

Chapter 6

Why Healthcare Professionals Are Reluctant to Seek Help

Sometimes healthcare professionals have mental health issues that require attention, but often they don't seek help. There are a few reasons why this is true. One is the stigma issue.

Mental health is stigmatized across many professions, but particularly in health care. Healthcare tends to be a "just get over it" culture and people can be rather stoic.

People might not feel comfortable speaking up when they are struggling for fear they may be perceived as weak. This perpetuates the "culture of silence" in healthcare that can make people feel very alone. (This was a problem even before COVID-19, but the isolating effects of the pandemic made it even worse.)

In a perpetually stressful and busy "all hands on deck" industry like healthcare, time off to rejuvenate and repair might be hard to come by. Plus, I think people keep on keeping on simply because they care so much. That's how mission driven they are.

In addition, people also have real concerns about privacy. They don't want mental health diagnoses on their record and worry about confidentiality issues. Some won't even seek medical treatment in their own organization because of privacy issues (in many cases people have to get treatment in the same hospital they work in). This mindset is even more pronounced around mental health issues. People fear they will be penalized later. They also have added concerns about professional repercussions, as their mental health history could impact their careers.

The “Resiliency” Misunderstanding

Resiliency has been the cornerstone of our industry’s mental health approach, but it has been misunderstood. This has created a bit of a problem. Resiliency doesn’t mean that you simply push through and suck it up, no matter the circumstances. Yet many times people may think that being resilient means they must keep going no matter what.

It’s in healthcare workers’ DNA to want to be helpful and useful. They run to danger, not from it. But sometimes they are so busy being helpful and useful to others they’re not helpful and useful to themselves.

As an industry, healthcare emphasizes resiliency so much that people can be reluctant to admit they are not doing well. They push through and don’t take care of themselves. People tend to skip the self-care step.

Plus, the media’s constant celebration of healthcare workers’ resilience, courage, and selflessness—while driven by pure intentions—can reinforce the impulse to keep going. People may feel the need to live up to this image and are reluctant to express their pain or struggles.

All of this reinforces the stigma around mental health (toughen up, move through pain, pull yourself up by boot straps, etc.) It promotes denial and discourages you from seeking much needed help.

This is an even bigger issue for minorities (women and people of color). These populations are the most vulnerable, yet are often even more reluctant to ask for help.

They don’t want to be seen as complainers. They already struggle with belonging. If they’ve just gotten the job and are feeling isolated or excluded, they may try to tough it out due to “last hired, first fired” concern.

This is also a generational problem. Young folks are less likely to endure and suffer through the way their predecessors did. They value quality of life. Long, irregular work hours and weekend calls sometimes interfere with that. Yet older employees may judge younger ones for being soft. This will create a talent drain if we don’t fix as a profession.

By the time the burnout, stress, and trauma manifests in the workplace, it is usually pretty serious. With many people, work is the last place the suffering manifests. By the time it shows up at work, the rest of their lives are probably in shambles. People will sacrifice in other areas of their lives to continue to perform at work. People equate success in life with success at work. As long as they are able to keep their job, they still think they are doing ok.

Work has to be the first line of defense, as healthy people create healthy organizations. This means it is urgent that we not only fix the systemic factors that work against wellness and create burnout (more on this later) but that healthcare gets intentional and assertive about dismantling the culture of silence that keeps people trapped in unsustainable circumstances.

The first part of getting employees the help they need is being assertive about breaking down the stigma around stress, trauma, and other mental health issues. Part of this is about making sure leaders receive education on how to recognize and deal with these issues, which we will address a little later.

Make it very, very clear that it is not only “okay” to let you know when they are struggling, it is expected and urgent. People need to know it’s safe to ask for the care they need without negative consequences or jeopardy to their careers.

Leaders have to be careful not to promote a “sweep it under the rug” mentality. The pace of business often promotes that mindset. As leaders, we must acknowledge the reality of the struggle employees are having (stress, anxiety, accelerated pace of change). Until we do that part, we won’t be in a good position to figure out just how serious the problem is inside our own organization.

Before we can focus on solutions, of course, we must assess individual employees and the organization as a whole—and that’s the subject of the next section. Given what a sensitive subject mental wellness is, we need to handle the process with kid gloves. Privacy and discretion matter! Have the same consideration as with other personal health situations.