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Mental Health Literacy in Your Manufacturing Company is a Win-Win

By Anna Smith, News Editor IndustryWeek

Modern statistics tell a troubling mental health tale. According to Mental Health America's (MHA) 2024 "State of Mental Health in America" report, 23% of adults, equivalent to around 60 million Americans, experienced a mental illness in the past year. [ComPsych](#) data reveal mental health-related leaves of absence increased 300% from 2017 to 2023. With numbers like these, it is no surprise that mental health challenges are affecting the American workplace.

The statistics don't look much better when focusing on the manufacturing industry alone. A [2017 MHA report](#) placed manufacturing on the list of unhealthiest workplace industries, alongside retail and food and beverage. Of the manufacturing respondents in this report:

- 58% said work stress "always or often" impacted their personal relationships
- 38% state they "always or often" felt a constant fear over losing their job
- 42% reported "always or often experiencing isolation in the workplace"

“At least one in five of us at any given time is experiencing a diagnosable mental illness,” says mental wellness expert and advocate Lynn Hennighausen. “As leaders in manufacturing, what would the response be if one in five employees was experiencing a physical injury? What would happen in that organization if one in five people got hurt on the job?”

And it’s not just mental health that is at risk. A [study conducted by financial company The Standard](#) found that 54% of manufacturing workers know a coworker impacted by substance abuse or addiction.

“The research continues to tell us that people in manufacturing are more likely to struggle with substance abuse, with suicidality and with other mental health concerns,” says Rob Vallentine, a mental health advocate and expert. “You think about the safety hazards, think about the irregular scheduling, think about the worries about layoffs. There’s a lot of stressors that come in that industry.” That’s where employee training for mental health steps in.

Mental Health First Aid

Launched by the National Council for Mental Wellbeing, Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) at Work “teaches employees how to recognize and respond to colleagues who may be experiencing a mental health or substance use challenge in the workplace. It offers an opportunity to meaningfully integrate mental health and substance use support into company culture,” according to the [program announcement](#).

Vallentine and Hennighausen are national trainers for [MHFA at Work for Manufacturing](#), a series of courses created specifically for manufacturing employees and leaders. “All of the visuals, all of the scenarios, all of the examples are relevant to the manufacturing industry,” Hennighausen says.

The curriculum directly addresses prevalent stressors among manufacturing employees, including pressure to meet production targets and oftentimes isolated, physically demanding work.

“People being able to talk about what’s going on in their life can be life changing for them,” Vallentine says. “When we talk about our pain, it becomes less dangerous.”

The program consists of four courses that build on one another:

- An introductory, self-paced eLearning course provides education on stigma in the workplace and an overview of how to support colleagues and teammates.

- An instructor-led certification course focuses on recognizing and responding to noncrisis and crisis mental health and substance use challenges in coworkers. Once completed, the employees walk away with a training certification.
- A second instructor-led course creates a network of designated mental health and substance use resources. Interested employees serve as go-to advocates when peer support or assistance is needed.
- The final piece is an interactive workshop for company management, leaders, HR and legal professionals. An instructor facilitates a wellbeing action plan to create a healthy workplace culture for employees at the policy level.

“If we do our work well ... [the training] becomes a facilitated conversation instead of us standing in front of the room and talking and teaching,” Hennighausen says.

Trident Seafoods Takes Proactive Approach to Mental Health

One of Trident Seafoods’ core values is “we care for each other,” and that’s what the company demonstrated when it introduced MHFA to its employees in the midst of the pandemic.

“During that time, mental health became a really prevalent topic in the workplace in general, and we were responding and being proactive about making sure our employees had the support that they needed,” says Employee Experience Partner Michaela Hjelm. The company wanted employees to feel comfortable talking about and responding to mental health struggles, both personally and professionally.

Trident offered the introduction and certification courses on a voluntary basis, but “both courses always ended up filling up, so the interest was there, and we have people now certified through that course at all of our locations across the U.S.,” Hjelm says.

Mental health training was especially crucial for the manufacturing employees in Alaska, as those plants can be in very remote locations, she adds. As an example of how the training fits into everyday work, Hjelm says that team safety meetings now dedicate time for employees to share concerns and their needs for resources, which reduces stigma and allows for more open discussions around mental health.

“We’ve only had positive feedback from the people who have participated,” she says. “You can’t really go wrong by offering it and encouraging participation.”

A Business Case for Mental Health

In addition to improving the wellbeing of employees, another a strong motivation for companies to train their workers in mental health exists: employee retention

“To offer [training] sends a message to your population,” says Hjelm. “It really sets the tone for how you want to approach mental health as an organization.” “Young people are willing to leave an organization if the organization won’t talk about [mental health],” Hennighausen says. “The 90-day turnover rate in manufacturing is 30%. So, there’s already this big retention problem, and now we have younger people coming in saying, ‘You won’t talk about it? I’ll find someone who will.’”

A healthy workforce boosts morale which clears a path toward increased productivity within the organization, she adds. But it won’t happen overnight.

“Just like talking about falls and talking about ergonomics and fatigue, we’ve got to start talking about the effects of poor mental health in the workplace,” Hennighausen says. “Organizations can bring us in for one training; that’s not going to change culture. It’s great for the 30 people who are in the room, but that’s not going to change culture. This has to become embedded and hardwired as part of an effective safety program.”

***About the Author & IndustryWeek** Anna Smith is the news editor for IndustryWeek. She handles IW’s daily newsletters and breaking news of interest to the manufacturing industry. Anna was previously an editorial assistant at New Equipment Digest, Material Handling & Logistics and other publications.*

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