



Create a Stigma-Free Workplace

IF YOU WERE TO ASK PEOPLE WHO HAVE A MENTAL ILLNESS, “WHAT’S THE WORST PART OF HAVING A DISORDER?” MANY WILL SAY, “THE STIGMA.” FEELINGS OF SHAME, CONCERNS ABOUT JOB SECURITY, AND FEAR OF REJECTION BY COLLEAGUES ARE OFTEN OVERWHELMING AND INTERFERE WITH PRODUCTIVITY. AND THESE ISSUES OFTEN DISCOURAGE MANY FROM SEEKING THE HELP THEY NEED.

Many innovative employers have learned that addressing their employees’ mental health needs makes good economic sense. They also recognize that they play an essential role in their employees’ mental health not only by offering adequate insurance coverage for mental health care, but also by creating an environment that supports people who need help.

To help support employers, NMHA recommends the following strategies for creating a stigma-free workplace:

- ◆ **Educate:** Employees at all levels of the organization need to learn about mental illnesses, stress and wellness, as well as the signs and symptoms of mental health disorders.

It is equally important to educate staff about the benefits and services their employer provides and how to access them. Supervisors should receive training to learn how to intervene appropriately if they think an employee may have a mental health problem.

- ◆ **Encourage dialogue:** Organizations that can talk candidly about mental health and stress getting appropriate help set a positive and supportive tone among employees. Create a safe environment in which staff members are encouraged to talk about stress, workloads, family commitments and other issues.

- ◆ **Send the message that mental illnesses are real, common and treatable:** Many people mistakenly believe that mental illnesses are permanent and untreatable. In fact, with access to appropriate treatment, the vast majority of people with mental illness see significant improvement in their disorders and lead stable, productive lives.

- ◆ **Discourage stigmatizing language:** Stigma begins with hurtful labels such as “crazy,” “loony” or “nuts.” Discourage staff members at all levels from using such language and encourage “people-first” language, which puts a human face on mental illness (for example, say “a person with schizophrenia” as opposed to using the dehumanizing term “a schizophrenic”).

- ◆ **Invest in mental health benefits:** Actions do speak louder than words, so it’s essential to invest in mental health benefits, including appropriate insurance coverage for treatment, and prevention and educational programs. Be sure to confirm that the treatment and services your organization has paid for are indeed available through an adequate network of providers.





◆ **Try using the Internet:** Some employers are making use of Internet and Intranet technology to provide mental health and benefit information to their employees. Some provide useful links from their sites to provider directories and wellness information, and also offer toll-free information numbers. Feel free to link to the NMHA Web site at www.nmha.org, or to your local Mental Health Association site.

◆ **Help facilitate a healthy transition back to work:** Some people may need time off work for treatment, and employers need to ensure a healthy transition back to the office. Management should help create an environment in which people feel welcomed and encouraged to ask for the help they need—and, above all, not judged. Employers should also have a policy in place to accommodate the needs of staff members who have “standing appointments” for mental health treatment.

◆ **Seek consultation:** If your health or mental health administrator includes an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), its staff may be helpful in implementing all these efforts. In addition, your local Mental Health Association shares your goals of educating staff, eliminating stigma and improving emotional well-being. Many provide workplace education and screenings for mental illnesses. Contact your local Mental Health Association to discuss the possibilities of a partnership.

To learn more, contact your local Mental Health Association or the National Mental Health Association at 800-969-NMHA (6642) or www.nmha.org

