institute of Mental Health's My Mental Health: Do I Need Help?](#)

This website contains valuable information to help anyone struggling with mental health issues understand when it's time to seek professional help. It also includes links to a treatment locator and information about accessing help during a mental health crisis.

[Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's Find Support](#)

This website describes the thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and bodily changes that may signal professional help is needed for a mental health condition or substance use disorder.

[American Psychiatric Association Center for Workplace Mental Health's Mental Health Topics](#)

This resource includes numerous links to webpages about specific mental disorders (e.g., anxiety), mental health-related struggles at work (e.g., burnout, workplace stress), and other wellness challenges (e.g., loneliness, caregiving).

Resources

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