

A Guide to Building a Mental Health Employee Resource Group



INTRODUCTION

It's more important than ever for employers to support workers' mental health and psychological well-being.

For starters, it is crucial for employee **recruitment and retention**. Four in five workers now say that mental health support is a key factor they consider when evaluating potential employers.

Beyond that, the ways that a company addresses — or adds to — workplace stress can directly affect worker performance, morale and company culture.

Meanwhile, the **demand for professional mental health treatment** is on the rise. People — your workers among them — are in greater need of professional care for diagnosable conditions like anxiety, depression and sleep-wake disorders. These conditions can affect how employees show up to work. While you're not responsible for diagnosing or "solving" these conditions, the support you provide can set these employees up to thrive.

The best possible work environment achieves two separate, but related, goals:

1. Help workers improve their psychological fitness and find meaning and fulfillment on the job ("**well-being**"); and
2. Help workers manage their mental health conditions ("**mental health**").

In working towards these goals, it's important to understand your employees' lived experiences and consider what you can do to support them. It may also be helpful to empower your workers to support one another and take specific actions to improve their mental health and psychological well-being. One way you can help cultivate a supportive and inclusive workplace culture is by creating a mental health employee resource group (ERG) within your organization.

ERGs are employee-led affinity groups designed to bring people with shared identities and their allies together to connect and support each other.

Officially recognized and usually funded by the employer, ERGs exist in **90 percent of Fortune 500 companies**, partly because they have been shown to **increase inclusion** and belonging among historically excluded communities.

Creating an ERG that focuses on mental health can help your company:

- Cultivate **community and belonging** in the workplace, which can reduce loneliness and make work more meaningful.
- Tackle the **stigma** that discourages some employees from talking about their mental health and well-being or seeking professional care. Stigma is part of the reason why only **8% of workers** benefit from the counseling available to them through employee assistance plans.
- Signal to all employees that mental health is a company priority and an important component of its diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging (DEIB) strategy.
- Better understand the unique mental health needs of your workforce, and collect employee feedback on your organization's mental health and wellness offerings.
- Maintain an open dialogue with a diverse community of employees who have varying mental health needs.
- Encourage inter-group connectivity and broader representation by including members of your company's other ERGs.

A Mental Health ERG stands a higher chance of success if company leaders have **normalized discussions of mental health** (beyond topics like burnout and stress) and worked to implement an inclusive and **positive culture** around mental health in the workplace.

This guide is designed to help you get started.

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STEP 1

Identify and Empower Employee Leaders

A Mental Health ERG should welcome anyone aligned with its goals, including employees with mental health conditions and their allies. Its leaders should have solid experience and/or a passion for advancing workplace mental health, demonstrated leadership capabilities and a strong relationship with their colleagues.

To build your Mental Health ERG:

- Work with appropriate staff to define the role of the Mental Health ERG leader(s) and issue a call for volunteers. Be mindful of how and where you extend the invitation, given the sensitive nature of mental health conditions and the need to protect employee privacy.
- Identify employees who have helped to promote workplace culture, advocated for expanded employee benefits and accommodations, and/or supported other efforts to make your workplace more equitable and inclusive.

PRO TIP: When **Johnson & Johnson (J&J)** sought to create an ERG for people with mental health conditions, company leaders turned to Craig Kramer, a nearly 20-year veteran of the company who held various leadership positions in government affairs, public policy and corporate affairs — and who was open about his family's mental health challenges. Kramer currently leads J&J's Alliance for Diverse Abilities ERG, which boasts more than 90 chapters around the world. This initiative has positioned J&J as a global leader in workplace mental health.

- Create capacity for the role. Leading an ERG involves a full scope of responsibilities, from developing programs and partnerships, to recruiting new members and engaging with senior leaders. Make sure the group leaders have adequate time to fulfill these responsibilities.
- Consider compensating your ERG leaders for their time to help reinforce the importance of their work. This may take the form of a bonus or professional development opportunities.

PRO TIP: **LinkedIn** offers a \$10,000 bonus to all ERG leaders, including its Mental Health ERG, EnableIn. EnableIn's leaders are expected to meet certain goals and its mindfulness programs are evaluated based on employee engagement metrics.

- Encourage managers to acknowledge the work of the Mental Health ERG leaders during their performance reviews, factoring their accomplishments into promotions, raises and other accolades.
- Ensure the Mental Health ERG leaders have access to adequate mental health resources as they support their colleagues.
- Enlist a member of your DEI team to join the Mental Health ERG to help align your organization's DEIB strategy with the ERG's work.

STEP 2

Equip Your Mental Health ERG for Success

Establish a discretionary budget for your company's Mental Health ERG that is comparable to those of its other groups. This will help the ERG to:

- Promote itself and recruit a diverse range of members from all levels of the organization.

PRO TIP: Zillow's ERG includes employees who have mental health conditions and/or loved ones experiencing these challenges.

- Conduct surveys to identify and assess employees' specific well-being and mental health needs.
- Provide ERG programming, featuring outside experts in speaking engagements and workshops on key mental health education and wellness topics.

PRO TIP: When an employee at Affirm created the financial technology company's first Mental Wellness ERG, it quickly became one of the organization's largest groups. Based on employee feedback, the group hosted a meditation event at a local studio during the holidays. They also organized a Wellness Fair, featuring a keynote speaker and opportunities to connect with businesses focused on well-being.

- Train your Mental Health ERG leaders on how to share their stories to help normalize common mental health challenges in the workplace, garnering greater awareness and support among their coworkers.



STEP 3

Consult with Your ERG to Identify and Address Employee Mental Health Challenges

It's important to establish an ongoing dialogue between your company's executive and ERG leaders to stay abreast of critical employee mental health issues and find ways to facilitate greater awareness, education and support. Consider how you can:

- Identify a senior leader with cross-organizational influence to serve as an executive sponsor of the Mental Health ERG. This will help solidify connections and support among employees and company leadership.
- Ensure senior leaders meet with the ERG leads regularly (quarterly, at a minimum) to integrate suggestions into the company's broader mental health strategy.

PRO TIP: The **Powell Companies Real** hosted bi-annual forums featuring various experts on mental health conditions and treatments. Topics addressed important issues affecting women in the workplace, such as psychological well-being, menopause at work and working-mother guilt, along with broader mental health topics, like combating anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Launch your Mental Health ERG by having a senior leader—either the CEO, the ERG's executive sponsor or both— announce its creation and encourage anyone who's interested to join. Be sure to emphasize that participation is voluntary and members will not be required to share any personal mental health information they would prefer to keep private.

PRO TIP: In 2016, **Verizon Media**—now **Yahoo**—created an ERG focused on neurodiversity. When employee mental health concerns surfaced during the COVID-19 pandemic, Yahoo CEO Guru Gowrappan encouraged employees to participate in various mental health programs and activities, including expert panels for World Suicide Prevention Day, a company-wide fireside chat and an open forum where employees shared their personal experiences. The ERG now has more than 250 participants across 26 chapters.

- Encourage your Mental Health ERG leaders and HR managers to work together to improve and promote employee mental health and wellness benefits, host mental health awareness events and provide opportunities for interested staff to share their stories.
- Invite ERG leaders to participate in executive-level conversations about annual human resource-related goals. Discuss ways to improve employee recruitment, retention, engagement and satisfaction related to mental health.

STEP 4

Work to Engage Every Employee in Mental Health Activities

Anyone can be affected by mental health challenges – and many employees may be reluctant to share their experiences. Work to ensure your Mental Health ERG's programming is accessible to all employees and achieves the greatest reach possible.

- Consider company-wide initiatives to promote mental health and psychological well-being, not just during Mental Health Awareness Month in May, but year-round.
- Promote cross-ERG collaboration, particularly around events like **BIPOC Mental Health Month**.

PRO TIP: Walmart encourages its ERGs to partner on programming. For example, during the company's celebration of Pride Month, its Pride and Faith employee groups co-hosted a program acknowledging both the diversity and commonalities of their members. The program's success prompted Walmart's Women and Asian ERGs to co-create a mentorship program, which expanded their collective reach.

- Work with all of your ERGs to cultivate belonging in the workplace, using our **employer guide** to get started.

For a more comprehensive guide to promoting employee mental health across your business, check out our **Workplace Mental Health Playbook**.



Additional Resources

Health Action Alliance

- [Cultivating Belonging in the Workplace: An Employer Guide](#)
- [Small Business Guide to Workplace Mental Health](#)
- [Workplace Mental Health: A Conversation Guide for Managers](#)
- [Workplace Mental Health Playbook](#)

American Psychological Association

- [Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Framework \(PDF\)](#)
- [Inclusive Language Guidelines \(PDF\)](#)
- [Psychology in the Workplace](#)
- [Take a Critical Look at Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Policies](#)

Ad Council

- [Belonging Begins with Us](#)
- [Seize the Awkward](#)

One Mind At Work

Mental Health Action Day