

# Creating a Culture of Support in the Workplace

*A Best Practices Resource for Managers in the Hospitality Industry*



## about

Active Minds is the nation's leading nonprofit organization supporting mental health awareness and education for young adults. Powered by a network on more than 800 high school and college campuses, in workplaces and communities, and through a vast public audience, Active Minds is creating communities of support and saving lives.

*Join the Active Minds movement to change the conversation about mental health.*

**[activeminds.org](http://activeminds.org)**



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*This resource was developed in partnership with OPTUM.*

# Building A Culture of Wellness in the Workplace: Why It Matters

Mental health struggles are on the rise throughout the United States, particularly among young adults. Within the hospitality industry, these struggles are exacerbated by the unique challenges in these jobs. Some of these challenges are well-known, such as long and unpredictable work hours, fast-paced and high-pressure environments, and inconsistent wages. Other challenges are more nuanced and harder to define, including an employee's perceived or real lack of appreciation from managers, a sense of mistrust between managers and employees, inconsistent communication, and ongoing mental health stigma.

Speaking openly about mental health is an incredibly powerful step toward creating a more supportive climate. Simply acknowledging as a manager that your team's mental health matters can impact the way that your employees communicate with you and perform. When a workplace is perceived as supportive of mental health, employees are more likely to seek support when they need it, allowing them to perform more efficiently on the job while reducing absenteeism and other productivity losses. A supportive climate is also likely to decrease employee turnover and enhance loyalty among team members.

Workers in the hospitality industry overwhelmingly report that managers who are open to feedback on how they can support their employees are "extremely important" in promoting a culture that feels supportive of mental health in the workplace.

Your engagement with this guidebook is your first big step in the right direction. This resource draws on in-depth feedback and data gathered by Optum and Active Minds from people who work throughout the hospitality industry - from front-line employees, to managers and executives, to industry association representatives. That input has been compiled and translated into the following concise and accessible best practices that will support your management team, step-by-step, to create a workplace culture that is more supportive of employee mental health.

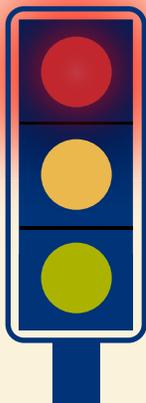
## new data: mental health in the hospitality industry:

In partnership with Optum, Active Minds conducted a research study identifying the challenges to emotional wellbeing faced by hospitality employees and managers. After conducting a thorough literature review regarding mental health in the hospitality industry, Active Minds and Optum led a series of nationwide focus groups and a survey of hospitality workers and leaders in varying roles and levels of management exploring specific challenges and promising strategies.

### significant survey findings include:

- For employees, **the most stressful elements of the job** include: feeling like the customer always has to be right (41%), inconsistent or long hours (40%), fear of making mistakes (38%), communication issues with management and/or other employees (36%), and a lack of trust in management (33%).
- When considering **whether their workplace supported their mental health**, most employees felt that their workplace culture was only moderately (34%) or not at all (38%) supportive.
- In terms of **what would help promote a workplace environment that feels supportive** of mental health, employees rated recognition and/or gratitude from manager(s) (87%), a clear system for getting shifts covered (85%), opportunities for professional development (79%), consistent communication or check-ins with managers (75%), and consistent shift hours (75%) as most impactful.
- Other **meaningful strategies to support mental health** include consistent breaks for all employees (66%), opportunities for staff bonding outside of work hours (61%), pre-shift personal and team-related check-ins (54%), and information about how to connect to local mental health services (52%).
- Employees shared that **the easiest way to receive information about mental health resources** are through individual conversations with managers (57%), posters on the wall in staff spaces (48%), team discussions during staff meetings (33%), and the employee manual (28%).

In this guide, Active Minds provides specific recommendations for employers regarding these actionable strategies and solutions in addition to addressing common questions about balancing support with expectations of excellence, navigating challenging conversations, and building trust with employees.



#### *“Help! I’m too busy to take this on!”*

In our research, we often heard from managers that **a lack of time and capacity** were key barriers in better supporting their team’s wellbeing. Additionally, team members expressed the need for **more opportunities for professional development**. In many cases, employees know best about what is needed to boost their morale and support their wellbeing. With all of this in mind, we will highlight areas for managers to empower employees with opportunities to get involved. **When you see this symbol , consider engaging a team member to implement an idea that they have.**

## PAIN POINT #1: COMMUNICATION ISSUES WITH EMPLOYEES

### the issue:

In a fast-paced, customer-focused workplace, it can seem like there are not enough hours in the day to check in with everyone individually and create a workplace where your team feels a sense of belonging. Though it can seem like a lot, keep in mind that **consistent communication** is cited as one of the most impactful ways to promote a workplace culture that feels supportive.

### solutions:



**1. Casual daily check-ins:** Asking “How are you feeling today?” goes a long way.



**3. Create opportunities for team building** and staff bonding outside of work hours. **E**



**2. Use pre-shift line-ups or regularly scheduled team meetings:** In addition to business updates, ask staff how they’re doing. More ideas below!

### key messages:

“I’m here for you.”

“I’m available if you need to talk.”

### additional tips:

- **One Word Check-In:**\* Ask each person to use one word to describe how they are feeling right now. Share verbally, or have staff drop a slip of paper with their word in a simple ‘mood box’ to be read at the start of the shift by management.
- **Reach Out:** Remind your team to reach out to a manager or teammate if they are struggling; assure the team they will not be judged or penalized for doing so. Consider identifying one team member to volunteer as a go-to peer resource for the week.
- **Team Morale:** Support communication and trust with activities for your team to get to know one another, bond, and interact with the management team outside. Ask your team for ideas for annual traditions like holiday gatherings, or for informal activities like bowling or barbecues. **E**

**\*Program highlight: “I Got Your Back Project” based in Sacramento, California. For more information, visit [igotyourback.info](http://igotyourback.info).**

# Validate-Appreciate-Refer

Use Active Minds' V-A-R tool ([activeminds.org/var](https://activeminds.org/var)) for active listening to check in with individual employees as time allows:



VALIDATE

Validate their experiences. It's okay to not be okay. Validation sounds like:

*"That sounds difficult."*

*"It seems like you have a lot going on. It makes sense that you might not be feeling great."*



APPRECIATE

Appreciate their courage; sharing is important. Appreciation sounds like:

*"I'm glad you chose to tell me."*

*"I know sharing what's really going on can be challenging. I appreciate that you did."*



REFER

Refer them to skills and support. For some, professional support is needed. For others, healthy coping skills will help. Assist in exploring options. Refer sounds like:

*"Do you need a breather? I can step in for a minute, if that would help."*

*"Would it help to talk to someone about this?"*

## PAIN POINT #2: CHALLENGES IN PRIORITIZING EMPLOYEE WELLBEING WHILE UPHOLDING STANDARDS OF EXCELLENCE

### the issue:

It can be challenging to ensure that employees feel their dignity and wellbeing are important to the business while also upholding ideals of courtesy and professionalism. Our survey revealed that **a fear of making mistakes** and **a culture in which “the customer is always right”** are the leading causes of stress in the workplace.

### solutions:



**1. Acknowledge** the stress of the job and discuss the policies and protocols that employees can take advantage of to support their own success, such as taking brief breaks, reaching out to managers for support, or sharing experiences in a team meeting.



**2. Offer professional development** See examples in the call-out box below. 



**3. Include mental health information\*** in the employee manual and post in prominent areas of the workplace.



**4. Pay attention to signs** that an employee might be struggling, such as feelings of hopelessness, anger or rage, extreme fatigue, trouble concentrating, neglect of personal care, reckless behavior, or frequent absences or tardiness.

*\*See Posters and Templates section for ready-made resources.*

#### **Professional development opportunities may include:**

- Owning responsibility for a project, to build project management skills
- De-escalation training for navigating tough conversations with peers and customers
- Active listening skill-building (see Active Minds' V-A-R program)
- Office hours with management team for ask-me-anything (AMA) sessions about managing
- Cross-training opportunities in your workplace
- Food and alcohol safety training through state and national hospitality associations
- Gathering ideas from your team about what other professional opportunities they would like to see

## key messages:

*"I care about the goals you have as a professional."*

*"I care about who you are and what you are going through outside of work."*

*"If you are struggling, help is available."*

## additional tips:

- **Visible Messages:** Hang eye-catching posters in staff spaces, such as a break room or bathroom, to send a message to your team about the importance of their mental health and the resources available to them.
- **Know Employees' Goals:** Promote longevity and loyalty among your team by understanding their goals for the future and supporting them in pursuing these goals.
- **Start by Assuming Best Intent:** Is the customer always right? Give the employee the benefit of the doubt (assuming the circumstances feel reasonable) and hear them out while still attending to the needs of the customer.

### SAMPLE LANGUAGE TO SHOW ASSUMPTION OF BEST INTENT:

*"That sounds like a tough situation. Can you explain what happened from your end? I would be happy to think it through with you, with company policy and protocol in mind."*

*For more tips on how to use supportive language, see page 6 to learn about V-A-R: Validate, Appreciate, Refer.*

### KEEP IN MIND...

*If someone is considering suicide and indicates it in some way verbally or behaviorally, it's important to connect them with professional help as soon as possible. Post the flyer on page 13 with emergency mental health phone numbers publicly for employees to access and visit [activeminds.org/signs](https://www.activeminds.org/signs) for more information about signs of distress. You are not expected to be a mental health expert or professional. If something is happening with an employee that is beyond your capacity or comfort zone, you may need to mobilize professional support. For national resources, see the poster in the following section.*

## PAIN POINT #3: NEGATIVE IMPACT OF INCONSISTENT OR LONG HOURS

### the issue:

Long and unpredictable hours contribute to mental health struggles within the hospitality industry. A **clear system for getting shifts covered** and **consistent shift hours** were rated in our survey among the most impactful ways to promote a supportive workplace environment.

### solutions:



**1. Provide a meal** for staff during especially long shifts.



**2. Share clear and consistent protocol** for shift coverage and taking time off, such as an online substitution board.



**3. Offer scheduling flexibility** when feasible to support employees who are taking classes, juggling childcare, having a bad mental health day, or have other last-minute coverage needs.



**4. Provide clear guidance on breaks:**

When and how all employees, not only smokers, can take short breaks throughout the day.



**5. Offer to take on duties** for a few minutes when someone needs a quick break to cool down from a hot moment, or just to breathe.



**6. Avoid Holiday Resentment:** Establish a collaborative holiday coverage schedule by asking for employees' preferences, eliminating the discontent and resentment. **E**

### key messages:

*"Let us know when you are struggling; we can step in for you."*

*"Take a break if you need one, or as soon as possible."*

### additional tips:

- **Breaks:** Ensure that all employees have access to breaks with clear protocols that ensure breaks are covered and communicated. **E**
- **Model Personal Wellness:** To the best of your ability, model the act of valuing your personal wellness by balancing work with time off for your own personal health.
- **Consistent Scheduling:** While flexibility may be an important quality in an employee, consistent work hours – as much as possible – is an important support for mental wellbeing and stress reduction. Aim to schedule your team out at least two weeks in advance, and if flexibility is needed, communicate that with your team as transparently as possible.

## PAIN POINT #4: CULTURE OF FEAR OR DISTRUST

### the issue:

More than half of respondents to an Active Minds employee survey reported a lack of trust from or with management as a stressful part of their job. It's not surprising, then, that in the same survey 87% of employees said hearing gratitude from their managers and receiving recognition for their work would be greatly beneficial to their wellbeing.

Research demonstrates that **gratitude and appreciation** build a workplace where people feel higher levels of loyalty, commitment, and meaning.

### solutions:



**1. Say thank you** often, especially when things are busy or chaotic.



**2. Celebrate team "wins"** and empower your team to celebrate each other with an appreciation wall. **E**



**3. Avoid reprimanding** employees for mistakes in front of other staff, and before reprimanding, assume best intent and decide if a reprimand is necessary.



**4. Ask for ideas** and feedback through direct check-ins and/or an anonymous suggestion box. **E**



**5. Model trust** by actively listening to your employees when a conflict or challenge arises and trusting your employees' needs when they request time off.



**6. Trust your employees** to know what is best for their health, unless you are given reason not to. Most employees do not have medical benefits and cannot afford to pay for a doctor visit. Asking them to prove their illness with a doctor's note is problematic.

### key messages:

"We are a team."  
"We are in this together."  
"You are not alone."

### additional tips: **E**

- **An Ongoing Practice:** A culture of gratitude is more than a one-time thing: once-a-year recognition won't do the trick. Success comes by paying attention and responding as an ongoing practice.
- **One Size Does Not Fit All:** Public recognition may be appreciated by some, while others may prefer a hand-written note or text. It's okay to ask! Find out from your employees how they prefer to be appreciated.
- **Seek Feedback:** Ask your team about the culture of your workspace and how it may be improved to better support a culture of wellbeing.
- **Best Intentions:** Adopt the mentality that each of your employees has best intentions so you start with demonstrating a sense of trust. This can go a long way towards encouraging employees to be trustworthy and establishing a relationship of trust.

# Posters and Templates

*The following posters are intended to be printed and displayed in a prominent place in your establishment. Consider posting in a staff common room such as a break room or bathroom.*

- ⑤ *You can engage a team member to research local resources that may be helpful to your team.*

# WHEN IT'S MORE THAN A BAD DAY

*Helping someone is as simple  
as showing up for them in their  
everyday struggles.*



V

## VALIDATE

Let them know that what they're feeling is okay and that you believe them.

A

## APPRECIATE

Let them know they did the right thing by sharing and that you're here to support them.

R

## REFER

Let them know help is available and refer them to appropriate resources.

*If you're worried that someone may be considering suicide, use the crisis resources below. Stay with your friend until they're safe.*

Call 1-800-273-TALK(8255)

Text "BRAVE" to 741-741

active  
minds  
.....●●●●

YOU DON'T NEED TO BE  
AN EXPERT TO HELP.  
YOU JUST NEED TO BE THERE.

Learn more about V-A-R at [activeminds.org/VAR](https://activeminds.org/VAR)

# 24/7 MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS RESOURCES

*When it comes to your mental health and that of those around you, sometimes professional support is what is needed. If you are concerned that you or someone you know is in danger of hurting themselves or others, it's important to involve other people.*

Crisis Text Line: text **"BRAVE"** to **741-741**

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:  
**1-800-273-TALK (8255)**

Trevor Project (LGBTQ) crisis intervention:  
text **"START"** to **678-678**

National Sexual Assault Hotline:  
**1-800-656-HOPE (4673)**

Local resource (local mental health organization):  
\_\_\_\_\_

Local resource (ex: church, synagogue, community center):  
\_\_\_\_\_

## example statement for employee manual:

Any member of our staff who is struggling for any reason is encouraged to reach out to management and teammates for support. At this establishment, we believe that health and wellness is of the utmost importance in order for our team and business to thrive. Employees who reach out to management will be treated with respect and offered accommodations to the best of our ability. Your mental health matters.

If you are in immediate need of support, text **"BRAVE"** to the Crisis Text Line at **741-741**, or call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at **1-800-273-8255**

