

How to Support Employee Mental Health



By Rachel Sams

Lead Consultant and Editor

Resource Type: Risk eNews

Topic: General

Risk management helps nonprofit organizations cope with and manage through disruption and uncertainty.

But what about the team members who deliver your mission every day? How is your nonprofit providing resources individuals need to deal with uncertainty?

Many nonprofits are still reeling from a [federal funding freeze that disrupted operations](#) at countless organizations. Ripple effects from that freeze, [executive orders that affect nonprofits](#), and economic volatility continue to affect nonprofits, the people who work for them, and the people they serve.

When your team members clock in, all the factors that affect their lives and their jobs come with them. That's especially true in times of stress. An overtaxed team that doesn't have the resources it needs, including mental health support, will struggle to meet the risks the organization faces.

As nonprofits face huge challenges, it's important to assess the support you're providing your employees—and bolster it where you can. No matter your budget, nonprofits of all sizes can take some of the steps on this list to help your team navigate this moment and the challenges to come.

Mental Health Leadership: Steps for Team Leaders

Take time to understand and address your own emotions. You can't support your team or model healthy behavior if you neglect yourself. Write down what you feel, whether it's sadness, anger, frustration, or a mix of feelings. Make sure you get enough sleep and nourishing food, so your body has time and sustenance to process those emotions.

Acknowledge what's happening. Tell your team you know things are tough and you understand people may be anxious. Name what's making things difficult: losing a big contract, an act of violence impacting people you serve, a leadership change that shakes the team up. Let people know, individually and as a team, that it's OK for them to talk to you about these things, and it's also OK if they don't want to.

Don't automatically cancel social activities, but read the room. Events like a happy hour or team-building outing can provide a needed stress release during difficult times. Use good judgment: if you are grieving a major blow or announcing layoffs, put celebratory event plans on pause. And always make social activities optional. What feels restorative to one person might drain another.

Mental Health Supports for Teams

Listen. Staff surveys, exit interviews, and all-staff meetings can give insight into where your staff is hurting or stressed and needs assistance. Gather and analyze information from these channels, act on the feedback, and communicate your actions to staff.

Evaluate. If you have an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), make sure your team members know what it offers and how to access it. Communicate the information frequently on multiple platforms. If your nonprofit can't afford mental health benefits or an EAP, seek and share a list of mental health resources in your community.

Talk. Emphasize that your door and calendar are truly open. Talk about stories in the news or that you've heard from other nonprofits of how their teams deal with mental health challenges and stress. And if an employee seems to be struggling, ask privately if they're OK. Let them know you don't want to overstep any boundaries, but you're concerned about their well-being.

Train managers to promote wellness and mental health. Most managers don't receive any training on how to supervise other people, let alone how to talk with them about the importance of mental health. See if a local mental health provider can hold a pro bono or deeply discounted training for your managers and supervisors.

Give employees time. Make sure employees know what personal and mental health day benefits they have and how to take them. Let them see you take yours. Consider "restoration breaks," where the office closes to give staff time to rest and reset.

Build in flexibility. Look for ways to say yes to flexible scheduling requests, instead of no. Having control over when and how you work is potentially meaningful for anyone struggling to cope with factors and developments outside their control.

Lean into inclusion. Listen and respond to the needs of staff related to inclusion. Frequently communicate the steps the organization is taking to create a welcoming culture that prioritizes belonging and participation.

Communicate expectations clearly. As your organization's priorities shift during a period of disruption, make sure employees know what projects take top priority and what tasks or activities can be put on the back burner. Clearly communicating expectations and helping employees problem-solve on their workloads can help alleviate confusion and burnout.

And both leaders and teams can connect with other nonprofit professionals navigating employee mental health at [NRMCM's 2025 Risk Summit](#), October 27-28 in Reston, Virginia. Summit attendees regularly tell us one of the most valuable aspects of the event is the ability to connect and compare notes with nonprofit professionals experiencing similar challenges.

In times of change and upheaval, there's a lot you can't control. But even if your nonprofit's budget and time are limited, you can take concrete steps to support your employees' mental health. Doing so will make your team more resilient and help you retain great people who can help you meet the challenges you face—together.

Rachel Sams is Lead Consultant and Editor at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. Reach her with thoughts and questions about nonprofit employee mental health at rachel@nonprofitrisk.org or (505) 456-4045.