emergence

Reforming Culture

Mental Health & Psychological Safety
Building a Positive Work Culture

Sheona McGraw

The past two years have been anything but easy, but if there's one good thing that's come out of the COVID-19 pandemic, it's that the business world at large has started taking stock of its responsibility to their employees—vis-à-vis their mental health. Over the past two years, the undeniable impact that work can have on our overall mental health has finally fallen under the mainstream spotlight and companies have started taking notice.

Workplace culture and mental health are deeply interconnected – one affects the other. They can't be untangled or separated.

This paradigm shift in corporate attitude couldn't have come at a more critical time. Pre-pandemic, organizations had primarily been too invested in creating an awesome workplace centered around superficial perks in the name of "workplace culture"—free smoothies, year-end bonuses, etc. On the other hand, behavioral and structural issues impacting employee wellbeing (and which provided a more accurate litmus test of a team's culture) were often overlooked and unaddressed. (To be clear, offering free smoothies isn't a problem in and of itself—it becomes a problem, however, when companies focus too heavily on "funifying" the workplace in lieu of creating an environment where people are inspired and able to do their best work.)

Yet, for all the hype, adoption of new workplace mental health legislations by various governments and a significant increase in spending on mental health initiatives by businesses, the working world continues to see record levels of stress and burnout[1]. Many organizations continue to take a reactionary, piecemeal approach to workplace mental health, investing in existing—and often outdated—strategies rather than innovating new ways to integrate mental health into every aspect of the workplace.

It's Time to Refresh Our Understanding of Mental Health

When we hear the term "mental health", many of us immediately think of mental health issues, like anxiety or stress. This is in part because the terms "mental health" and "mental illness" are still frequently used interchangeably. Yet, mental health is neither a negative nor a positive—simply put, it is the way your mind works and feels.
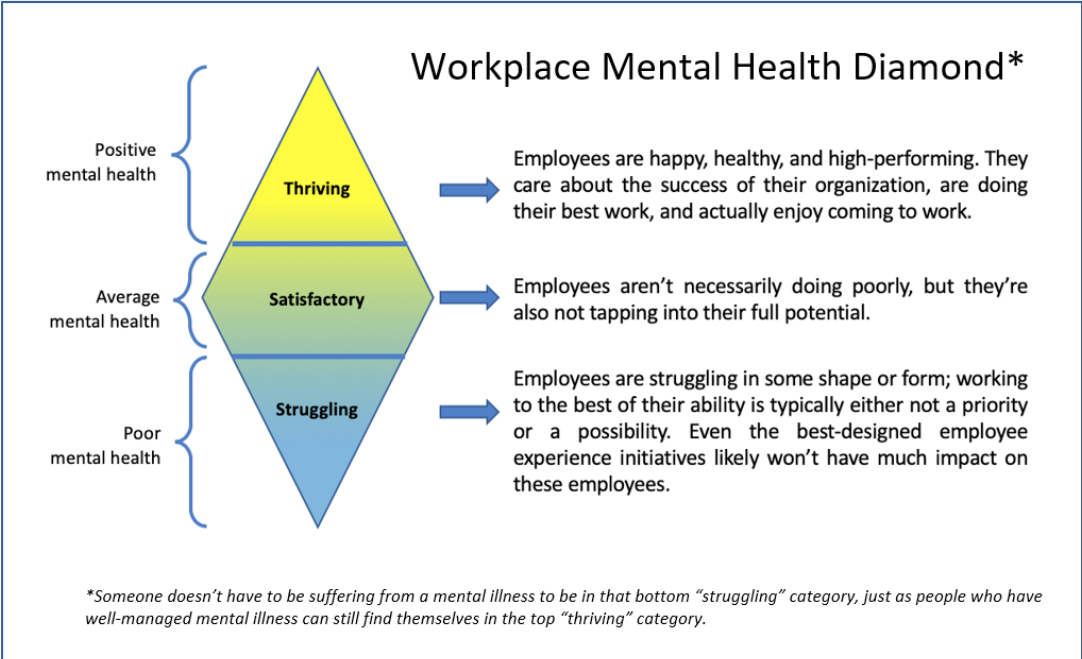
Just as every person's *physical* health falls on a spectrum ranging somewhere between very healthy and very unhealthy, our mental healt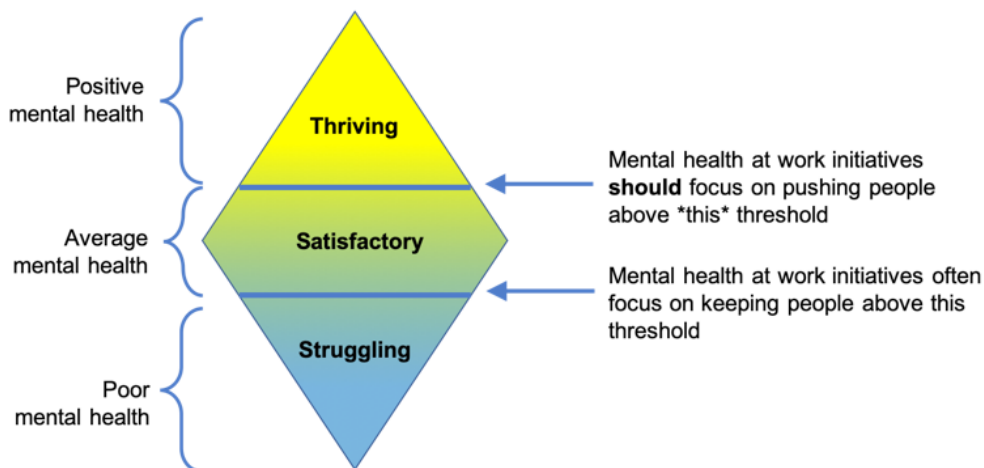h is no different. Just as people can experience the negative side of mental health like fear, frustration, or anger, we can also experience positive mental health, where we feel inspired, grateful, loved, and/or joyful.

So, whether they know it or not, when organizations talk about creating a "great" or "awesome" work culture, what they're essentially talking about is a workplace that actively contributes to positive mental health.

The Workplace Mental Health Bar Has Been Set Too Low

We know from research that when someone's struggling with their mental health—say, depression—it can have a huge impact on their work in terms of increased sick days, reduced productivity, lack of innovation, and so on. Most of us have probably experienced this first hand at some point in our lives. We also know from a large and growing body of research that the opposite is true—when we're happy and mentally thriving in our lives and work, that can have a significant positive impact on our overall job performance.

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Workplace Mental Health Diamond*

Mental Health Level	Category	Description
Positive mental health	**Thriving**	Employees are happy, healthy, and high-performing. They care about the success of their organization, are doing their best work, and actually enjoy coming to work.
Average mental health	**Satisfactory**	Employees aren't necessarily doing poorly, but they're also not tapping into their full potential.
Poor mental health	**Struggling**	Employees are struggling in some shape or form; working to the best of their ability is typically either not a priority or a possibility. Even the best-designed employee experience initiatives likely won't have much impact on these employees.

*Someone doesn't have to be suffering from a mental illness to be in that bottom "struggling" category, just as people who have well-managed mental illness can still find themselves in the top "thriving" category.

Positive
mental health

Thriving

Mental health at work initiatives
should focus on pushing people
above *this* threshold

Average
mental health

Satisfactory

Mental health at work initiatives often
focus on keeping people above this
threshold

Poor
mental health

Struggling

Despite the myriad of benefits happy and mentally-healthy employees bring to organizations, a large number of workplace mental health programs continue to focus primarily on the negative aspects of mental health, and moving people out of the bottom "struggling" part of the diamond into the middle "satisfactory" part.

To be sure, enabling employees to move beyond the struggling threshold is absolutely essential to creating a happy and healthy workplace culture. Expanding on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, an employee's most basic needs (financial security, physical safety, etc.) must first be met before other workplace culture initiatives truly become impactful. Even the most innovative and inspiring workplace culture initiatives will be relatively ineffectual if employees are scared of losing their jobs, are unable to pay the bills, or are being severely bullied by a colleague.

That being said, organizations looking to reap the benefits of a great work culture need to broaden their approach to workplace mental health by preventing employees from ending up in the "struggling" part in the first place, and enabling employees to move into the "thriving" part of the diamond. This means improving the way organizations support employees who are struggling with mental health issues, focusing on changing the systemic issues or environmental factors that are contributing to or causing the issues in the first place, and proactively seeking out opportunities to actively promote positive mental health.

Taking a Comprehensive Approach to Workplace Mental Health

Mental health needs to be considered in everything a business does. Organizations and their leaders need to be deliberate in their decisions, processes, and structures if they want to encourage behaviors that engender a culture of wellbeing and excellence. By taking a three-step approach that combines both reactive and proactive solutions, organizations can help to ensure they're creating a work culture that actively promotes positive mental health.

1. Building Awareness: Reducing the Stigma of Mental Illness

While organizations are having increasingly open conversations about mental health, stigma still represents a major barrier[2] for those suffering from mental illness. A lot of employees are still very reluctant to talk about their own mental health issues because of feelings of shame, fear of being judged, or fear of getting fired.

> **"Seeking mental health care should be as routine and unremarkable as seeking treatment for high blood pressure, diabetes, or a heart condition."**
>
> **Bernard J. Tyson**
> *CEO, Kaiser Permanente*

Organizations need to provide clear, open communication from the top on why mental health matters. Creating a safe environment to discuss mental health and getting leaders actively involved in the conversation are important ways to build empathy and understanding within the team.

> **In any given year, about 20% of adults in the United States will personally experience a mental health issue, though this number jumped to nearly 41% at the start of the pandemic.**
>
> *Sources: National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) & Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)*

When senior leaders and managers talk more openly on mental health and share their own personal experiences with it, it can help to create a culture where employees feel supported and safe to ask for help when they need it.

Making It Practical:

- Build a common language around mental health. Improve understanding of mental health and normalize discussion by talking about it frequently.

- Send regular, clear communication from management that mental health matters to them. Leaders shouldn't be afraid to make themselves vulnerable or to draw from personal experience.

- Embed mental health language and understanding across the organization—include it in the organization's values, strategies, policies, and communications, and ensure they reflect your organization's commitment to creating a psychologically healthy and safe environment. Follow through with your commitment. For example, having a zero tolerance policy for abusive language is worthless unless you're willing to enforce it.

2. Enabling Employees to Get the Help They Need

Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the individual struggling with mental health issues to get the help they need, but there's a lot an organization can do to set employees up for success in this regard. Offering a personalized experience for employees and providing flexible, easily accessible, and discreet support are great ways to empower employees to seek help. After all—what good is a resource if nobody knows about it, if it doesn't address the issues appropriately, or if it is too hard to access?

Making It Practical:

- Ensure all employees know what mental health resources are available to them and how they can be accessed, before they need it. People access and process information in different ways, so consider a variety of ways to keep employees informed—this could include lunch and learns, a dedicated intranet page listing mental health resources, updates in team newsletters, posting information on a centrally-located bulletin board—the list goes on.

- Offer a wide variety of evidence-based options and resources. What works for one person might not work for another.

- Make it as easy as possible for employees to access resources and support. Put yourself in someone else's shoes to get a better sense of how easy or difficult it is to access a particular resource, and identify ways to remove unnecessary barriers or red tape. It should never be a burden to someone to access support.

- Offer regular training for employees and managers, such as workplace "mental health first aid"[3], so that they're properly equipped to support employees in crisis.

3. Problem-Solving and Being Proactive

Imagine finding your two-year old cutting holes in your couch with scissors. What's the first thing that pops into your head? Chances are it's, "Ack! I have to get those scissors away!", and not, "Ack! I need to fix the couch!" It seems almost inconceivable that you would completely ignore your scissor-wielding toddler, yet we do this so easily within the workplace. Helping an employee deal with their anxiety is essential, but what's the point if they're just thrown back into the very work environment that caused the anxiety in the first place? Organizations need to go beyond just patching up the holes in the proverbial sofa and address the root cause of the issue, such as inflexible policies or disrespectful behavior.

It also means proactively seeking out new ways to tap into the team's potential by enhancing what matters most to employees—whether that's being recognized for a job well done, feeling a sense of purpose at work, or having meaningful relationships with coworkers and managers.

Making It Practical:

- Organizations can embed mental health across the organization by doing a systematic review of key policies, systems, and processes, and updating them to reflect their commitment to actively promoting positive mental health.

- Include employees in key decisions that will directly impact their work.

- Create a culture of trust by encouraging risk and celebrating mistakes.

- Offer resiliency training to employees and managers. Resilient people overcome adversity quickly, "bounce back" from setbacks, and can thrive under ongoing pressure.

- Recognize the good work of your team—celebrate wins both big and small.

- Encourage job autonomy to allow employees to do their job as they see fit.

Don't Let Your Strategy Collect Dust on a Shelf

A strategy is only useful insofar as it is kept up-to-date and put into practice. The following three guiding principles can help ensure your organization's mental health strategy is as comprehensive and impactful as possible, regardless of what your culture may look like.

1: Taking a Holistic Approach

What happens in our personal life can have a huge impact on our mental state at work (and vice versa). Approaching mental health in a holistic way, where we

consider an employee's full life experiences rather than just their "9-to-5" work life, is a key element of any comprehensive mental health strategy. Organizations should look at ways to create positive experiences for employees not only at work, but in their personal lives as well.

2: Establishing Accountability Across the Organization

Each and every employee both affect and are affected by their organization's culture and mental health, therefore it stands to reason that the workplace mental health strategy is the collective responsibility of all employees. Designing and implementing mental health initiatives in collaboration with as many employee groups as possible helps to increase buy-in, and improves an organization's ability to properly assess the needs of a diverse workplace. Designating a senior-level champion to "own" the mental health strategy is also important to help garner senior-level support and resources, and to send a strong message illustrating the organization's commitment to mental health.

3: Focusing On Intrinsic Motivators

Focusing on elements that impact how someone feels about their job rather than what they *think* about their job is the key to pushing people past the "thriving" threshold, and creating a healthy and high-performing work culture. The most impactful initiatives tend to strengthen relationships, enhance employees' ability to do their job properly, or create purpose for the employee—all factors that affect how we feel about our job. On the other hand, extrinsic motivators, such as perks or bonuses, tend to increase job satisfaction—this is what we think about our job—and do little for enhancing the overall employee experience.

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What's the Current State of Your Organization's Mental Health?

Having a clear and realistic understanding of where your organization's employees sit within the Workplace Mental Health Diamond can help to identify gaps in your approach, and can be the stepping stone for designing initiatives that have the biggest impact on your culture. The Diamond Model offers a useful tool (see below) to help with this assessment and to regularly track your organization's progress with its mental health efforts.

When employees can agree with all four "Struggling" Needs Statements, only then do they move up to the "Satisfactory" section of the Diamond. When employees can then agree with all five "Satisfactory" Needs Statements, only then do they move up to the "Thriving" section of the Diamond.

Setting an Ambitious but Realistic Goal

While the goal of an organization should be to maximize the number of thriving employees, it simply isn't realistic or helpful to expect to see all employees thriving at all times. Being mentally healthy doesn't mean that you don't go through difficult times or that you don't experience negative emotions—we all go through ups and downs throughout life. But when resilient and mentally-healthy people experience some of the low points of life—dealing with the death of a loved one or navigating the extra challenges brought forth by a pandemic, for example—they're much more likely to bounce back quickly. Therefore, a critical strategic element for maximizing the number of thriving employees is to enable employees to bounce back from mental health issues and negative events as quickly and sustainably as possible.

Moving Up the Mental Health Diamond Needs Statement Tool

"Thriving" employees should be able to generally agree with the following 3 statements:

1. I work to the best of my abilities.
2. I enjoy coming to work.
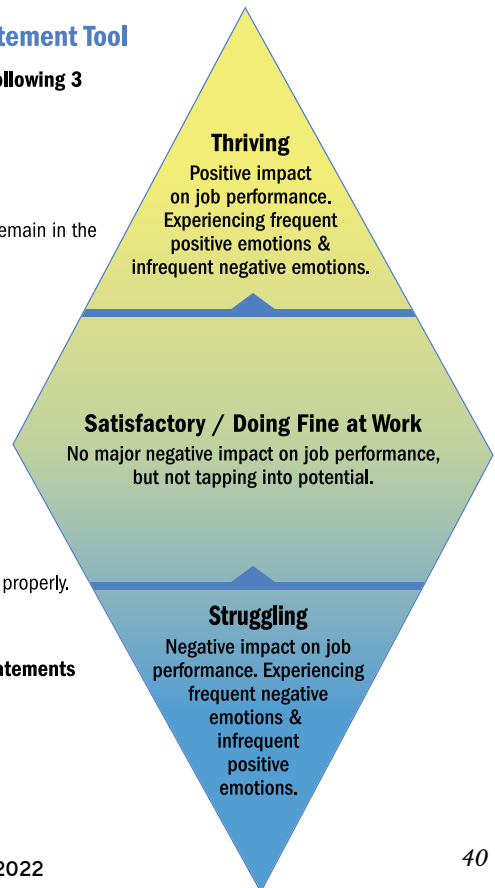3. I feel like I'm doing great work alongside great people

Employees must be able to agree with all 9 needs statements below to remain in the Thriving part of the diamond.

Employees must be able to agree with all 5 "Satisfactory" needs statements before moving up:

1. Sense of fairness: I'm treated fairly compared to my colleagues and compared to industry standards. This includes salary, benefits, recognition, etc.
2. My work has meaning on an individual level and at an organisational level.
3. I have the right types of support to lead a healthy and balanced life.
4. I have strong and healthy relationships at work.
5. I have the tools, training, resources, and support I need to do my job properly.

Employees must be able to agree with all 4 "Struggling" needs statements before moving up:

1. I work in a physically and psychologically safe environment.
2. My basic needs are met outside of work.
3. I have no major limiting physical or psychological health issues.
4. I have a steady source of income and enough to pay the bills.

Thriving
Positive impact on job performance. Experiencing frequent positive emotions & infrequent negative emotions.

Satisfactory / Doing Fine at Work
No major negative impact on job performance, but not tapping into potential.

Struggling
Negative impact on job performance. Experiencing frequent negative emotions & infrequent positive emotions.

Set your employees up for success by acknowledging the full mental health spectrum, recognize that struggling with mental health can be a normal part of life, and empower your employees to move up the Mental Health Diamond as easily and effectively as possible. ⓔ

REFERENCES

1. State of the Global Workplace: 2022 Report; Gallup

2. The Centre for Addition and Mental Health, Canada: https://www.camh.ca/en/driving-change/addressing-stigma

3. Mental Health Commission of Canada; https://www.mhfa.ca/en/workplace-programs

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has dedicated her career to working on initiatives that give her goosebumps – projects with the potential to have lasting social impact and bring about meaningful change. For over 20 years, she's managed projects in 50+ countries across various sectors. As a certified Psychological Health and Safety Advisor with the Canadian Mental Health Association and former C-Suite executive, she has a deep understanding of how workplace culture and management practice can impact the success of a team. Sheona is the founder of Cloud 9 to 5 and Director of Woohoo Unlimited, two companies dedicated to helping organizations and their employees tap into their potential and thrive.
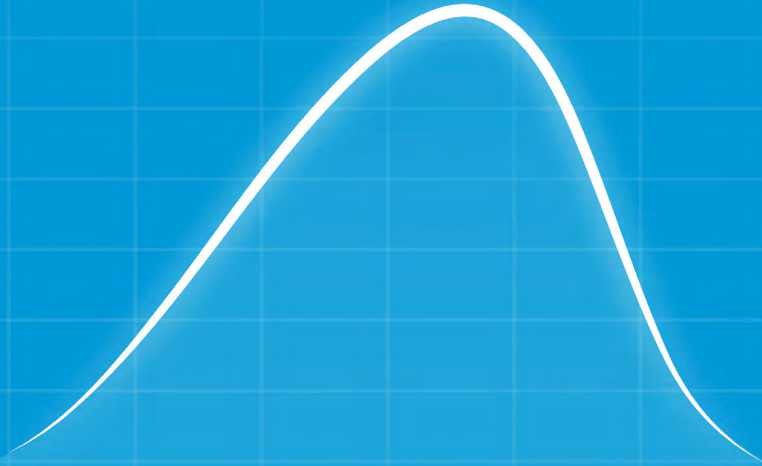
Thinking about the Mental Health Diamond: where do you think you are most of the time? And how about your colleagues? What could you do to move upwards?
Which initiatives are taken in your organization to help people move upwards?

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