



Mayor's Office of
ThriveNYC

Office of Labor
Relations

Workplace Mental Health Guidance for Commissioners and Agency Leadership



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How to Use this Guide

As part of the work of the Mental Health Council, the Mayor's Office of ThriveNYC and WorkWell NYC at the Mayor's Office of Labor Relations (WorkWell) convened a Vicarious Trauma Working Group between December 2019 and January 2020. This Working Group, which included managers and frontline staff from over 20 City agencies, developed a set of strategies to help City agencies support employees exposed to stress, anxiety, and vicarious trauma.

This Toolkit includes actionable steps, guidance on clear messaging and best practices for Commissioners and agency leadership. We ask that you each do your part to reduce the stigma of mental health challenges, to build awareness of available mental health resources, and to encourage your employees who may need mental health support to connect to care.

ACTIONS COMMISSIONERS CAN TAKE NOW:

An infectious illness outbreak such as COVID-19 can be stressful for all New Yorkers. This may be especially true for City employees who are serving the public in new ways and may be exposed to increased stress, anxiety and trauma during the COVID-19 pandemic. City employees may be experiencing anxiety or other mental health challenges for the first time, or experiencing existing mental health challenges in different or more intense ways than before. The mental health challenges that may be emerging during this time can have long-term effects on overall health, particularly if left untreated.

To support your employees during the COVID-19 pandemic -- and to address increasing demands on our workforce -- we urge all agency leaders to complete the following in spring 2020:

- **Use the email template on [page 10](#)** to demonstrate your commitment to your employees' mental health and to promote resources. The messaging in this email can be used on a recurring basis (recommended monthly) to communicate with your employees about mental health throughout the crisis.
- **Contact the NYC EAP** to learn about stress management, mental health, education, referrals and resources to assist City employees and their families. Stress management and grief counseling workshops can be scheduled via teleconference and at a convenient time for your employees. You can contact the NYC EAP by email at eap@olr.nyc.gov or by phone at 212-306-7660 to schedule an appointment. Visit the NYC EAP website at nyc.gov/eap to learn more.
- **Work with your Human Resources team to send regular updates about citywide sick leave and bereavement policies** to ensure City workers have the time and resources they need to support themselves and their loved ones during this pandemic.
- **Contact WorkWell NYC** to schedule wellness and resilience workshops, such as meditation and mindful movement, or to learn about other City programs, by emailing Anna Tan, Be Well Program Coordinator at anna.tan@olr.nyc.gov.

How to Use this Guide

RECURRING ACTIONS COMMISSIONERS CAN TAKE MOVING FORWARD:

To develop and maintain a supportive workplace in the particularly critical months following the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, Commissioners and Agency leadership should take the following steps on a recurring basis (monthly or quarterly, as noted below).

- **Designate a senior member of your team to ensure your agency is doing everything possible to support employee mental health**, including implementing the guidance in this Toolkit.
- **Use the Talking Points (page 7) in this Toolkit to communicate consistently about mental health in agency-wide communications**, in order to reduce stigma and encourage help-seeking behavior, and make City employees aware of the mental health resources available to them.
- **Integrate the Best Practices (page 8) in this Toolkit to develop supportive policies and programs** that promote mental health.
- **Identify a WorkWell Ambassador** for your agency who can assist with work-site communications and program implementation. Please contact Anna Tan, Be Well Program Coordinator, at workwell@olr.nyc.gov for more information.

If you have any questions, please email Deborah Friedman, Assistant Commissioner for Workforce Engagement & Innovation at OLR: dfriedman@olr.nyc.gov.

Creating a Common, Citywide Understanding of Mental Health

WHY WORKPLACE MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS

- Mental health, which includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being, is an essential part of overall health. In fact, our mental and physical health are interrelated.
- We all play a role in supporting each other's mental health.
- A workplace offers opportunities to set up supportive and preventative policies and programs that promote mental health.
- Mental health-friendly workplaces value the health of their employees and have consistent practices in place to support the emotional well-being of employees.¹

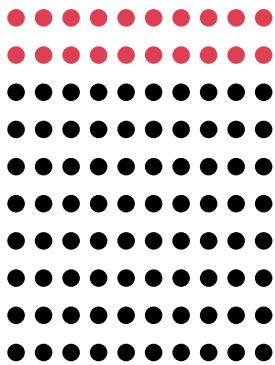
In spite of the suffering caused by mental health challenges and mental illness, recovery is possible and with the right support, many people can go on to live happy and productive lives.²

GLOSSARY OF MENTAL HEALTH TERMS

As the City's largest employer, the City government should employ specific and standardized language to reduce stigma and accurately represent the breadth of emotional, social and psychological experiences associated with mental health:

- **Mental health** is a state of well-being in which the individual realizes their abilities, can cope with the normal stressors of life, can work productively, and is able to contribute to their community.³
- **Mental health problems** is a broad term that recognizes the mental health spectrum from health, to challenge, to illness, and acknowledges the breadth of these experiences.⁴
- **Mental health challenges** may be experienced by all of us and do not necessarily refer to an underlying condition or illness. A mental health challenge can arise at particularly stressful moments in our lives (e.g., stress related to the COVID-19 pandemic, job loss, feeling socially isolated or grieving), and this term typically refers to time-bound events.
- **Vicarious trauma** – also referred to as “secondary trauma” – is an occupational challenge due to continuous exposure to survivors of trauma and violence. Frequent interactions with individuals who have experienced trauma is associated with negative psychological, emotional, and cognitive effects.⁵
- **Mental illnesses** are conditions in which people's thinking, mood and behaviors negatively impact their day-to-day functioning, which can include depression, anxiety, schizophrenia and many others, as well as addictions.⁶

GLOSSARY OF MENTAL HEALTH TERMS

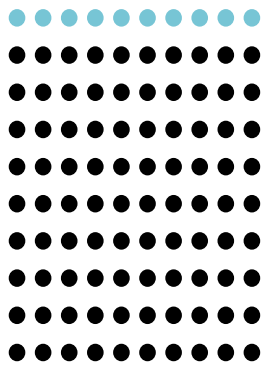


One in five New Yorkers experiences a mental health disorder in any given year.ⁱ

Mental illnesses are health conditions involving changes in emotion, thinking or behavior (or a combination of these) associated with distress and/or problems functioning in social, work or family activities.ⁱⁱ

i. New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. EpiQuery -NYC Health and Nutrition Examination Survey 2014. April 28th, 2020. <https://nyc.gov/health/epiquery>

ii. Parehk, R. (2018). What is Mental Illness? American Psychiatric Association. Retrieved March 02, 2020, from <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/what-is-mental-illness>.

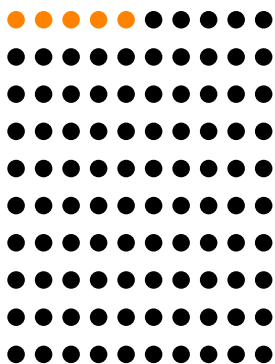


In a given year, nearly one in ten New Yorkers experiences depression.ⁱⁱⁱ

Depression is a mood disorder that causes a persistent feeling of sadness and loss of interest and can lead to a variety of additional emotional and physical problems.^{iv}

iii. Tuskeviciute R, Hoenig J, Norman C. Depression among New York City Adults. NYC Vital Signs 2018, 17(2); 1-4.

iv. Mayo Clinic (2020). Depression (major depressive disorder). CON-20257464. Retrieved March 02, 2020, from <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/depression/symptoms-causes/syc-20356007>.

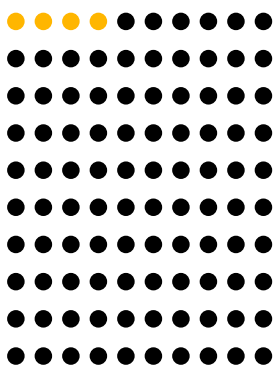


5% of New Yorkers experience serious psychological distress in a given year.^v

Serious psychological distress includes mental health problems severe enough to cause moderate-to-serious impairment in social, occupational, or school functioning and to require treatment.^{vi}

v. Choden T, Huynh S, Hoenig J, Norman C. Serious psychological distress among New York City adults. New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene: Epi Data Brief (102); May 2018.

vi. Pratt L.A., Dey A.N., & Cohen A.J. Characteristics of adults with serious psychological distress as measured by the K6 scale: United States, 2001–04. Advance data from vital and health statistics; no 382. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. 2007.












4% of adult New Yorkers experience serious mental illness.^{vii}

Serious mental illness is a mental, behavioral or emotional disorder (excluding developmental and substance use disorders) resulting in serious functional impairment, which substantially interferes with or limits one or more major life activities. Examples of serious mental illness include major depressive disorder, schizophrenia and bipolar disorder.^{viii}

vii. Norman C, Goldmann E, Staley B, Duchon R. Serious Mental Illness among New York City Adults. NYC Vital Signs 2015, Volume 14, No. 2; 1-4.

viii. Parehk, R. (2018). What is Mental Illness? American Psychiatric Association. Retrieved March 02, 2020, from <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/what-is-mental-illness>.

Talking Points for Agency Leadership

-  In any given year, one in five New Yorkers will experience a mental illness.⁷ The surrounding stigma towards mental illness can make it hard to ask for support, especially in the workplace.⁸
-  We believe that mental health is just as important as physical health. That's why we're taking action to create a healthier, happier workplace for all our employees that address all aspects of your health.
-  As you know, stress is an inevitable part of life, but it is important to address it before it becomes chronic and debilitating. A disease outbreak such as COVID-19 can be particularly stressful for all of us. Many people are experiencing mental health challenges for the first time. Others are experiencing more challenges than normal. This is understandable and these are natural reactions to a stressful situation.
-  We can work together to address stress and other mental health challenges that can be associated with work and we all have a responsibility to look out for each other and to take part in creating a mentally-healthy workplace.
-  I also want to share that while mental illness and mental health challenges can be very difficult, most people who receive treatment will recover and continue to live happy, productive lives.
-  If you're facing a mental health challenge – work-related or otherwise – please know that you have the full support of this agency. You can speak to your manager, a trusted colleague or HR. We are here to help.
-  And, remember that you can call the NYC EAP for support right away. All EAP services are provided by NYS Licensed Mental Health Professionals and are confidential and free for City employees and their dependents. You can reach out to the EAP with the confidence that your mental health concerns will be taken seriously. Services include access to workshops, counseling, help navigating benefits, and finding a provider. You can reach us Monday-Friday 8am-11pm at eap@olr.nyc.gov or 212-306-7660.
-  All New Yorkers can also access support through NYC Well, the City's 24/7 behavioral health helpline. NYC Well works to connect people to appropriate services regardless of insurance or immigration status. Any New Yorker in need – or who knows someone in need – can call 888-NYC-WELL (1-888-692-9355), text WELL to 65173, or chat online at nyc.gov/nycwell.
-  By prioritizing our mental health, we will improve our well-being, strengthen our relationships, and provide the highest level of service to New Yorkers, and make this an even better place to work – for everyone.

Checklist: Best Practices to Get Started

-  **STEP 1: Communicate about mental health and available resources with all agency employees via email at least once per quarter, or at least once a month during times of crisis.**
 - Emails should encourage staff to seek mental health support and include information about available resources: you can link to the NYC EAP, upcoming Be Well mental health programs, and NYC Well (see sample talking points on [page 7](#) and sample email template on [page 10](#)).

-  **STEP 2: Host at least two agency- or division-wide meetings per year to affirm the existence of workplace stressors and to demonstrate your support for your employees' wellbeing.**
 - Dedicate time in staff meetings to affirm your support for employees' mental health, to encourage help-seeking behavior, and to promote resources (see suggested talking points on [page 7](#)).

-  **STEP 3: Hang physical and digital signage about mental health in your shared spaces.**
 - Signage in communal or public spaces like kitchens, bathrooms, on video or TV screens, and elevators can help to reduce stigma and encourage staff to seek help (see sample flyers attached, and contact WorkWell NYC for more). Stay tuned for Be Well's anti-stigma campaign "Let's Talk" to be launched later in the spring.

-  **STEP 4: Leverage your agency's social media to communicate monthly about mental health.**
 - Use the messaging and resources in this guide to get started, and check out [@MentalHealthNYC](#) (ThriveNYC's Twitter handle) or [@WorkWellNYC](#) on Instagram for inspiration and check out some sample content on [page 11](#). Remember that any communication raising awareness of mental health should be accompanied with information about mental health resources.

-  **STEP 5: Encourage opportunities for peer and social connection by hosting at least one community-building event quarterly.**
 - Whether a brown bag lunch, WorkWell class or other community-oriented event, social connection can support mental health. In the era of COVID-19, you can use a virtual format to bring people together or set up a buddy system for colleagues to check in on each other.

Mental Health Resources for City Employees

Commissioners and agency leadership should proactively share the following mental health resources with City employees:

Mental Health Coverage: All health plans offered through the City offer extensive mental health and substance misuse coverage with modest copays. Employees can contact their health plan directly for information or contact the EAP for support finding a provider. The EAP can be reached at (212) 306-7660 or eap@olr.nyc.gov.

NYC Well: NYC Well offers free and confidential mental health support, via phone, chat or text, 24/7 in in over 200 languages, regardless of insurance or immigration status. City employees can call 1-888-NYC-Well, text “Well” to 65173, or chat online at nyc.gov/nycwell.

EAP: The City of New York offers its employees and their dependents a helping hand through a network of programs providing education and information, counseling and individualized referrals to assist with a wide range of personal and social problems. The EAP can be reached at (212) 306-7660 or eap@olr.nyc.gov.

Support is available for people harmed by violence, crime or abuse:

- Safe Horizon operates NYC’s 24-hour hotline: 1-800-621-4673. You can also chat with a Safe Horizon advocate, who can offer information, advocacy and support through [SafeChat](#).
- For anyone needing resources to help themselves or a loved one experiencing dating, domestic, or gender-based violence, you can also visit the [NYC Hope Resource Directory](#). For immediate safety planning, shelter assistance, mental health support, and other resources, all NYC Family Justice Centers are providing support by phone, Monday to Friday, from 9:00am – 5:00pm. The physical locations of the Family Justice Centers are temporarily closed.

Unions: Many unions that represent City employees host their own member assistance program with its own range of services. Union members can contact their union directly to learn more or visit the [EAP website](#) for a list of union member assistance programs.

WorkWell NYC Be Well Program: As part of WorkWell NYC, the Be Well program specifically promotes the emotional wellness of City employees through worksite health programming, webinars, informational toolkits, and resources. Visit and refer your employees to the [Be Well website to learn about the range of current and growing mental health offerings for City employees](#).

- **Be Well Slack Community:** Be Well has set up an online community to foster social support via Slack. [Encourage your employees to sign-up here](#) and [Follow @workwellnyc](#) on Instagram for updates.

For additional information related to workplace mental health resources and programs, you can: Contact workwell@olr.nyc.gov

Visit the [Thrive in Your Workplace website](#)

Follow the Mayor’s Office of ThriveNYC on Twitter at [@MentalHealthNYC](#)

Appendices

I. Sample Email Template for Commissioners to Send to Staff

Subject: Mental health support is available

Dear Colleagues,

We are in an unprecedented crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Every day, you are playing a vital role in supporting our citywide effort to mitigate the harm caused by this crisis to our City, to save lives, and help New Yorkers heal. Thank you for playing an essential role in ensuring that New Yorkers are able to access vital services.

This uniquely difficult time has increased demands on our agency and forced us to re-imagine how we spend our time at work and at home. All of these changes can have a significant impact on our mental health, which includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. The uncertainty, stress, anxiety, and other mental health challenges during this time can have long-term effects on our overall health – but help is available for you and your family during this time.

We are here to support you. Please take advantage of the resources below – taking care of yourself is more important now than ever.

Thank you for all your hard work.

Best,
Commissioner

[Please include the Mental Health Resources for City Employees listed on page 9.](#)

Appendices

II. Sample Social Media Content

Agencies may use or borrow from the following social media content:

- It's common to feel overwhelmed, sad or anxious. Help is available: https://thrivenyc.cityofnewyork.us/mental_health_support_while_home
- If you're feeling stressed or depressed, NYC Well is your #ThriveNYC connection to free, confidential mental health support. Call 1-888-NYC-Well, text "Well" to 65173, or chat online at nyc.gov/nycwell.
- Some good suggestions in this @nytimes piece on confronting loneliness: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/13/opinion/coronavirus-social-distancing.html>
- Through the Spaces to Thrive partnership between @MentalHealthNYC and @NYPL, New Yorkers can check out these 10 e-books or audio-books from our mental health booklist: <https://www.nypl.org/blog/2020/03/25/mental-health-reads>

Remember to follow [@MentalHealthNYC](#) on Twitter and [@WorkWellNYC](#) on Instagram for more inspiration.

III. Sample Flyers:

In addition to sharing the enclosed information about mental health resources, we encourage you to frequently share flyers about mental health services with your employees. You can contact your agency's Human Resources team and WorkWell NYC Ambassador, Employee Assistance Program (Eap@olr.nyc.gov) and/or WorkWell NYC (workwellnyc@olr.nyc.gov), for additional flyers related to employee wellness.

Footnotes

1. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. *Workplaces that Thrive: A resource for Creating Mental Health-Friendly Work Environments*. SAMHSA Pub. No. P040478M. Rockville, MD: Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2004
2. “Making the Business Case”, Center for Workplace Mental Health, <http://workplacementalhealth.org/Making-The-Business-Case>
3. World Health Organization. (2004). *Promoting mental health: concepts, emerging evidence, practice (Summary Report)* Geneva: World Health Organization.
4. Mental Health Commission of Canada. (2009). *Toward recovery & well-being*. Calgary: Mental Health Commission of Canada, Calgary
5. Bercier, M. L., & Maynard, B. R. (2015). Interventions for secondary traumatic stress with mental health workers: A systematic review. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 25(1), 81-89.
6. Surveillance and Epidemiology Division, Public Health Agency of Canada, CCDSS Mental Illness Working Group, CCDSS Science Committee, & CCDSS Technical Working Group (2015). *Report Summary--Mental Illness in Canada, 2015*. *Health promotion and chronic disease prevention in Canada: research, policy and practice*, 35(6), 95–96.
7. New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. *EpiQuery -NYC Health and Nutrition Examination Survey 2014*. April 28th, 2020. <https://nyc.gov/health/epiquery>
8. Talking points adapted from Heads Up Leadership Toolkit accessed: <https://www.headsup.org.au/healthy-workplaces/strategies-for-healthy-workplaces>