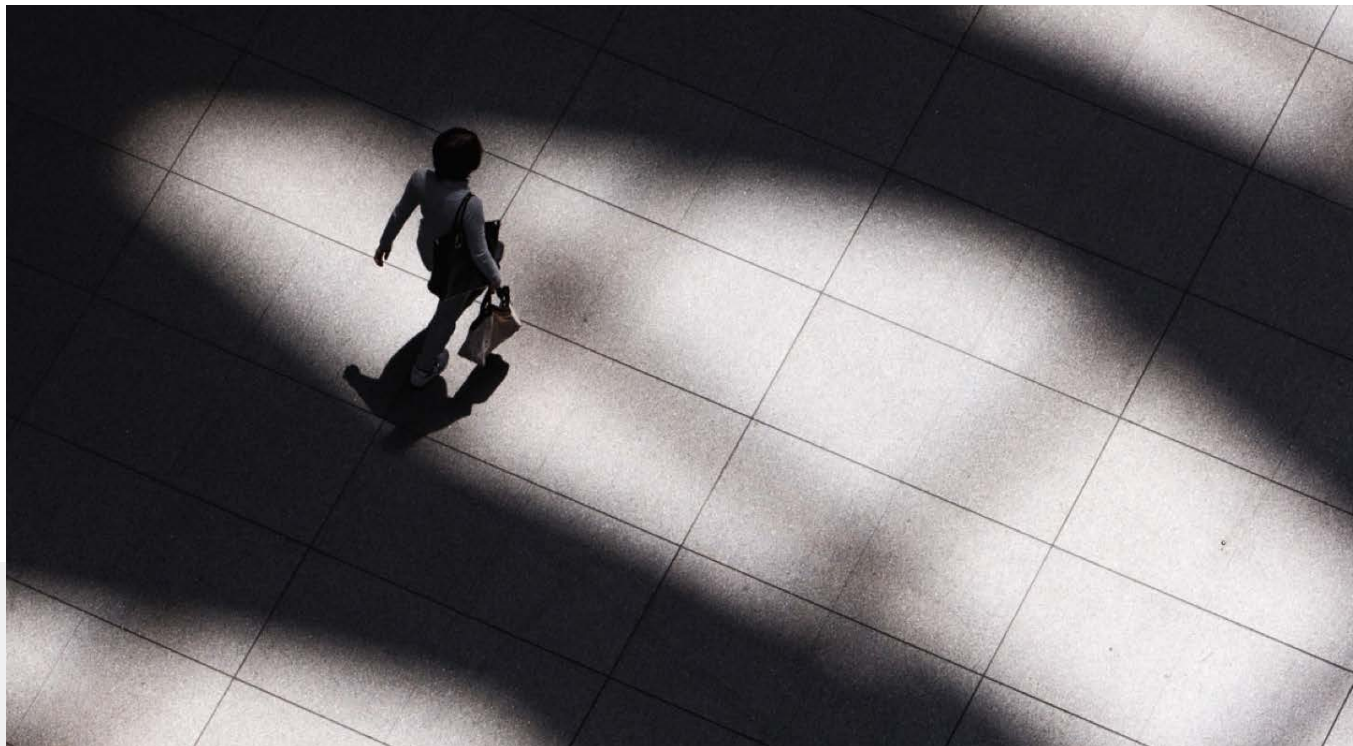# STANTON CHASE

A Mental Health Action Plan for Companies: Insights from Top HR Professionals

The mental health crisis is here, and companies need to act.

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Happy employees are 12% more productive than unhappy employees. However, productivity should not be the only reason companies prioritize their employees' mental health. It should be a moral obligation, especially considering that most full-time employees spend a total of 90,000 hours at work during their lifetimes.

Mental health problems are pervasive in today's workforce, and unfortunately, they often go unaddressed or are not addressed appropriately. Statistically, three out of 20 employees are suffering from poor mental health, and sadly, many are afraid to speak to their supervisors about it. This has resulted in 12 billion working days being lost each year globally as a result of depression and anxiety, costing businesses a colossal $1 trillion in lost productivity. Surprisingly, despite these numbers over half of employees feel that their employers are not doing enough to support their mental well-being, while 70% of managers believe there are structural barriers to providing such support.
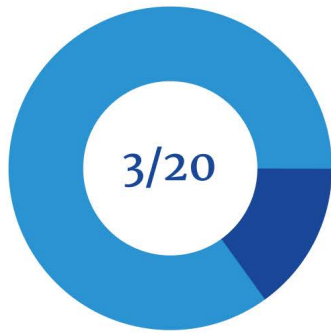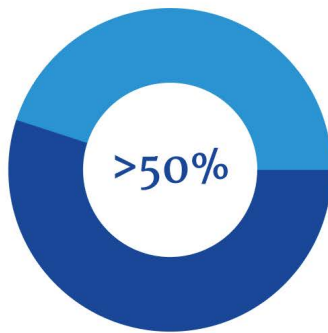
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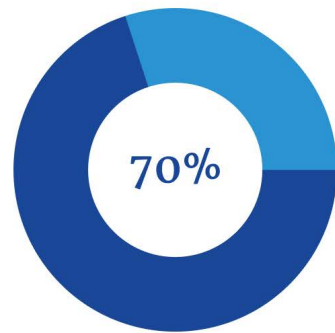
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Top HR Professionals in Healthcare and Life Sciences Weigh in on Workplace Mental Health

Stanton Chase London undertook a project to investigate how companies are approaching the issue of mental health in the workplace. Consequently, we conducted interviews with prominent HR professionals from the Life Sciences and Healthcare industry to gain insights into the current state of mental health in the workplace. The objective was to learn how these professionals' organizations deal with mental health concerns in the workplace and to understand their views on the HR department's responsibility in promoting positive mental health. The identities of the interviewees have been kept confidential to promote honesty and transparency.

To this end, eight specific questions were asked:

1. What factors have contributed to the current emphasis on mental health in the workplace?

During the COVID-19 pandemic, HR professionals noticed a significant increase in discussions regarding mental health in the workplace. This trend continued and even intensified post-pandemic. There are several reasons why there has been a heightened focus on mental health in the workplace, according to these professionals:

- The de-stigmatization of mental health discussions in the workplace.

- The isolation of remote and hybrid employees, which sometimes leads to poor mental health.

- Remote and hybrid employees often work longer hours to prove their productivity, which can lead to stress and burnout.

- Virtual conversations have made it easier to have difficult mental health discussions.

- External stressors like the predicted recession have led to an increase in poor mental health among employees.

- Employees find it challenging to compartmentalize their personal lives from their work lives.

- High-pressure work environments due to economic pressures.

One HR professional observed that "times have changed, and a major factor is the way we now work, which has now been turned on its head."

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2. Is poor mental health a new pandemic?

The interviewees who were asked this question concurred that the COVID-19 pandemic has not only triggered conversations about mental health in the workplace but that poor mental health in the workplace could emerge as a new pandemic in and of itself.

The data seems to agree with them:

- Over the past decade, mental health disorders have become more prevalent, with data indicating a 13% increase.

- A CNN poll conducted in 2022 revealed that 90% of US adults believe that their country is currently experiencing a poor mental health epidemic.

- According to the UK's Office for National Statistics, while depression diagnoses have decreased in prevalence since the beginning of the pandemic, they are now accounting for a greater percentage of all GP diagnoses compared to the pre-pandemic period.

"We're scratching the surface at the moment. I do think there will be a mental health pandemic," one HR professional confirmed.

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3. Who is responsible for employees' mental health?

The normalization of discussing mental health at work has sparked a debate about who should be responsible for addressing and supporting employees' mental health. Should it be their direct supervisor, HR department, colleagues, or the employees themselves?

To explore this question, HR professionals were asked to provide their insights, and their perspectives varied:

- Some HR professionals expressed concern about their ability to handle serious mental health issues, stating that they are not trained to identify or deal with them.

- Many believed that it was unfair to expect HR to have these skills, yet an increasing number of employees are turning to HR for mental health support.

- Others thought that employees and HR should work together to support employees' mental health, but that HR could only assist if the employee also wanted to help themselves.

- Some HR professionals argued that business leaders should take responsibility if poor mental health is prevalent in their workforce and that it was their responsibility to ensure the work environment did not contribute to poor mental health.

- Many HR professionals believe that line managers and direct supervisors should receive better training in recognizing and supporting poor mental health so that they can work in collaboration with HR to address these issues.

"The responsibility for employee well-being in the workplace can be divided into two aspects: the employer's duty to ensure a suitable environment and not worsen any existing issues, and the individual's responsibility to take care of their own well-being," one HR professional said.

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4. What is the scope of your company's wellness program?

During our interviews with HR professionals, we discovered that all the organizations they represented had implemented some form of wellness policy or program. However, there were differences in the extent, benefits, and level of commitment to these policies and programs across the companies.

Below are some of the benefits that were reported to be part of their organizations' wellness programs:

- Employee assistance programs and hotlines

- Employee wellness surveys

- Flexible work and holiday policies, as well as work-from-home and hybrid work policies

- Mental health coverage in addition to existing medical coverage

- Gym memberships

- Workshops designed to increase awareness about various issues and provide practical tools for managing stress and building resilience

- Social events at work and games in the breakroom

- Wellness sessions and Pilates classes in the office

"We have a full-time dedicated person who creates and implements well-being policies to ensure consistency across all business units and geographies. We also provide an employee assistance helpline for confidential support, run by an independent company," one HR professional reported.

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5. Is it necessary to make changes to ensure employees take breaks and time off?

The issue of employees not taking breaks, including annual leave, has become more prevalent. Shockingly, more than 20% of employees are too scared to ask for any time off at all.

To address this problem, the HR professionals who were interviewed were asked whether structural changes are necessary to compel employees to take breaks and time off. The responses were varied, with some expressing concerns about negative impacts on their organization's profitability if structural changes were made to encourage employees to take their annual leave, while others were supportive of the idea.

Key takeaways from their answers include the need for:

- Manager coaching and training to identify employees at risk of burnout or struggling with mental health issues to facilitate offering them time off.

- Monitoring unused vacation days and encouraging employees who have not taken vacations for an extended period to prioritize their well-being.

- Appointing Chief Happiness Officers and Chief Wellness Officers to prioritize the well-being of their workforce.

- Monitoring employees' working hours and discouraging them from working outside of working hours through initiatives like no-contact policies after work.

"I work with a senior manager who has a terribly busy schedule and always says yes to everything. Despite her workload, she sticks to a strict 9:00 to 5:00 work schedule. If someone sends her an email after hours, they won't receive a response until the next day. She leads by example and tries to discourage overworking," one HR professional recounted. "Change needs to happen from the top down."

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6. Is it HR's role to recognize problems with mental health, and are they adequately prepared and qualified to do so?

During our interviews with HR professionals, the topic of whether HR is equipped to recognize and handle mental health problems came up. It was generally agreed that HR professionals are not typically trained or qualified to address such issues.

Despite this, some HR professionals noted that their companies were taking steps to establish systems to identify and address mental health issues in the workplace. These steps included:

- Providing HR with courses and educational opportunities to recognize signs of burnout and mental distress.

- Appointing mental health first aiders within the company who can be the first point of contact for employees dealing with mental health crises, and who can guide them to appropriate resources and professionals for further help.

- Hiring external mental health professionals to evaluate and manage mental health problems in the workplace.

"It worries me that HR professionals take on the task of piecing together employees' mental health without completely understanding every issue," said one HR professional. "We live in a litigious society, and identifying and addressing mental health issues may be best left to mental health professionals."

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7. Is HR equipped with the right resources to provide employees with mental health support?

Opinions on this question were divided. Some HR professionals felt that they had the resources they needed, while others believed that their mental health toolbox was still missing key tools. Some of the tools the HR professionals said they still needed were:

- A central point where they can get advice on how to handle mental health issues with employees.

- More individuals with backgrounds and qualifications in mental health being appointed into the HR department.

- Improved accessibility for employees to HR.

"Recently, an employee reached out to one of our external providers that manages our employee assistance program but didn't receive the desired outcome. This employee was brave enough to inform the HR department about their experience and requested further help. As HR professionals, it is crucial that we ensure we remain accessible to employees regardless of the mental health tools on offer," said one HR professional.

8. How do HR professionals set boundaries to protect their own mental health?

HR leaders are increasingly expected to handle severe and complicated mental health problems, as well as to create intricate identification and prevention programs. However, this can often affect the mental health of HR professionals themselves, prompting the age-old question of "Who rescues the rescuer?" In fact, the pressure of dealing with employee mental health has led 45% of HR leaders to consider resigning.

Unfortunately, many HR leaders struggle to set boundaries, indicating that companies need to support them in doing so. To address this issue, the interviewed HR professionals suggested several ideas:

- HR professionals should receive training on how to deal with their own emotions that may arise from working with challenging and often tragic mental health situations, as well as training on how to compartmentalize and set boundaries with employees.

- Before supporting others, HR professionals must prioritize their own mental health. As one HR leader pointed out, "You've got to put your own oxygen mask on first in an emergency situation."

- HR leaders and managers should act as mentors and coaches for more junior members of the HR department. This would help teach and guide them on how to set boundaries and separate personal feelings from work.

One HR professional said, "It's hard for me to set boundaries because of my personality. I always want to provide the best service to the people I support. However, I realize that I need to prioritize my own mental health more."

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Your Leadership Can Positively Impact Lives

Contributing positively to employees' mental health is possible for any organization. However, to do so, HR leaders must add a new set of skills to their skillset. Chief HR Officers and senior HR management must possess both hard and soft skills to identify mental health issues, approach affected individuals with compassion, guide them to appropriate help, and implement structures to support employee mental health, such as flexible working arrangements and employee assistance programs. Nevertheless, achieving this goal requires the support of the entire C-suite and Board. Without their support, the HR leaders' ability to effect change will be limited.

At Stanton Chase, we understand the significance of empathic leadership and its ability to create positive outcomes for both companies and employees. We recognize that businesses can play an essential role in making the world a better place. As leadership experts, we are committed to ensuring that companies have the right leadership to thrive and support their employees' well-being.

Click here to reach out to one of our consultants.

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Gavin McCartney is a Partner at Stanton Chase London, and specializes in the Life Sciences & Healthcare business. Gavin is also Global Sector Leader for the Health & Med Tech sector for the firm worldwide. Gavin has extensive experience managing executive search assignments for global, regional, and local clients, and travelled widely interviewing in Europe, Central and Eastern Europe, South and North Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America. Gavin enjoys undertaking fundraising challenges and volunteering in order to support those in the community who have mental health needs, largely with charities (including the Halow Project and Boaz) that provide a brighter future for people with mental health needs, learning disabilities, and autism.

Gavin McCartney
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About Stanton Chase

Stanton Chase ranks among the world's top 10 executive search firms. It has been a market leader for executive search and leadership consulting since 1990.

Stanton Chase operates through focused industry practice groups, each led by a global practice leader who is an industry expert. As an international firm with operations in over 45 countries, Stanton Chase provides both a global perspective and local insight.

Stanton Chase's experienced global consultants can help you every step of the way, whether you are looking for the best talent or making sure your leadership team is as effective as possible. Our core services include executive search, executive assessment, succession planning, and Board services.

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