

# Workplace Mental Health



Opportunities and strategies for employers to create healthy, resilient workplaces and build strong communities.

**Governor Whitmer's mental health proposals**

will help Michigan take a big step towards giving Michiganders the comprehensive care they need, so we can attract and retain more mental health professionals, open more appointments, and create good-paying jobs.

To build on these efforts, she tasked the Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity (LEO) with establishing a dedicated workgroup to focus on mental health, trauma and resiliency in the workplace. LEO worked closely with employers, workers and professionals to discuss how workplaces can implement supportive and empowering strategies and highlight organizational opportunities for better workplace environments.

**This report details the findings of the workgroup and key strategies for employers to help build supportive workplaces by integrating employee mental health strategies that establish healthier workplaces, enhance employee wellbeing and promote resilient companies.**

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## Resilient Workplaces

To get started, the workgroup explored what it means to be a resilient workplace and how it can greatly impact employee wellbeing – with a focus on employee mental health, the employer’s bottom line and our communities.

Employers and employees alike recognize that workplace safety is a given, that this is part of the employment experience. A critical but often overlooked part of workplace safety is mental health and wellbeing. Ample evidence shows that mental and physical health are intricately linked, e.g., toxic stress is linked to physical ailments and an increase in chronic disease. Employees whose mental health is threatened are more prone to physical safety challenges at work.



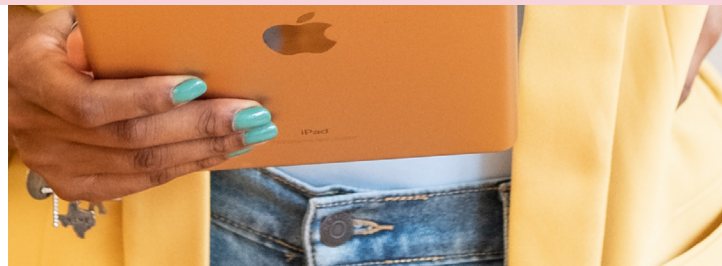
### The World Health Organization focuses on four main principles to build healthy workplaces:

- physical workplace
- personal health resources
- community involvement
- psychosocial characteristics of the workplace

### These psychosocial characteristics include:

- *Work organization* – time pressures, work demands, job clarity and design.
- *Organizational culture* – dignity and respect for all, harassment and bullying, gender or racial discrimination.
- Lack of support for work-life balance.
- Fear of job loss, job insecurity.<sup>1</sup>

Employers can create stronger and more supportive work organizations and cultures by training leadership, managers, and employees on how to adopt resilience-building strategies and practices at the individual, team, and organizational levels.



1 [www.who.int/publications/i/item/healthy-workplaces-a-model-for-action](http://www.who.int/publications/i/item/healthy-workplaces-a-model-for-action)

## Identifying the Problem

Depression and anxiety are two of the most prevalent mental health challenges impacting our country's workplaces every day and have thus been studied the most.

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**In 2020, roughly 48 million people suffered from an anxiety disorder, while 21 million suffered from a major depressive episode. Overall, 21% of the U.S. adult population will have a mental illness in any given year.<sup>2</sup>**

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However, less than half, 46.2%, received treatment for a mental illness in 2020.<sup>3</sup>

Mental health challenges cost both employees and employers billions of dollars annually through missed work, turnover, absenteeism, presenteeism (i.e., lost productivity through being unable to fully function) and more. Mental illnesses, toxic stress, and trauma (caused inside or outside the workplace) are hidden strains on and threats to employee morale and satisfaction, team cohesion and productivity, and company success.

A survey of working people from the CEO Roundtable of the American Heart Association found that while 76% of employees had struggled with at least one issue affecting their mental health, only 42% have been diagnosed and only 37% revealed this diagnosis to their employer.<sup>4</sup>

Recognizing these challenges and adopting strategies, practices, and policies to mitigate and alleviate them are becoming more and more important to companies' abilities to recruit and retain talent and remain competitive in the market.

### **THE IMPACT OF TOXIC AND CHRONIC STRESS**

Toxic stress is stress that overwhelms an individual's ability to cope and succeed at work (and in life). Chronic stress is ongoing high or toxic stress that does not abate. Both impact individuals in a myriad of ways and can eventually lead to chronic physical conditions that require medical intervention. Chronic stress can occur at multiple levels and degrees, but just experiencing stress for long periods can have significant impacts.

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2 [www.nami.org/mhstats](http://www.nami.org/mhstats)

3 [www.nami.org/mhstats](http://www.nami.org/mhstats)

4 [ceoroundtable.heart.org/mentalhealth/executive-summary/highlighted-findings/](http://ceoroundtable.heart.org/mentalhealth/executive-summary/highlighted-findings/)

Among the symptoms of chronic stress, individuals may experience cognitive, emotional, physical and behavioral signs of chronic stress:<sup>5</sup>

- Aches and pains
- Insomnia or sleepiness
- Change in social behavior, *such as staying in often*
- Low energy
- Unfocused or cloudy thinking
- Change in appetite
- Increased alcohol or drug use
- Change in emotional responses to others
- Emotional withdrawal

From these early symptoms, chronic stress can lead to severe medical and mental health challenges.<sup>6</sup> Chronic stress is linked to other conditions, both psychological and physical. These can include:

- Diseases such as hypertension, heart disease, obesity and metabolic syndrome, Type II diabetes and arthritis.
- Addiction to alcohol, nicotine and/or prescription drugs, and behavioral-related activities such as addiction to the internet, food or gambling.
- Mood disorders and anxiety disorders, which are common secondary diagnoses for people with chronic stress.
- Hypertension, depression, addiction and anxiety disorders.



**Employers must focus on mental health and safety for overall employee wellbeing.**

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5 [www.yalemedicine.org/conditions/stress-disorder](http://www.yalemedicine.org/conditions/stress-disorder)

6 [www.yalemedicine.org/conditions/stress-disorder](http://www.yalemedicine.org/conditions/stress-disorder)

## THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC

With the COVID-19 pandemic, Americans experienced toxic and chronic stress, and many have experienced significant trauma. This has increased symptoms of anxiety and depression in a large way (figure 1<sup>7</sup>).

As we continue to work, this amplifies the impacts of mental health and stress in our workplaces, the full effects of which are still uncertain but raise alarms and highlight the need to attend to stressors at work. It's also important to remember that toxic and chronic stress and trauma have "long tails," meaning their effects and symptoms are prolonged long after the initial incident(s) until they are addressed and resolved.

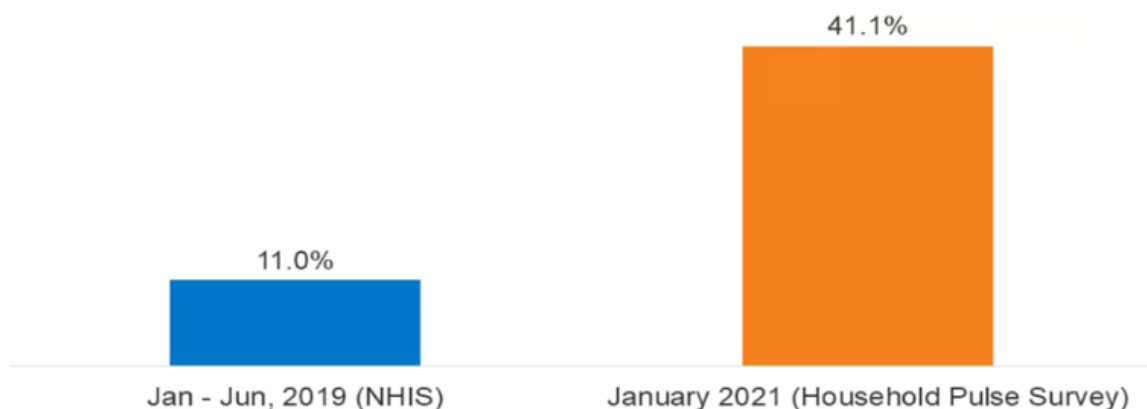
## THE ROLE OF TRAUMA

Certainly, trauma in terms of incidents that pose a risk to our physical safety can happen in the workplace, especially within certain industries or sectors more likely to encounter traumatic events, such as police, fire, health care and nursing, military personnel, etc.

Chronic stress and traumatic circumstances are also caused by societal factors like adverse childhood experiences, racism, gender discrimination, poverty, financial insecurity, war and more. Chronic stress and trauma or trauma retriggering can also happen at work, i.e., when a bullying boss triggers long-buried memories of an abusive parent, affecting our abilities to do our jobs well.

FIGURE 1

### Average Share of Adults Reporting Symptoms of Anxiety Disorder and/or Depressive Disorder, January-June 2019 vs. January 2021



NOTES: Percentages are based on responses to the GAD-2 and PHQ-2 scales. Pulse findings (shown here for January 6 – 18, 2021) have been stable overall since data collection began in April 2020.

Traumatic experiences can potentially cause more permanent changes to an individual's mental health and create potential "triggering," events that might induce an abnormal or extreme response to situations which may be interpreted differently by others.

Research on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), including abuse, neglect and family dysfunction prior to age 18, has found potential lifelong impacts to physical and emotional wellbeing. About 61% of adults report having experienced at least one, and 1 in 6 adults having experienced 4 or more ACEs.<sup>8</sup> For those having experienced 4 or more, job problems, absenteeism, and financial problems were significantly higher than those with fewer ACEs or none.<sup>9</sup> Even though ACEs happened at home or in the community when someone was younger, their effects can show up at work years later.

### THE ROLE OF WORK STRESS

While the definition of trauma narrowly defined may only include workplace stressors where physical health and safety are at risk, the chronic stressors that become toxic at work are also important to recognize. There are also situations in which an individual may have external traumatic experiences they carry with them into the workplace. Also, within work environments, workplace practices or policies may cause chronic or toxic stress.

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**Work itself is identified as a primary source of stress for individuals. 65% of U.S. employees surveyed identified their job as the No. 1 stress in their lives.<sup>10</sup>**

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Anecdotally, this appears to be a growing trend.

**Among the many types of work stress that can have more negative impacts on people, some of the more common include:**

- Overwork
- Job quality
- Job insecurity
- Bullying or harassment
- Lack of perceived supports
- Unrealistic expectations
- Workplace violence

8 [www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/aces/index.html](http://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/aces/index.html)

9 [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4690705/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4690705/)

10 [www.workplacementalhealth.org/mental-health-topics/resilience#:~:text=Resilience%20is%20a%20key%20strategy,one%20stressor%20in%20their%20lives.](http://www.workplacementalhealth.org/mental-health-topics/resilience#:~:text=Resilience%20is%20a%20key%20strategy,one%20stressor%20in%20their%20lives.)

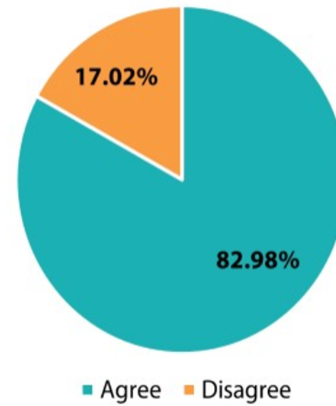
Workplace stress and impacts are prevalent (figure 2<sup>11</sup>):

FIGURE 2

### 2021 MHA Workplace Survey

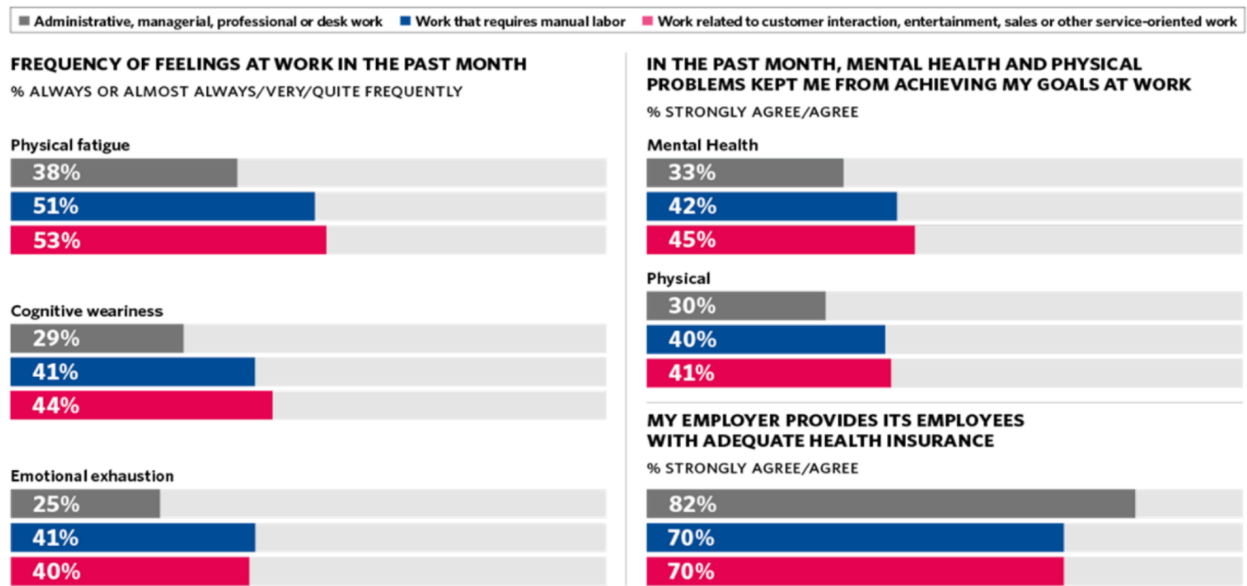
- Exhaustion, including emotional exhaustion, is one of the earliest signs of burnout.
- Employees who are feeling emotionally drained from work are at a higher risk of workplace stress, leading to burnout and other mental health concerns.

### I FEEL EMOTIONALLY DRAINED FROM MY WORK



This stress is pervasive across all industries, especially those interacting with customers/clients (figure 3<sup>12</sup>):

FIGURE 3



COMPOUNDING PRESSURE ON THE AMERICAN WORKFORCE © 2021 American Psychological Association

11 [mhanational.org/sites/default/files/MTW\\_Report\\_2021.pdf](https://mhanational.org/sites/default/files/MTW_Report_2021.pdf)

12 [www.apa.org/pubs/reports/work-well-being/compounding-pressure-2021](https://www.apa.org/pubs/reports/work-well-being/compounding-pressure-2021)



## IMPACTS FOR WORKERS AND WORKPLACES

Among the many poor outcomes from toxic and chronic stress, depression, anxiety, trauma/retriggering, many workers are struggling with suicide, suicidal ideation, and substance use, including excessive alcohol and even illicit drug use.

As referenced above, depression and substance abuse disorders are among the

most common conditions associated with chronic stress.

This is impacting workplaces across all industries and professions in very harmful and profound ways.

First, suicide rates continue to increase and are prevalent across all industries (figure 4<sup>13</sup>):

FIGURE 4

### The Professions with the Highest (and Lowest) Suicide Rates 2015 rate of suicide per 100,000 according to CDC

Rank	Professions	Suicide Rate
1	Construction and Extraction	52.1
2	Installation, Maintenance, and Repair	37.8
3	Arts, Design, Entertainment, Sports & Media	27.3
4	Transportation and Material Moving	26.8
5	Production	24.3
6	Protective Service	24.2
7	Farming, Fishing, and Forestry	18.7
8	Building & Grounds Cleaning & Maintenance	18.2
9	Architecture and Engineering	17.6
10	Food Preparation and Serving Related	14.8
11	Sales and Related	14.2
12	Computer and Mathematical	14.0
13	Legal	13.8
14	Life, Physical, and Social Science	12.8
15	Health Care Practitioners and Technical	12.5
16	Management	12.5
17	Health Care Support	11.9
18	Personal Care and Service	10.1
19	Community and Social Service	9.0
20	Office and Administrative Support	8.6
21	Business and Financial Operations	8.5
22	Education, Training, and Library	5.3

In addition, substance use including illicit drug use are prevalent in the workforce (figure 5 and 6<sup>14</sup>):

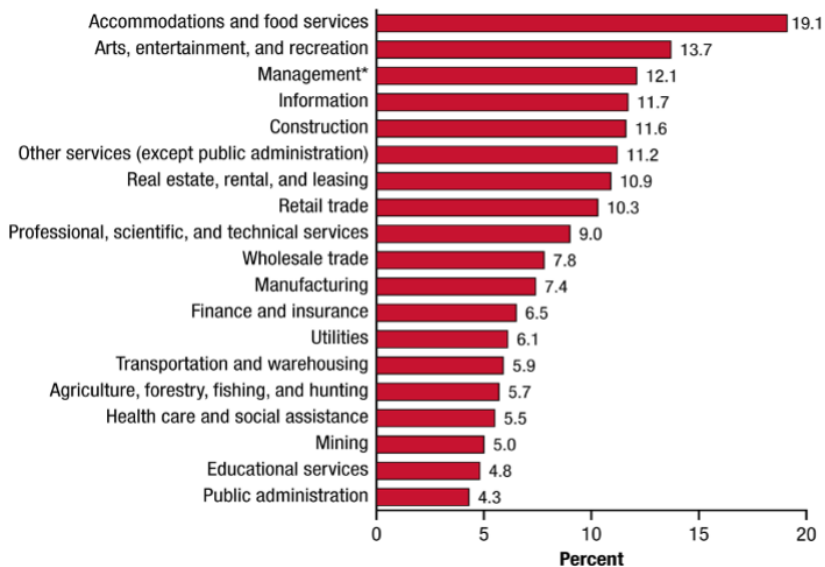
FIGURE 5

**Past month heavy alcohol use among adults aged 18 to 64 employed full time**  
*By industry category: combined 2008 - 2012*



FIGURE 6

**Past month illicit drug use among adults aged 18 to 64 employed full time**  
*By industry category: combined 2008 - 2012*



## The Stress Challenge



### IMPACTS OF STRESS

Stress and trauma are experienced differently by different individuals. However, once the human stress response is activated, our bodies and brains typically react in one of a few ways—fight, flight, freeze or submit.

Short-term, low-grade stress is part of life and can be positive for our development and ability to perform; however, toxic and chronic stress becomes harmful to our physical and mental health.

Toxic and chronic stress impairs our ability to function and can lead to severe outcomes such as depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and other chronic health conditions.

For some, factors outside of the workplace, including having adverse childhood experiences, ongoing or historical racial discrimination, socioeconomic disadvantages, financial insecurity, poverty, or other severe traumas can permanently impact not only the level of stress, but the

response to different types of stresses throughout a lifetime.

For many, the workplace can be a significant source of stress. When stress levels are consistently elevated becoming chronic or even toxic stress, it begins to have negative effects on health and wellbeing. This impairs the ability to function, think and respond to challenges.

Individuals can learn to identify the symptoms of toxic and chronic stress and trauma and adopt healthier responses to them – for ourselves and others. The goal is to try to avoid stress altogether and avoid our responses spiraling into harmful behaviors. This often requires support from employers and communities.

For employers, focusing on building a healthy environment will lead to better health outcomes, higher productivity, lower turnover and help build stronger communities among many other positive outcomes.

## PREWIRED RESPONSE TO STRESS

The stress response is an important evolutionary trait dating back to our early days as homo sapiens and designed to keep us alive in the face of threats from things like saber tooth tigers. Our stress response is automatic and helps ensure a quick response to a perceived threat.

For example, when suddenly encountering a bear in the woods, the automatic stress response helps to quickly respond to the potential threat.

However, the automatic human stress response can be activated in the face of other threats to our mental and emotional safety.

The human auto stress response to stay alive triggers a physiological change in the human body, increasing our physical strength and attention to succeed in survival mode. Anything not required for immediate survival gets temporarily diminished, including critical thinking, logic, and other executive processing activities. Cortisol and adrenaline rush throughout the body to be “ready.” This response is primarily without thinking and simply reacting to the situation.

Once activated, the general response is flight, fright, freeze or fawn.

### FLIGHT

**If you’re confronted by a bear, you may run, walk backwards slowly or otherwise flee to get away from the threat.**

In the workplace, this may be disengaging, missing deadlines, avoiding interactions, taking sick days, quitting or other methods to flee from the stressful situation.

### FIGHT

**In the bear scenario, the response can include standing one’s ground, yelling, looking bigger or otherwise engaging the bear to leave.**

In the workplace, this generally presents as anger or aggressive behaviors, quick to temper or lashing out in other ways.

### FREEZE

**In the bear scenario, this means not moving and freezing in place.**

In the workplace this looks the same. The person is simply unable to move forward, engage, process new information, tackle the challenge or respond in a meaningful way.

### FAWN

**Consistently abandoning your own needs to serve others to avoid conflict, criticism, or disapproval.**

Fawning is also called the “please and appease” response and is associated with people-pleasing and codependency. This is also known as the “submit,” or “submission,” response.

**Companies thrive when they consider the impact of specific workplace contributors and external factors that impact employee mental health and resiliency and strive to minimize negative factors and maximize positive ones.**

#### **THE GOOD NEWS**

Once the event is removed, stress levels decrease, and the brain begins to heal. Healing takes some time, and the more chronic/toxic the stress level, the more time is necessary. However, certain stressors can lead to a lasting effect on the response and cause poor outcomes for individuals. This is why it is important to work toward minimizing stress and addressing mental resilience head on.

Individuals can learn how to better recognize perceived threats and find better responses to avoid triggering the stress response.

Finally, employers can establish healthier workplaces by focusing on enhancing overall employee wellbeing and recognizing harmful workplace operations, policies and procedures.



## Building the Business Case

### *Why the Workplace?*

Working people spend most of their waking hours at work.<sup>15</sup> Workplaces are already bearing the brunt of these costs of toxic and chronic stress, trauma, and unsafe mental health challenges. Workplaces are most likely the best place to offer education, support and the ability to impact good outcomes.



## IGNORING IS EXPENSIVE

The Chicago Resiliency Network found a \$4 return for each dollar invested in mental health treatment.<sup>16</sup> Similar numbers are found in other research on mental health, which can vary a bit by condition. However, overall, the return on investment appears significant.

While employers may see some costs of mental health conditions through medical claims, pharmacy costs, wellness program costs, or sick days and workplace leave programs, the larger costs are likely more invisible.

First, absenteeism because of major depressive disorder and anxiety alone account for 27 or more lost workdays annually per person experiencing these conditions, and cost roughly \$250 billion annually.<sup>17</sup>

Second, and even more likely invisible, is the cost of presenteeism and lost productivity.

Presenteeism occurs when workers are in the workplace, but due to depression are unable to fully function. A study from Tufts University found that depression accounted for 37% of all presenteeism losses for the top 10 most expensive chronic conditions at roughly \$109 per all employees with or without the condition.<sup>18</sup>

Further, in this study, based on prevalence data of depressive conditions, it is likely that an employer with 10,000 employees has 1,000 that are experiencing depression. These same multiples apply to smaller employers as well, meaning that the costs associated are already occurring.

Finally, adding in job stress, research suggests that stress alone costs American companies over \$300 billion in health care costs, absenteeism and poor performance. Further, roughly 40% of turnover is due to job stress.<sup>19</sup>

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16 [www.corpcoalition.org/chicago-resiliency-network#CRN-First-Section](http://www.corpcoalition.org/chicago-resiliency-network#CRN-First-Section)

17 [ceoroundtable.heart.org/mentalhealth/the-business-case-for-investing-in-mental-health/the-invisible-costs/](http://ceoroundtable.heart.org/mentalhealth/the-business-case-for-investing-in-mental-health/the-invisible-costs/)

18 [seureservercdn.net/198.71.233.213/e47.77e.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/OMaW\\_Tufts-Study\\_High-Cost-of-Mental-Disorders-1.pdf](http://seureservercdn.net/198.71.233.213/e47.77e.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/OMaW_Tufts-Study_High-Cost-of-Mental-Disorders-1.pdf)

19 [www.uml.edu/research/cph-new/worker/stress-at-work/financial-costs.aspx#:~:text=is%20Job%20Stress%3F-,How%20costly%20is%20job%20stress%3F,turnover%20is%20due%20to%20stress](http://www.uml.edu/research/cph-new/worker/stress-at-work/financial-costs.aspx#:~:text=is%20Job%20Stress%3F-,How%20costly%20is%20job%20stress%3F,turnover%20is%20due%20to%20stress)

## EMPLOYER CONTROL OR INFLUENCE

**Employers have control over several factors that can greatly impact overall employee health and wellbeing. Among these are:**

- Medical and other benefit programs
- Workplace rules
- Processes and procedures
- Distribution of work and training
- Supervisory training
- Employee training
- Response to customer interactions
- Expectations for suppliers/contractors
- Internal data gathering
- Company culture
- Employer communications and messaging
- Employer commitment

**Employers also have a great deal of influence establishing the right culture and commitment to influence employee behaviors. Among these are:**

- Building trust
- Enhancing employee engagement through more opportunities and control
- Ensuring transparency and ability for employees to speak up
- Creating a safe space for employees to share challenges and opportunities focused on mental health
- Recognizing all as Human Beings
- Building a positive, welcoming culture
- Enhancing and integrating diversity, equity and inclusion
- Showing empathy
- Employer/Employee Common Interests

**Employees and employers share many common interests in the workplace. Among these include:**

- Workplace safety and health
- Job quality and engaging work
- Personal and professional development
- Employee ownership of job responsibilities
- Opportunities for growth
- Training
- Transparency
- Conflict resolution
- Continued success of the business
  - Impacts job security
  - Impacts profitability





## THE GOOD NEWS

Employees who strongly agree that their employer cares about their overall wellbeing, including mental health, are:

**69%**

less likely to search for a new job

**71%**

less likely to report experiencing a lot of burnout

**5x**

more likely to advocate for their employer as a place to work

**3x**

more likely to be engaged at work

**36%**

more likely to be thriving in their lives<sup>20</sup>



**Employers who invest in their employees' mental health and safety see a significant return on investment including improved employee satisfaction, increased productivity and reduced absenteeism and turnover.**

## Five Steps to Start Building a Resilient Workplace

Based on this research, the workgroup recommends these easy steps to help employers build a resilient workplace. These steps will help organizations focus on overall wellbeing, incorporate trauma informed strategies and reduce workplace stressors that can lead to crisis.



**As organizations and employers consider these steps, they can also focus on training leadership, managers and employees with tools to ensure a healthy workplace.**

### 1

#### **ASSESS YOUR WORKPLACE AND CULTURE**

Depending on the size of the operation, employee surveys can provide valuable insight into how employees feel. For surveys to be effective, it is critical that employees believe the survey will not have any negative impacts, will not be held against them and will lead to improvements. Low survey participation is also an indicator of limited employee engagement and trust.

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) has template surveys employers can use specifically for mental health. You can find this and other information on the NIOSH Job Stress website at [cdc.gov/niosh](https://www.cdc.gov/niosh). There are many other web resources and tools available in this space as well that can provide some insight.

Smaller employers are better positioned to directly interact with employees and gauge how they are feeling about their workplace.

## 2

**CONSIDER WORKPLACE POLICIES, PRACTICES AND PROCEDURES**

In some areas, employers have begun offering more flexible mental health days, and, in some cases, implementing company-wide mental health days where no employee is expected to work.

Other employers are offering more flexible PTO or work schedules to accommodate different needs.

Employees should be expected to use vacation and PTO time and separate from work for some period to allow time to refresh and recharge. Working vacations should be avoided.

Remote work options can help employees.

Minimize repetitive or redundant meetings. Provide clear agendas and meeting facilitation. Allow authentic engagement for employees in meetings, discussions, and relevant company decisions.

Identify potential mental health hazards related to expectations, workload, staffing and work to minimize or eliminate negative impact.

Train supervisors on mental health awareness and empathy.

Engage employees in workplace performance, operational and other planning.

## 3

**RECOMMIT TO EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS (EAPS)**

EAPs are specifically designed to support employees needing certain help including mental health. However, these programs are generally underutilized, with roughly 5% of employees using them.<sup>21</sup>

Employers must identify why employees are unlikely to use these programs and find ways to enhance their utilization.

## 4

**DEVELOP WAYS TO ENGAGE AND EMPOWER EMPLOYEES**

Consider adding or expanding employee resource groups (ERGs). ERG's are voluntary, employee-led groups whose aim is to foster a diverse, inclusive workplace aligned with the organizations in which they work.

These groups provide employees with similar interests the space to identify challenges and solutions to a variety of issues.

## 5

**CONSIDER ADDING MENTAL HEALTH TO JOINT EMPLOYER/EMPLOYEE SAFETY COMMITTEES**

Many workplaces have established joint safety committees, safety talks or other workplace safety programs. Consider adding mental health awareness to these activities.

21 [www.mindsharepartners.org/post/5-workplace-mental-health-questions-to-include-in-employee-pulse-and-employee-engagement-surveys](http://www.mindsharepartners.org/post/5-workplace-mental-health-questions-to-include-in-employee-pulse-and-employee-engagement-surveys)

## Workgroup Recommendations for the State of Michigan

**The workgroup proposed recommendations for the State to consider in supporting mental health practices in the workplace:**

- Make the State of Michigan, as an employer, a model of workplace mental health and safety for other businesses.
- Give preference for businesses incorporating employee mental health improvement strategies through the State's procurement or grant processes.
- Offer financial support from the State for businesses to implement employee mental health improvement strategies.
- Develop a resource hub that allows various groups to access plans, policies and other information that is being used by employers in Michigan.
- Develop Michigan-specific data tools for tracking progress on improving workplace mental health and safety.
- Continue workgroup efforts that identify specific workplace challenges and opportunities for specific industries (e.g., healthcare, manufacturing, education, service workers, etc.).
- Develop a State recognition or "pledge" concept to encourage employers to integrate mental health strategies into their workplace.
- Identify incentives for recruitment and retention and work to alleviate potential shortages of mental health services providers in the community.
- Provide opportunities for learning about successful strategies and programs from across the country and provide peer-sharing and learning opportunities in the state of Michigan.

**Investing in mental health and safety is critical to building strong workplaces, a strong workforce and strong communities.**

## Resources for Employers and Organizations

*US Department of Labor-Office  
of Disability Employment*  
[dol.gov/agencies/odep](https://dol.gov/agencies/odep)

Free resources including  
public service announcements,  
customizable posters, and  
technical information.

*What You Can Do Campaign*  
[whatcanyoudocampaign.org](https://whatcanyoudocampaign.org)

Free resources including posters,  
public service announcements,  
interactive guides.

*World Health Organization (WHO)*  
[who.int](https://who.int)

Research and guides to healthy  
workplaces.

*Centers for Disease Control (CDC)*  
[cdc.gov](https://cdc.gov)

Research and tools.

