



REPORT

# 5 Ways to Support Mental Health in the Workplace

Help your team bring their whole selves to work



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## 1 in 4

people worldwide currently struggle with mental illness

— World Health Organization

May is Mental Health Awareness Month in Canada and the US—a time to raise awareness and reduce stigma around mental

illness. According to the [World Health Organization](#), 1 in 4 people worldwide currently struggle with mental illness, making it the leading cause of disability. [The Harvard Business Review](#) refers to mental illness as the “second pandemic.”

As a leader, you’ll want to support colleagues and employees suffering from mental health issues because healthy employees mean healthy organizations. While talking about mental health is important, listening to those affected is fundamental to effectively supporting mental health needs at your organization.

However, listening isn’t always easy because of the stigma associated with talking about mental illness. [Forbes](#) notes that “less than 30% of employees feel comfortable talking to their managers about their mental health, and even less (25%) to HR.” That’s why

it’s important to use tools like ThoughtExchange to provide an anonymous, unbiased space for employees to talk about what they need.

We launched a public Exchange to discover people’s ideas for supporting mental health in the workplace.

We asked:

**What are the most effective ideas or initiatives that you have heard or experienced to support mental health and well-being in organizations?**

We received anonymous feedback from participants across public, private, and not-for-profit companies, as well as those working in small to mid-sized organizations. Participants work remotely, as well as from hybrid and on-site workplaces.

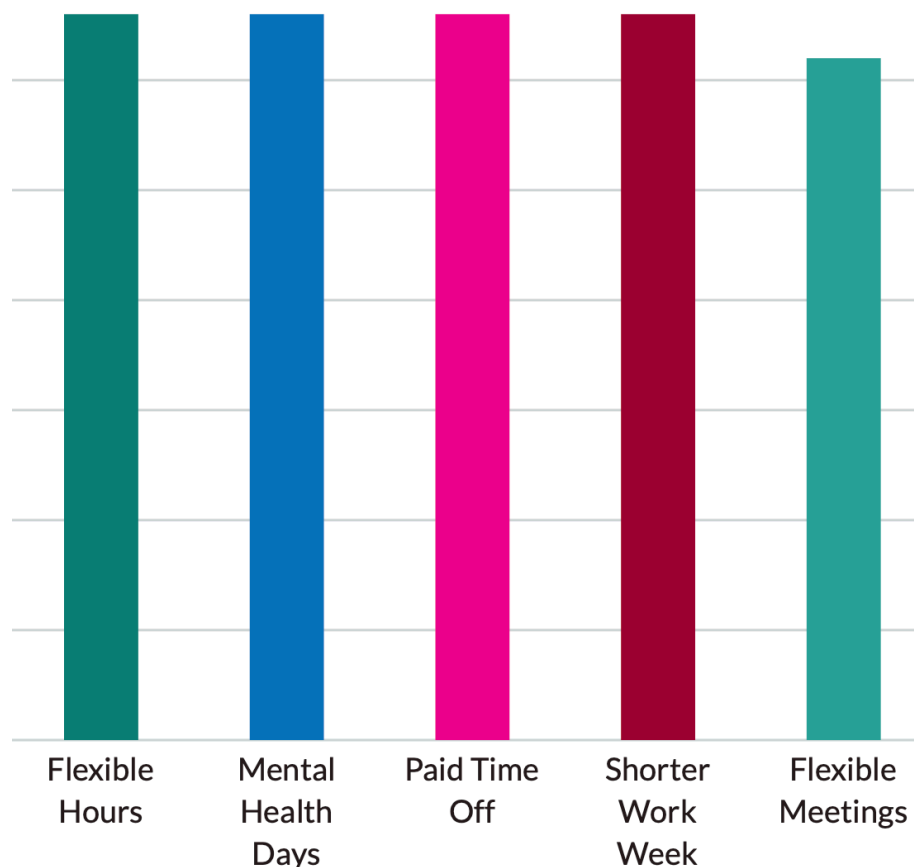
With the help of our AI technology, we quickly organized their answers into actionable topics that reflected the key areas they felt were the most important for employers to consider. This report outlines our participants’ top five recommendations for organizations that want to take workplace mental health seriously.



# 5 Actionable Ways to Support Mental Health

**Themes** represent thoughts that participants rated as the most important. They provide a starting point for employers to develop effective policies that have broad support.

These are the highest-rated Themes from the Exchange, showing the areas where employees see the most value in mental health initiatives.







## FLEXIBLE HOURS

Give employees the freedom to take care of themselves and take ownership of their roles.

***“Flexible working hours.** Offering opportunities that allow employees to better manage their work-life balance.”*

The pandemic introduced a host of obstacles for your employees to tackle throughout their workday—homeschooling, childcare, and other caretaking obligations. In addition, [Psychology Today](#) warns us about the impending “post-pandemic stress response” many people will face in the coming years, underlining the importance of workplace mental health policies like flexible working hours.

One way to help your employees over these obstacles is to allow for more flexibility in their working hours. By allowing employees to set their schedules in the most optimal way for their circumstances, you maximize their productivity and happiness. [Business Insider](#) lists higher productivity, fewer sick days, happier employees, more efficient communication, and better retention among the benefits of offering flexible working hours to your employees, whether remote or on-site.

## MENTAL HEALTH DAYS

Allow employees to take the time they need without disclosing personal circumstances.

***“Mental health days and the ability to take them, no questions asked. It’s important that we destigmatize mental health and needing to take time.”***

That 24-hour-flu your employee just messaged you about may have been a mental illness, not a physical one. [Kaiser Permanente](#) notes that “62% of missed workdays can be attributed to mental health conditions,” but those missed days are logged as something else because of stigma.

Providing a mental health days policy, where employees can take a day off when they need it, drastically reduces the negative perceptions around mental health. [Forbes](#) suggests that there are many ways forward-thinking companies could structure their mental health days, including “combining their vacation and sick days, or implementing unlimited days off.” Not only will you gain insight into how many of your employees are having difficulty coping in the workplace—calling for a more extensive examination of your culture—but you’ll also lean into the flexibility that the post-pandemic world is calling for.

The “no questions asked” aspect of this stresses the importance of confidentiality for your employees. They need to know that they can ask for the time off they need without being required to explain their circumstances. This may avoid triggering them, causing further mental distress. This especially applies to your BIPOC employees, who may also be dealing with [race-based traumatic stress](#). They might not feel comfortable opening up due to a history of having their experiences dismissed or ignored in the workplace.

By ensuring privacy in any conversations around mental health—except in cases where laws require you to disclose to HR, or the employee has given you express permission to share—your employees are much more likely to be truthful about why they need the time.



## PAID TIME OFF

Alleviate stress by supporting employees financially if they get sick for an extended period of time.

***"Paid sick leave.** It just helps remove the stress of knowing that if I do get ill for an extended period of time, I can still cover my mortgage and bills."*

Most of us have spent the last year watching COVID-19 ravage the world's population in real-time on news outlets. According to [Psychology Today](#), for some people, "concern about disease and contamination generates excessive personal distress and interference in daily functioning." Even for people who can keep their anxiety to a minimum, the threat of illness impacting their ability to work is real.

Paid sick leave is mandatory for most organizations, but the exact regulations vary depending on where you live. Ensure that your employees are aware of your paid sick leave policies and that what you offer is flexible to accommodate mental, physical, chronic, and extended illness. Making sure your paid sick leave policies are clear will help alleviate your employees' stress around losing income due to illness.

## SHORTER WORKWEEK

Emphasize productivity and output over time spent at work to avoid burnout.

***"3 or 4 day workweek.** A real one. Not cramming 5 days into 4. just accepting that realities are different, lives are full and supporting people to work less hours."*

The concept of shorter workweeks has been tossed around over the past few years as a way to address stress and mental illness and increase productivity. In November 2020, ThoughtExchange's CPO Dessalen Wood hosted an event called **Ready or Not: 4-Day Workweek**, where she discussed why and how a four-day workweek could work, especially for remote workplaces ([you can watch that here](#)).

Just like the 9-to-5 schedule, the five-day, 40-hour workweek is stubborn—it hasn't budged much since it was first introduced in 1940. Moving to a shorter workweek means shifting away from an almost set-in-stone mindset that more time equals more productivity. However, research shows that the opposite is often true.

Earlier this year, [Bloomberg Business](#) profiled the increasing popularity of a four-day workweek, citing a study that showed "almost two-thirds of businesses with a four-day week report improved productivity." So, while reducing workdays and hours is still a hotly debated topic, it may just be the future of work.

## FLEXIBLE MEETINGS

Address Zoom fatigue with policies like turning off video, walking meetings, and meeting-free days.

***“Encouraging people to turn video off when they want to. So much pressure to keep video on these days and the fatigue is REAL.”***

With more organizations leaning towards a hybrid remote model—a workplace with a mix of remote and on-site employees—flexibility in meetings is more important than ever. With remote teams, your employees are likely videoconferencing for hours every day. Developing flexibility around how they engage with meetings is important to impact their mental health positively.

In February 2021, Stanford researchers published a peer-reviewed article for [Technology, Mind, and Behavior](#) outlining the very real psychological consequences of excessive time spent videoconferencing, also known as “Zoom fatigue.” One aspect they looked at is how we respond to seeing ourselves on camera for extended periods, concluding that “it is likely that a constant “mirror” on Zoom causes self-evaluation and negative affect.” They also noted that this experience may be exaggerated for female employees.

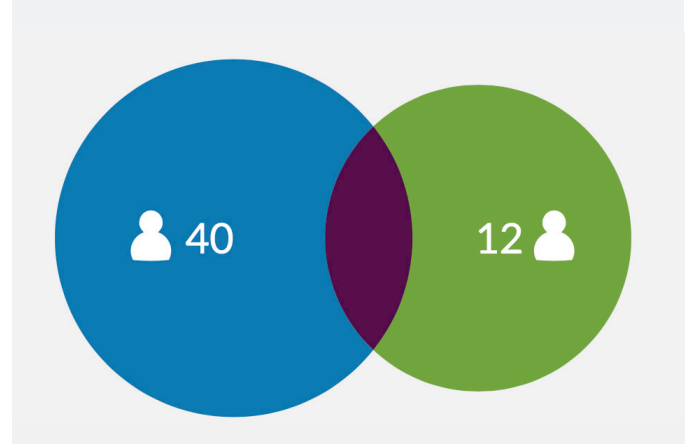
Considering the mental health impacts of videoconferencing, you may want to develop policies around when camera time is required and when it isn't, and whether the conversation even needs to be a meeting.

# Consider Exchange Differences when Strategizing Tactics



Our **Differences** tool reveals where participants disagree and where they find common ground. You'll want to consider this when strategizing tactics to support your employees' mental health.

In this Exchange, employees agree that mental health days, flex time, no-questions-asked time off, paid sick leave, and unlimited vacation are all important. However, company initiatives to encourage yoga, meditation, and mental health conversations with colleagues during work time were contentious. In other words—participants favor time off work to support their mental health needs rather than time off *at* work.



## Side A

Regular 1:1 sessions with a company coach to help address pain points and provide an action plan

Side A

13 ★4.4 (AVG)

Side B

5 ★1.8 (AVG)

Make sure you have time for at least 30 min of some sort of physical exercise during the day

Side A

13 ★4.5 (AVG)

Side B

4 ★2.0 (AVG)

Daily meditation and stress sessions gives employees permission to take a break

Side A

10 ★4.1 (AVG)

Side B

6 ★1.7 (AVG)

Creating a space like a slack channel where people can openly talk about mental health

Side A

10 ★4.2 (AVG)

Side B

4 ★1.3 (AVG)

Try and stay connected.  
To not feel isolated

Side A

9 ★4.0 (AVG)

Side B

7 ★2.0 (AVG)

## Side A/B Common (high)

Paid sick-leave.

It just helps remove the stress of knowing that if I do get ill for an extended period of time, I can still cover my mortgage and bills.

Side A

12 ★4.7 (AVG)

Side B

5 ★4.4 (AVG)

Treat mental health as you treat physical health.

They're connected and both should be considered equally important.

Side A

10 ★4.7 (AVG)

Side B

6 ★4.5 (AVG)

Flex hours.

Gives employees the freedom to take care of themselves and ownership of their roles.

Side A

10 ★4.9 (AVG)

Side B

5 ★4.2 (AVG)

Being able to take time off when you need it with no questions asked.

Side A

10 ★4.6 (AVG)

Side B

6 ★4.3 (AVG)

Access to no-questions-asked mental health / personal days

This allows employees the flexibility to take time that they need without disclosing their personal circumstances

Side A

10 ★4.6 (AVG)

Side B

4 ★4.8 (AVG)



## Scale group discussions, quickly

Leaders create an Exchange asking open-ended questions and share it widely



## Receive candid, unbiased answers

Participants confidentially answer questions and objectively rate other responses and ideas



## Learn what people think in real time

ThoughtExchange provides data-rich reports capturing top themes and thoughts



## Take decisive action that everyone supports

Leaders use ThoughtExchange insights to align groups, prioritize next steps and get ahead

**“As we navigate through pandemics and uprisings and the next industrial revolution with people working remotely in many languages from all around the world, it has become a business imperative to be willing to open conversations about how people are feeling, the challenges they are experiencing and the need to focus on our mental health.”**

**DAVE MACLEOD**, CEO of ThoughtExchange

MacLeod, D. (2021). pp 154-155. Scaling Conversations. Wiley. [www.thoughtexchange.com/scaling-conversations/](http://www.thoughtexchange.com/scaling-conversations/)

**Contact us to learn how ThoughtExchange can help you support your employees' mental health needs. Watch your organization thrive.**