



A PEOPLE'S GUIDE TO

HEALING THE NATION

Advocating for Better Mental Health and Addiction
Policy in our Communities

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WELL BEING TRUST

Laura Blanke, MPH Policy Associate

Benjamin F. Miller, PsyD, President

Tyler Norris, MDiv Chief Executive

Amy Shields, M.A. Communications Director

OTHER CONTRIBUTORS

Designed by Elizabeth Fowler
Collectively Creative

ABOUT WELL BEING TRUST

Well Being Trust is a national foundation dedicated to advancing the mental, social, and spiritual health of the nation. Created to include participation from organizations across sectors and perspectives, Well Being Trust is committed to innovating and addressing the most critical mental health challenges facing America, and to transforming individual and community well-being. For more information, visit wellbeingtrust.org.

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MENTAL HEALTH

IS ONE OF THE MOST

URGENT ISSUES

IMPACTING AMERICA

- AND THE WORLD.

INTRODUCTION

IMPROVING OUR MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Mental health impacts the well-being of every individual and our communities, our ability to form and maintain relationships, our ability to learn and to be successful at work, to be productive members of our society, and to lead happy, healthy lives.

This guide is intended as an introduction to mental health and to the changes that experts and those with lived experience tell us will make the biggest impact. It's for all of us - parents and teachers, young people and professionals, community leaders, family caregivers and those who want to get more involved, and everyone in between. We're all impacted by our own mental health and the mental health of those around us, and there are steps we can take to better care for ourselves and our communities.

The guide is by no means an exhaustive or complete list of everything that needs to change about our approach to mental health in America. Rather, it is a summary of some of the changes we think would make the most impact and help get our communities moving in a positive direction.

IF YOU OR SOMEONE YOU KNOW NEEDS IMMEDIATE HELP:



The [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) provides 24/7, free and confidential support for people in distress, as well as prevention and crisis resources.

Call: 1-800-273-8255 | En Español: 1-888-628-9454



Chat online: suicidepreventionlifeline.org/chat/



Text HOME to 741741 from anywhere in the United States, anytime to connect with a trained Crisis Counselor.

For TTY Users: Use your preferred relay service or dial 711 then 1-800-273-8255

SECTION ONE:

GET INFORMED

What is mental health?

Mental health is our emotional and psychological well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act and it is a critically important part of our overall health.

Everyone has mental health but how we experience mental health varies widely, between different people and over the course of a lifetime. A person may be enjoying robust mental health that helps them to lead a thriving, productive life. They may be facing a mild or moderate mental health challenge that interferes with some aspects of their life. Or they may be experiencing a serious mental illness that prevents them from performing functions of daily life.



[Learn more about mental health, including common mental health challenges →](#)

What causes mental health issues and illnesses?

There is no one cause for mental illness.

Our mental health is shaped by many factors that have to do with our individual bodies and lives, our communities, and how our society is structured. These include:

- 1 | **Biological factors:** some mental illnesses have been linked to abnormal functioning of nerve cell circuits or pathways that connect particular brain regions;
- 2 | **Genetics (heredity)** mental illnesses sometimes run in families;
- 3 | **Individual factors** like loneliness, isolation, and a lack of belonging;
- 4 | **Social and community conditions** like economic hardship, housing and food insecurity, systemic racism and intergenerational trauma, and inequitable divisions of resources; and
- 5 | **Systemic problems** such as health care services that are fragmented, too expensive, or fail to address culturally-specific needs.

How common are mental health challenges or illnesses?

Mental health issues are extremely common - over the course of our lifetimes almost everyone will experience a mental health challenge or know someone close to them who will.

These issues often emerge for the first time before the age of 25, meaning children, adolescents, and young adults are also likely to be affected by mental health challenges.



1 in 5 Americans

will suffer from a mental health issue in a given year



1 in 6 youth in America

(ages 6 - 17) will experience a mental health issue in a given year

Additionally, the systemic and structural inequality that is deeply rooted in American society impacts the mental health of those who experience such discrimination, including communities of color and LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning) individuals. Lack of access to economic opportunity, resources, and adequate culturally-relevant care as well as toxic stress, stigma, intergenerational trauma, and the many other factors that thwart a person's ability to flourish can compound mental health challenges while decreasing the likelihood that they will be correctly diagnosed or treated.

ADULTS WITH A MENTAL HEALTH DIAGNOSIS WHO RECEIVED TREATMENT OR COUNSELING IN THE PAST YEAR

23% Asian
33% Black

34% Hispanic or Latinx
50% White



Learn more about the prevalence of mental illness in America →



Learn more about mental health and young people →



Learn more about mental health and communities of color →



Learn more about mental health and the LGBTQ+ community →

Can we improve mental health? How?

Yes! Just like with physical health, a wide variety of treatment options exist for those experiencing mental health issues or illnesses. There are also steps that we can take - in our own lives and collectively as a society - to promote better mental health.

Taking action to improve mental health is urgent. "Deaths of Despair" — including those caused by alcohol, drugs or suicide — have risen in recent years and the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has already led to an increase in the number of such losses.

Improving mental health in America will require addressing the many factors that contribute to mental well-being, from promoting and maintaining positive mental health to preventing and treating illness. It will also require recognizing and meaningfully addressing the ways in which discrimination and structural inequality are uniquely impacting the mental well-being of communities of color, LGBTQ individuals, and others impacted by bias and systemic inequities. For these efforts to be successful, we have to consider the many systems that impact mental wellness including:



Health Systems



Judicial Systems



Communities



Education System



Workplaces



\$400+ billion

is the annual cost for mental health issues in the U.S.



156,242

Deaths of Despair in the U.S. in 2019

Where can I go to learn more about mental health?



There are many great organizations focused on mental health. To get started, check out [Mental Health America](#) and the [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#) to learn more and resources that can help.

SECTION TWO:

GET INVOLVED

Improving mental health in America will take all of us, working together, to drive positive change in the systems and structures that impact well-being in our society. This section includes information on the changes that will help make a difference - based on what experts and those with lived experience have to say. There are many different entry points to improve mental health - think about which ones would be most relevant to you and your community.



Health Systems

Mental health is a fundamental component of overall health, and we need a health care system that recognizes that reality.

Too often, the health care professionals we interact with most often, such as primary care doctors or emergency room staff, receive little training in mental health and are often not well equipped or supported to offer the most effective care. And some insurance companies still fail to cover the costs of mental health care in the same way they cover physical health care (known as “parity”) - even though the law requires them to. Additionally, substance use issues have largely been viewed as a moral failing for the criminal justice system to handle. In reality, it is a mental health issue that requires medical care, not incarceration.

Here are three ways we can improve mental well-being through changes to the health system:



Integrate mental health care into physical health care →



Recognize the opioid epidemic as a public health emergency, not a criminal justice problem →



Expand and diversify the mental health workforce and in researching mental health care →

Integrate mental health care into physical health care

Integrating mental and physical health care is perhaps the most effective solution to increase access to mental health treatment for many people. It improves the chances that someone with a mental health issue will receive a timely and accurate diagnosis as well as effective treatment. It can also lower costs for those who are experiencing both physical and mental health problems. To better integrate mental health care into physical health care we should:

Train primary care doctors to screen for and identify common mental health concerns and either offer treatment or refer patients to mental health specialists who can

Primary care doctors are where people go when they are feeling sick and for regular check-ups, making them the most common contact point between patients and the health system. As a result, primary care doctors are also the most common place people go for mental health concerns.

We can increase mental well-being for patients by making sure the doctors they are already seeing on a regular basis have the training they need to spot a potential mental health challenge, resolve mild- to moderate-needs with evidence-based treatment, and refer patients to mental health specialists when needed.

Make sure hospitals - especially Emergency Departments - are places where mental health issues are quickly identified and patients are connected to appropriate treatment

Hospitals are another common contact point between those experiencing mental health issues and the health system. If all hospital departments and staff have a systematized way to identify and treat mental health, patients will have their needs more consistently addressed. This is especially important since patients may be suffering from a mental health condition and a physical health condition simultaneously, and it is more effective and less expensive to treat both at the same time.

Hospital funding should be used to encourage better mental health integration and better mental health outcomes for their patients. Evidence-based strategies exist to do so, including proven suicide prevention programs.

~33%

wait more than a week to access a mental health clinician

Only 10%

with an identified substance use disorder (SUD) received care

One-third

of hospital stays are now related to mental health diagnoses

Expand and enforce “parity” laws that require health insurance companies to cover mental health care just as they are required to cover physical health care

How health insurance companies reimburse care providers directly impacts the cost and quality of the care patients receive. That makes improving health insurance reimbursement and coverage practices vitally important to improving mental health care.

Historically, insurance companies have not provided robust coverage for mental health services. Despite passage of the [Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act \(MHPAEA\)](#) in 2008, legislation which was designed to ensure equal coverage for treatment of mental health and substance use disorders by health insurance plans, barriers still exist to achieving the intent of this law.

To end these coverage gaps, state and federal regulators must aggressively and proactively enforce parity laws so that mental health care is accessible and affordable.

A mental health office visit with

a therapist is five times as likely to be out-of-network when compared to a non-mental health doctor’s office visit

IDEAS FOR ACTION

- **Make mental health a “vital sign”** that doctors and other health care professionals screen for. Just as patients have their temperature, heart rate, and other basic indicators of well-being checked, they should also have basic indicators of mental well-being monitored. Making mental health screening routine throughout the health system will ensure those experiencing an issue are more quickly and correctly diagnosed.
- **Develop and support a robust crisis infrastructure** to support the new three-digit suicide prevention lifeline number so that those experiencing a mental health crisis have access to timely supports and care. The National Suicide Hotline Designation Act was signed into law in 2020, making 9-8-8 the new three-digit number for the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) beginning in July 2022. The federal government must allocate resources to ensure appropriate crisis response services are available at the local level for those calling 9-8-8 and that there is enough staff in position for the increased call volume.
- **Create an annual “report card” that ranks insurance companies’ coverage of mental health care**, requiring insurance companies to publicly report metrics comparing their mental health and addiction coverage to their physical health coverage.
- **Know your rights related to coverage for mental health and substance use services** and connect with resources that help in taking action to ensure access to appropriate care. Check out resources from The Kennedy Forum: thekennedyforum.org/resources/.

Recognize the opioid epidemic as a public health emergency, not a criminal justice problem

Mental illness and substance use disorders sometimes occur together. Policies that attempt to address these disorders through the criminal justice system only compound the suffering of those living with addiction and their loved ones, while making it harder for them to access timely, effective treatment. To more effectively address the opioid epidemic, and other substance use issues, we should:

Increase access to evidence-based care, including medically-assisted treatment

Most Americans do not have access to evidence-based treatments for addiction (regardless of their insurance) and even fewer have access to the full range of effective services. A number of medications have now been approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to treat substance use disorders, but few treatment centers offer a full range of those medications and many doctors face barriers to prescribing them.

We can help to solve these problems by making sure doctors receive training on evidence-based treatment options for addiction, including medications, and by making it easier for doctors to prescribe those treatments. Insurance companies should also be required to cover the cost of such care so that price is never an obstacle.

**Annually,
only 10%**
of people with
an alcohol or
substance use
disorder receive
treatment

Increase access to overdose reversal drugs like Naloxone

Naloxone is a medication that reverses the potentially deadly effects of an opioid overdose. Police officers, emergency medical technicians, and first responders are trained on how to give naloxone.

In some states, friends and family members can be trained on how to give naloxone.

We should continue to expand access to this life saving medication by making it available at more public locations, and by making sure first responders and community members receive training on how to administer it. Insurance companies should also be required to cover naloxone without a co-pay and health care providers should have to prescribe the drug whenever they are prescribing an opioid medication for longer than a week.

Decrease the prescription of opioids

It is not enough to just treat opioid addiction - we must limit the number of opioid pain medications prescribed unnecessarily by doctors in the first place by ensuring appropriate standards are in place related to amount and duration of prescriptions. We also have to address the underlying causes of why people may be seeking opioid pain medications.

Health care providers should receive better training about evidence-based alternative pain management options and insurance companies should be required to cover such treatments so that patients have easy and affordable access.

There are non-opioid pain medications that are available over-the-counter or by prescription, such as ibuprofen, acetaminophen, aspirin, steroids, amine reuptake inhibitors (ARIs), and membrane stabilizers. Nondrug therapies can also be used, alone or in combination with medications, and include physical therapy and acupuncture.

For when opioid pain medications are a patients' best option, doctors should be trained on safe prescribing practices that minimize the risk of addiction and [Prescription Drug Monitoring Programs](#) (which are managed at the state-level) should be improved so that individuals who are diverting or misusing drugs can be identified.

**On average,
130 Americans**
die every day from
opioid overdose

\$500+ billion
is the annual opioid
epidemic cost in
the U.S.

IDEAS FOR ACTION

- **Expand Take Back Day programs, including National Prescription Drug Take Back Day (Oct 26).** Such initiatives help limit access to and inappropriate use of potentially dangerous prescription drugs - including opioids - by encouraging people to safely return medications they were prescribed but did not use. These programs can include installing drug take-back boxes in public locations and creating other opportunities for individuals to turn in unused prescription drugs.

[Click here to learn about Take Back Day programs →](#)

- **Make naloxone available at all government facilities, including post offices,** to increase access to this potentially life saving drug.

[Click here to learn about increasing access to naloxone →](#)

Expand/diversify the mental health workforce and expand mental health research

In order to truly expand access, we need more health care practitioners offering mental health care, especially more providers from communities of color. We also need to expand our investment in research so that we can identify new evidence-based treatments so that people have more options. To increase our investment in mental health care, we should:

Increase the size and diversity of the mental health workforce

Currently, there are simply not enough mental health providers to meet the need. This is especially true for providers of color as the small workforce that does exist is overwhelmingly white.

We must invest in recruiting, training, and retaining a larger and more diverse mental health workforce so that these practitioners are widely available throughout our communities. No one should ever go without help just because they can't find someone to provide it.

77% of people

with mental health conditions report unmet mental health needs due to a lack of clinicians

MAJORITY OF THE WORKFORCE ARE WHITE

76% psychiatrists

95% psychologists

85% social workers

80% counselors

92% marriage + family therapists

90% psychiatric nurses

Increase investment in mental health research

Innovations in mental health care have been slow and most people receive the same treatments that have been used for decades. We need to increase research funding - from the government as well as private investors - to help us better identify the causes and potential treatments of mental illness.

This research must include technology - both how it can be a constructive part of prevention, screening, and recovery as well as how its potentially negative impacts on mental health can be minimized.

IDEAS FOR ACTION

- Expand programs like the National Health Service Corps, Behavioral Health Workforce Education and Training (BHWET), and the Minority Fellowship Program, which provide incentives for individuals to enter the mental health workforce.



Criminal Justice Systems

Each year, millions of people with mental health conditions end up in contact with justice systems for various minor offenses, in large part because they did not receive the mental health care they needed.

Few of those incarcerated will get adequate treatment while in jail or prison and those environments often increase the severity of mental health conditions.

This treatment of those experiencing mental illness serves no one. Individuals incarcerated for their illnesses should be receiving mental health care in their communities, not spending time locked up. This is a public health, human rights, racial justice, and economic issue - inappropriate incarceration increases suffering while wasting millions of dollars annually. This is especially true for youth whose exposure to the juvenile justice system can derail their long term educational and career opportunities.

Here are three ways we can improve mental well-being through changes to the justice system:



Prevent unfair and costly incarceration →



Provide better care to those who are incarcerated →



Provide better support services to those re-entering communities →

Prevent unfair and costly incarceration

People with mental health and substance use disorders too often become involved in the criminal justice system because our society fails to provide adequate and timely treatment and support services. We can do better by taking a public health approach - increasing prevention, screening, and treatment services instead of funneling people into the justice system.

To decrease the incarceration rates of those with mental illness, we should:

Provide better care and services to those at risk, including youth and those experiencing acute mental health crises

Our first priority should be to prevent interactions between those with mental health challenges and the justice system in the first place. We need to provide plentiful, affordable wraparound services to those with mental health challenges, including those tailored to children and teens. These early investments will help make sure people in need receive care to resolve or effectively manage their mental illness before they escalate.

About half

of incarcerated individuals suffer from some form of mental health condition

Support formal diversion programs that redirect those experiencing a mental illness from the justice system to the health system

We need tools in place to redirect those who do become involved with the justice system to the appropriate mental health care. These systems need to identify those who have been inappropriately arrested or detained, stop legal proceedings, and connect individuals with services. While there are already some “diversion” programs in place, systemic bias and structural racism has often meant these systems discriminate against people of color.

For every \$1 invested

in a specialized court, the state saves \$2.30 to \$5.70

Increasing the number of mental health courts, veterans’ treatment courts, drug courts, and other specialized courts – and ensuring equitable access – can help address this problem. These courts have shown to be effective at decreasing recidivism and lowering costs for communities.

IDEAS FOR ACTION

- **Create Crisis Intervention Teams** that specially train first responders on how to appropriately respond to those experiencing a mental health crisis and refer people to services. Currently, law enforcement officers often take individuals to jail because they lack training on how to respond to the situation or they simply have nowhere else to take them.

Provide better care to those who are incarcerated

When those with mental health conditions do become incarcerated, they are often denied access to adequate care while also facing an environment that exacerbates the severity of their illness. We must ensure that jails and prisons provide quality, evidence-based mental health treatment options. In order to ensure those who are incarcerated receive the care they need, we must:

Require and incentivize jails and prisons to provide quality mental health care

Just as prisons and jails are required to meet minimum standards for physical health care, they should also be required to meet minimum standards for providing evidence-based mental health care. These policies should penalize facilities that fail to screen for mental health conditions or provide quality treatment options. These efforts should include mental health training for correctional officers so they are able to identify someone experiencing a mental health challenge or crisis and are able to respond appropriately.

IDEAS FOR ACTION

- **Invest in care for incarcerated individuals.** Continuity of care across systems is critical for the treatment of mental health needs. Transitions from community to incarceration, or from incarceration back into the community, should not result in loss of necessary services and treatment. Investment in care for those who have been incarcerated is critical to providing stability, and has been shown as an effective way to reduce recidivism.
- **Enforce standards to ensure screening and appropriate mental health and substance use services** are provided in correctional settings, including access to medication-assisted treatment, to improve both short- and long-term outcomes for incarcerated individuals.

Provide better support services to those re-entering communities

For people with mental health conditions that fail to receive appropriate services and support, the justice system can become a revolving door. Each period of incarceration disrupts whatever treatment they were receiving and any progress toward recovery. Thus, the period post-incarceration becomes a critical time for supporting people to thrive and escape the factors that led to incarceration. To provide adequate support to those re-entering communities, we need to:

Ensure continuous, integrated support services

For those being released from incarceration, it's vitally important to ensure they have access to quality support services in their community on release. We should build on the success of existing re-entry programs, ensuring they provide the needed connection to mental health services as well as the wraparound support that will help ensure an individual can successfully rejoin their community.

IDEAS FOR ACTION

- **Automate Medicaid enrollment** to help ensure that those re-entering communities have immediate health care coverage that will help them access the services they need, without any gap in their access to care.



Education Systems

Schools – from early childhood education programs to universities – are in a unique position to address youth mental health needs.

Children spend most of their waking hours there and they are a hub of community life. With proper resources, the education system can be used to provide mental health services to students, building their emotional well-being and resilience.

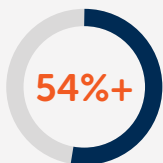
Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected educational systems worldwide. The shifts in daily life and compound stress on children resulting from the pandemic is having a profound impact. As schools re-open and children return to this environment, it will be more important than ever for schools to engage in early identification and intervention to meet the increased need.

Positive mental health and resilience are essential for learning. Students learn best when they are calm, focused, and engaged - not when they are depressed, anxious, or angry. In fact, positive mental health is being increasingly acknowledged as foundational to a student's long term well-being and future career success.

Here are ways we can improve mental well-being through changes to the education system:



Build schools that proactively foster mental wellness, monitor for emerging issues, offer appropriate care, and equip students, teachers, and other school staff with the information, training, and resources they need to promote mental wellness →



increase in suicide rates

for ages 10 - 24 in the U.S. from 2007 to 2018

MENTAL ILLNESSES EMERGE

Half by age 14

75% by age 24

Build schools that proactively foster mental wellness, monitor for emerging issues, and offer appropriate care

Research shows that changes integrated directly into the day-to-day functioning of schools (including universities and early childhood education centers) can improve the mental health outcomes of all students and even prevent some conditions from developing. These policies and programs need to be woven into the culture of the school and built into the curriculum, teaching children key cognitive, emotional, and social skills so that they have the tools they need to manage their mental well-being. In order to create schools that foster mental wellness, we need to:

Create mechanisms to measure and monitor student mental wellness

Mental health is just as key to a young person's well-being as their academic performance, so we need tools to make sure it stays on track. Schools should be required to monitor indicators of mental wellness. Screening for emerging mental health challenges will help schools and families identify potential issues earlier so that they can be proactively addressed before they cause lasting harm.

Build school communities that foster mental wellness

Schools need to do more than just keep an eye out for potential problems - they need to actively cultivate mental wellness. This will require building capacity for schools to understand student mental health needs and to provide meaningful support services that are culturally relevant and informed by the specific needs of all students, including students of color and LGBTQ students. School districts need to adopt prevention, intervention, response, and treatment systems so that they are prepared to meet the full scope of students' needs.

This should include integrating mental health throughout schools' operations, creating school-based mental health centers, and increasing the number of school health providers such as school counselors, in-house therapists, and social workers.

Build a coordinated support system that meet students' needs at home and in the community

Mental wellness doesn't start or stop at the school door. We need to recognize that fact by supporting partnerships between educational partners and local community providers, developing innovative models that coordinate care and services for students as well as their families.

IDEAS FOR ACTION

- **Offer loan repayment programs for mental health providers who practice in schools**, incentivizing counselors, therapists, and other providers to work in these critically important positions.
- **Incorporate mental health practices into schools' academic missions**, recognizing the fundamental link between young people's mental wellness and their ability to learn.
- **Take action through the [Hopeful Futures Campaign](#)** which aims to help ensure every school in the United States has a comprehensive mental health plan in place for students.

Equip students, teachers, and other school staff with the information, training, and resources they need to promote mental wellness

All members of a school community - especially students and teachers - need to be equipped with information and tools to understand and address young people's mental health needs. This will require ongoing training and education that will empower students and the adults responsible for their development to foster robust mental health. It will also help to normalize conversations about mental health, combatting the persistent stigma that surrounds the issue. In order to provide students and educators with these resources, we need to:

Better prepare educators to understand students' development and needs

Teachers and other educators need access to continuing education programming that builds their skills to address student mental wellness and promote classroom mental health. This includes training that covers adolescent development, verbal de-escalation skills, and mindfulness practices. This training must address the specific needs of students from different economic, cultural, religious, and ethnic/racial backgrounds as well as those who identify as LGBTQ.

School-based health providers also need to be trained in evidence-based mental health interventions, increasing their capacity to address mild to moderate mental health needs when other providers are unavailable.

IDEAS FOR ACTION

- **Train all students in Teen Mental Health First Aid** and similar programs that use a first aid-style course to teach young people themselves about mental health, including how to spot a friend or peer who might be struggling with a mental health condition and how to connect that person with help.

Empower students with the information, tools, and resources they need to foster their own mental wellness

Students themselves need information, tools, and strategies to understand and address their own mental health needs. Schools need to increase the availability of Social and Emotional Learning lessons as well as age-appropriate mental health interventions, including trauma-informed programs, so that students can strengthen their resilience and ability to cope with challenges as they arise.

Additionally, students need to be empowered through connections to resources that can help them address their individual needs and by opportunities to drive positive change in their own schools through student-led mental wellness initiatives. View resources from [Active Minds](#) and learn more about how Active Minds is supporting mental health awareness and education for young adults.



Workplaces

Just as schools are a perfect setting for mental health interventions for young people, the workplace is an ideal environment to support the mental well-being of working-age adults.

While workplaces can be a source of connection and purpose that fosters mental wellness, they can also be a source of stress that can exacerbate mental illness. The economic stress of the modern economy is also an important reality, as the lack of access or ability to work is tied to a number of negative mental health effects. As a result, it's critical to provide support for both employees in the workplace as well as those experiencing unemployment.

Here are two ways we can foster mental health in the workplace and for those experiencing unemployment:



Increase access to evidence-based tools, resources, and initiatives that foster the mental well-being of employees →



Connect those experiencing job loss or unemployment with effective support →



Globally, mental health conditions

cost an estimated \$1 trillion in lost productivity

Increase access to evidence-based tools, resources, and initiatives that foster the mental well-being of employees

Evidence shows that a workplace's culture and climate impacts the mental health of employees and that employers can take proactive steps to foster the mental and emotional well-being of their teams. While we know these interventions can be effective, relatively few workplaces adopt them. In order to turn more workplaces into environments that cultivate mental well-being, we should:

Invest in identifying and implementing workplace interventions that support mental wellness

We need to invest in research to better understand how to build workplaces that foster mental wellness and we need to incentivize employers to implement these changes. This must include requiring business to implement policies that prevent suicide and related mental health safety issues that can result from workplace conditions.

Build workplaces that are accessible for those living with mental health conditions

In addition to actively cultivating mental wellness for all employees, workplaces need to understand and adapt to the needs of those living with mental health conditions. Just as we require organizations to meet accessibility standards for those living with physical disabilities, we need to build workplaces that are accessible for those living with mental health challenges.

IDEAS FOR ACTION

- **Expand Employee Assistance Programs (EAP)** that offer free and confidential mental health support including short-term counseling and referrals to other services for employees. All employers should offer access to EAP as part of their standard benefits package. Additional ways employers can promote well-being in the workplace include:
 - Provide sick leave for mental health that does not require documentation,
 - Create a supportive environment through wellness programs,
 - Providing breaks throughout the day,
 - Make improvement to physical environment and access to tools to relieve stress/promote relaxation/improve coping.

Connect those experiencing job loss or unemployment with effective support

Job loss can be a watershed moment for an individual's mental health. A lack of support during this time can exacerbate mental health problems and make it harder to find new employment, even leading to disability. While unemployment benefits and other supports are sometimes available, they are highly stigmatized and thus underutilized. To better support those experiencing unemployment, we should:

Incentivize workforce development programs to make arrangements with employers so that they can be notified when a job loss occurs and proactively reach out with support

By shortening the time between the loss of employment and the connection to benefits and support services, workforce development programs should work with employers to set up systems that would allow them to learn when a job loss has occurred and to reach out proactively with assistance.

Extend eligibility for supplemental security and disability income to include those with substance use disorders

While job loss and unemployment can create conditions that worsen mental health, and even lead to disability, many government benefits programs discriminate against those with substance use issues. This only makes recovery more difficult and increases suffering. The government should extend eligibility for supplemental security and disability income to include people with substance use disorders.

IDEAS FOR ACTION

- State Labor Offices must recognize that many dealing with a mental health condition are more likely to be unemployed, and those who have experienced job loss are at higher risk for a mental health or substance use issue. Those who are unemployed may also experience a loss or change in health coverage, which can impact continuity of care for mental health or substance use treatment or support.
- In addition to the requirements for unemployment benefits, State Labor Offices should provide resources related to mental health services and support – connecting people to information and to critical services for those in need.
- States can also expand the level of support provided by the Department of Employment Services to help get people back to work sooner.



Communities

Mental health is impacted by all aspects of community life and engaging whole communities to improve mental health will be more effective than any single program or intervention.

This will require wide-ranging investment, innovation, and collaboration. Here are two ways we can foster mental health in communities:



Build communities that foster positive attitudes toward mental health and inclusion →



Create and sustainably fund programs that allow communities to more efficiently and effectively improve mental health →

Build communities that foster positive attitudes toward mental health and inclusion

We need to build a society that recognizes that promoting mental health is everyone's job and that mental health is determined in large part by our daily interactions with those around us and by our access to opportunities and resources.

Fundamentally changing mental health in America will require changing attitudes and understanding. Stigma remains a serious stumbling block to the positive change we need, often preventing those in need of treatment from seeking help and excluding those living with mental health challenges from their communities. In order to create a more productive understanding of mental health and more inclusive communities, we should:

Proactively tackle stigma and discrimination

We must prioritize changing people's perceptions of mental health. This will require increasing public awareness efforts - educating communities about mental health and wellness as well as improving awareness of the availability of screenings and resources. We must invest in identifying and scaling tools and programs that will help us take these steps.

We must also improve understanding that mental health issues are a leading cause of disability and that those living with such conditions deserve accommodation, just as those with physical disabilities do.

IDEAS FOR ACTION

- **Assess and address structural stigma to ensure that individuals with mental illness and/or substance use disorder are not discriminated against through policy.** Language across all federal agencies and programs must be consistently inclusive and supportive of those with mental health issues and addiction. By changing our language and our discourse around mental health, we can begin to minimize some of the major issues of stigma.
- **Support programs and funding that provide local organizations with resources and training** to the end the stigma around mental illness and addiction, ensuring that communities across the country has the knowledge and resources to tackle stigma in culturally-, linguistically-, and historically respectful ways.

Increase access to the positive social and work-related activities that foster mental wellness and combat social isolation

Mental health is profoundly shaped by the social and economic opportunities we are able to access. As a result, the mental health experiences of many are directly impacted by America's legacy of systemic racism and structural inequality. To begin to address these longstanding and ongoing inequalities, we should:

Recognize the significant impact economic development can have on mental health and adopt policies to more effectively foster positive mental wellness

This includes investing in research that explores the connection between community development and mental health and investing in programs that combat social isolation and add vibrancy to communities. It must also include requiring economic and workforce development programs to meaningfully engage with the community, including with those living with mental health challenges.

IDEAS FOR ACTION

- **Offer mental health screenings and referrals to those being tested, immunized, and treated for COVID-19.** The public health infrastructure being used to respond to COVID-19 can simultaneously be used as an opportunity to increase access to mental health care. This is especially important given the significant impact on mental health we know the pandemic is having.
- **Invest in strategies that foster supportive environments,** which includes providing training and resources to increase capacity within communities to identify and address mental health and social needs.

NOW WHAT?

There is so much that needs to change about our approach to mental health in America – and so many opportunities to create positive change. Hopefully, one or more of the recommendations in this guide has helped spark an idea for how you’d like to see your community better address mental well-being.

To help get you started, here are some simple steps you can take to begin advocating for the transformative changes - big and small - that will make a difference:

1 | Educate yourself about the policies in your community that are impacting mental health

You can’t fix what you don’t know is broken. So start by learning more about the ways that the systems around you could better support positive mental well-being and care for those who are struggling:

What are the changes that need to be made and who are the people with the power to make those changes? You can also explore what existing campaign or advocacy groups might already be actively pushing for change on that issue. Many organizations around the country are focused on improving mental health in America and want your help!

[NAMI](#)

[Kaiser Family Foundation](#)

[Mental Health Coalition](#)

[MHA](#)

[The Trevor Project](#)

[The Kennedy Forum](#)

[Active Minds](#)

2 | Share your story

One of the most powerful ways to make someone care about an issue or change their mind is by sharing your own story. If you have a personal experience with a mental health challenge or illness, consider how and when you might want to share it. Maybe it’s with someone in your life that you’ve hesitated to open up to before or maybe it’s in a more public setting. If you’re comfortable and ready to speak up, your voice can be powerful.

[Share Your Story | NAMI: National Alliance on Mental Illness](#)

[How are you really? – The Mental Health Coalition](#)

3 | Get in touch with Well Being Trust on Social Media:

We hope this guide has been helpful and that it has inspired you to take action. If it has, we want to hear about it!

[Facebook](#)

[Twitter](#)

[LinkedIn](#)

[Instagram](#)

[Sign up for the Well Being Trust monthly newsletter](#)

Definitions

Health: Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and is not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.

Mental health and well-being: Mental health is a state of well-being in which individual potential is realized, one can ably cope with normal life stressors, work productively, and contribute to their community.

Addiction: Addiction is a treatable, chronic medical disease involving their brain, genetics, environment, and individual life experiences. People with addiction use substances or engage in behaviors that become compulsive and often continue despite harmful consequences. Prevention efforts and treatment approaches for addiction are generally as successful as those for other chronic diseases.

Agency: Possessing a sense of control and having the ability and opportunity to make purposeful choices. This exists at a personal, and community level.

Health Equity: Health equity means that everyone has a fair and just opportunity to be healthier. This requires removing obstacles to health such as poverty, discrimination, and their consequences, including powerlessness and lack of access to good jobs with fair pay, quality education and housing, safe environments, and health care.

Mental health care: A wide array of services and treatments meant to address suffering from mental illnesses of all types to decrease suffering and disability and to enable healthier, longer, more productive lives.

Naloxone: Naloxone is a drug that is used to treat drug overdoses. It can reverse the potentially fatal effects of an overdose and save lives.

Opioids: Opioids are a category of drugs - including prescription medications such as oxycodone and fentanyl and illegal drugs such as heroin. While prescription opioids can serve as powerful pain relievers that can help someone experiencing extreme discomfort, they are also highly addictive and opioid overdoses can be deadly.

Parity: When discussing health insurance, parity means that an insurance company is required to offer equal coverage for different types of conditions. For example, health insurance companies are required by law to offer coverage for mental health services just as they offer coverage for physical health services. [Click here](#) to learn more from our partners at the Kennedy Forum.

Policy: Policies are often a set of principles that reflect the goal of an organization, state, system, or community. Policies should help promote movement towards a desired goal.

Resilience: Is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity whether this is a traumatic event or a daily stressor. It is how well we function after a highly difficult or upsetting event.

Social movement: Social movements are forms of collective action that emerge in response to situations of inequality, oppression and/or unmet social, political, economic or cultural demands.

Stigma: Stigma is the disapproval of or discrimination against a certain quality, characteristic, or category. Stigma is dependent on social, economic, and political power and exists when elements of labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination occur together in a situation that allows them.

Trauma: An intolerable event or experience that causes the person to be overwhelmed mentally and emotionally and causes psychological harm.

References

Active Minds

Mission and Impact

<https://www.activeminds.org/about-us/mission-and-impact/>

Benefits.gov

Unemployment Assistance

<https://www.benefits.gov/categories/Unemployment%20Assistance>

Bipartisan Policy Center

Tackling America's Mental Health and Addiction Crisis Through Primary Care Integration

<https://bipartisanpolicy.org/report/behavioral-health-2021/>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Prescription Drug Monitoring Programs (PDMPs)

<https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/pdmp/index.html>

Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services

The Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act (MHPAEA)

https://www.cms.gov/CCIIO/Programs-and-Initiatives/Other-Insurance-Protections/mhpaea_factsheet

Credible Mind

<https://crediblemind.com/>

Hopeful Futures Campaign

<https://www.inseparable.us/hopeful-futures/>

Mental Health America

<https://www.mhanational.org/>

FAQ for Understanding 988 and How It Can Help with Behavioral Health Crises

<https://mhanational.org/sites/default/files/FAQ%20with%20vibrant%20FINAL%20COPY.pdf>

LGBTQ+ Communities and Mental Health

<https://www.mhanational.org/issues/lgbtq-communities-and-mental-health>

Mental Health and Criminal Justice Issues

<https://www.mhanational.org/issues/mental-health-and-criminal-justice-issues>

Position Statement 56: Mental Health Treatment in Correctional Facilities

<https://www.mhanational.org/issues/position-statement-56-mental-health-treatment-correctional-facilities>

Mental Health First Aid

Mental Health First Aid for Youth

<https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/population-focused-modules/youth/>

NAMI

<https://www.nami.org/Home>

About Mental Illness

<https://www.nami.org/About-Mental-Illness>

Mental Health by the Numbers

<https://www.nami.org/mhstats>

Teens & Young Adults

<https://www.nami.org/Your-Journey/Teens-Young-Adults>

Identity and Cultural Dimensions

<https://www.nami.org/Your-Journey/Identity-and-Cultural-Dimensions>

Responding to Crisis

<https://www.nami.org/Advocacy/Policy-Priorities/Responding-to-Crises>

Crisis Intervention Team Programs

[https://www.nami.org/Advocacy/Crisis-Intervention/Crisis-Intervention-Team-\(CIT\)-Programs?](https://www.nami.org/Advocacy/Crisis-Intervention/Crisis-Intervention-Team-(CIT)-Programs?)

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Pew Charitable Trust

Expanded Access to Naloxone Can Curb Opioid Overdose Deaths

<https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/issue-briefs/2020/10/expanded-access-to-naloxone-can-curb-opioid-overdose-deaths>

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

Reentry Resources for Individuals, Providers, Communities and States

https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/topics/criminal_juvenile_justice/reentry-resources-for-consumers-providers-communities-states.pdf

The Kennedy Forum

Latest toolkits, policy briefs, videos, and more

<https://www.thekennedyforum.org/resources/>

Thriving Together

<https://thriving.us/>

U. S. Food and Drug Administration

Drug Disposal: Drug Take Back Locations

<https://www.fda.gov/drugs/disposal-unused-medicines-what-you-should-know/drug-disposal-drug-take-back-locations>

Well Being Trust

Thriving Together: A Springboard for Equitable Recovery and Resilience in Communities Across America

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