

Modern Belonging Pt. II: Addressing Mental Health Stigma in the Workplace

Your guide to implementing integrative, evidence-based strategies that promote employee well-being, inclusion, and belonging within your organization.



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What Is Modern Belonging?

Modern Belonging is the belief that helping employees feel like they *belong* is crucial for employee well-being, productivity, and retention in the modern workplace.

Belonging is not only a [psychological need](#) but a connection that empowers employees of diverse backgrounds to show up authentically in the workplace, resulting in greater engagement, creativity, and productivity. Employees need to feel like they belong to thrive at work, and there are ways you can help them show up as their best selves day after day.

This is where destigmatization comes into play. Reducing stigma promotes a greater sense of belonging, as individuals feel supported and their experiences are validated. Reducing stigma also helps cultivate inclusive work environments and contributes to an employee's overall sense of belonging.

This guide equips you with evidence-based strategies to build a thoughtful Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) strategy that prioritizes belonging and employee well-being within the workplace.

We'll cover:

- Why the “B” in DEIB matters: The relationship between mental health and belonging
- How to build belonging into your organizational culture and DEIB strategy
- Modern Health resources for you and your employees



Inclusive Terms for Addressing Stigma

Belonging

Feeling psychologically safe, accepted, and welcomed for all aspects of your identity in a group setting. In the context of the workplace, belonging can also relate to “feeling seen for your unique contributions, connected to your coworkers, supported in your daily work and career development, and proud of your organization’s values and purpose.” ([Kennedy, 2021](#))

Bias

Bias occurs when authorities and community members become particularly intolerant of individuals with mental health challenges and differentially enforce conformity norms of acceptable behavior. ([Snowden, 2003](#))

Community

A group of people with diverse characteristics who are linked by social ties, share common perspectives, and engage in joint action in geographic locations or virtual spaces. Examples of communities include cities, workplaces, groups or clubs, and online social networks. (MacQueen et al., 2001)

Culturally Centered Care

The [integration of culture into mental health care delivery](#), guided by four key concepts: 1) Awareness of culture 2) Knowledge of cultural aspects of an individual, group, couple, family, community, or organizational experience 3) Understanding of the difference between culture and pathology and 4) Ability to integrate these concepts into service delivery.

Discrimination

The unfair or prejudicial treatment of people and groups based on characteristics such as mental health, race, gender, age, or sexual orientation.

Diversity

Representation or composition of social identity groups, including race or ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, geography, age, language, disability, mental well-being status, socioeconomic status, religion, and other dimensions.

Equality

Each individual or group of people has the same resources or opportunities and is not unjustifiably discriminated against based on identity, including gender, age, sexual orientation, origin, caste or class, income or property, language, religion, convictions, opinions, health, or disability.

Identity-First Language

It should be noted that some individuals prefer identity-first language over person-first language, and it is important to honor someone’s preference. In identity-first language, the condition comes first. This allows some individuals to claim the condition or mental health issue/experience and choose their identity rather than allowing others to name it and can be viewed as an expression of pride/reclamation of their condition. Again, there are individual preferences, and it is important to honor those ([APA, 2020](#)).

Inclusion

Cultivating an [environment where people feel included](#) by acknowledging, welcoming, and accepting different approaches, styles, perspectives, and experiences.

Marginalized Communities

Communities that experience discrimination and exclusion for different reasons, such as mental or physical disabilities, age, economic status, access to education, or geographic location.

Mental Health Equity

The state in which everyone has a fair and just opportunity to reach their [highest level of mental health and emotional well-being](#). It also involves the ability for all people to access quality, affordable, and culturally centered mental health resources and services.



Inclusive Terms for Addressing Stigma

Person-First Language

In person-first language, the person is emphasized rather than the condition/mental health issues/experience (e.g., a person with depression vs. a depressed person). Person-first language helps with seeing the person first and not by their mental health issues or experiences.

Psychological Safety

An environment in which employees trust that team members will not judge them negatively for offering an opinion, proposing an idea, or expressing their individuality.

Social Identity

A person's affiliation with and feelings of connection to other members of a socio-cultural group (such as age, disability, religion, gender, ethnicity, race, gender expression, socioeconomic status, and tribe). People have multiple social identities, which can overlap. Which social identity is most important to us can change depending on the environment. For example, at church, religious identity may be more important than gender, but at work, age may play a larger role in how a person identifies.

Stigma

Stigma occurs when people are viewed negatively because of a distinguishing characteristic or personal trait that's thought to be, or actually is, a disadvantage (a negative stereotype). Unfortunately, negative attitudes and beliefs about people with mental health challenges are common.

Systemic and Structural Racism

Forms of racism that are pervasively and deeply embedded in systems, laws, or written or unwritten policies, and entrenched practices and beliefs that produce, condone, and perpetuate widespread unfair treatment and oppression of people of color, with adverse health consequences.



Understanding Stigma

What Is Stigma?

Stigma involves negative attitudes or discrimination related to social characteristics or traits of a person. For this guide, we will focus on [stigma associated with mental health](#). While the conversation around mental health is improving and the topic is part of today's zeitgeist, stigma is still common — and is a serious issue. Stigma may lead to delays in treatment and reduce the chances of people receiving appropriate and adequate care.

Types of Stigma

[Researchers have identified](#) three different types of mental health stigma:

- **Public stigma:** Negative or discriminatory attitudes the public has about mental health.
- **Self-stigma:** Negative attitudes, including internalized shame, that people have about their own mental health.
- **Institutional stigma:** Involves government and private organizations intentionally or unintentionally limiting opportunities for people with mental health challenges. Examples include lower funding for research or fewer mental health services relative to other health care.



Sources of Mental Health Stigma

Stigma often arises due to a general lack of understanding or fear of mental health challenges. There are societal and cultural factors that feed into public and institutional stigma, including:

- Negative media portrayal of mental health
- Mental health systems that encourage segregation of people facing serious mental health challenges
- Community rules for socially acceptable behavior
- General intolerance

People who live with mental health challenges will often experience thoughts or behaviors that lead to **self-stigma** and prevent them from seeking treatment, including:

- Fear of rejection
- Feeling uncomfortable around others
- Unwillingness to discuss mental health challenges with others
- Fear of poor reflection on family

Modern Belonging Pro Tip: Reflect on different factors you have seen contribute to stigma in your community or workplace. Have discussions in spaces where people feel a sense of safety and belonging, such as an ERG meeting, about experiences they might have had or witnessed that made a person feel rejected or unwilling to ask for help or seek support.



The Difference Between Stigma and a Lack of Resources

Some barriers to mental health services go beyond stigma and are more closely related to a lack of resources and access to care. For many, the importance of mental health and well-being is not part of their education, and as such, they don't openly discuss these topics.

Adequate access to mental health care is also a big issue and disproportionately affects marginalized communities. Some of the barriers [preventing these populations from receiving](#) care include:

- Systemic racism and discrimination
- Insufficient insurance or financial means
- A lack of [culturally centered care](#)
- A shortage of mental health services in rural communities
- Cultural differences in understanding mental health
- Preferences for healing modalities that the current mental health system may not offer
- Mistrust of mental health care providers

Modern Belonging Pro Tip: Evaluate employee awareness, utilization, and engagement with current wellness benefits through workplace or benefit surveys. If there is low awareness and utilization, especially of mental health benefits, consider where those gaps exist and whether you can include additional services so employees have options to support their mental well-being.



Impacts of Stigma

Stigma affects individuals with mental health challenges and the loved ones who support them, and the consequences can be severe. Stigma can fuel fear, anger, and intolerance toward people and mental health services. Harmful effects of stigma include:

- Reluctance to seek treatment or remain in treatment
- Delayed treatment
- Social isolation
- Lowered psychological well-being
- Strained relationships with friends and family
- Harassment, violence, or bullying
- Reduced quality of life
- Shame and self-doubt
- Difficulties in the workplace

At its core, belonging cannot exist without psychological safety or feeling confident that questions, ideas, and self-expression won't be judged negatively by a group. Promoting greater awareness and understanding of mental health and addressing stigma associated with seeking mental health support and care can foster a greater sense of psychological safety for employees.

Modern Belonging Pro Tip: Consider how stigma may negatively impact employee well-being, work performance, and experience in the workplace. Evaluate how you have seen stigma hinder employees from learning more about mental health resources available to them or seeking support. Think about how you can create greater awareness and encourage employees to seek resources to support their mental well-being journey. Provide information to employees about their mental wellness benefits.



Stigma in the Workplace

Belonging links DEIB and mental health, but stigma can be a barrier

Many organizations have found innovative ways to prioritize employee mental health and are increasingly offering support through mental well-being benefits. However, mental health stigma continues to be a major challenge in the workplace, and people still worry about the potential negative ramifications of seeking mental health services.

Reducing mental health stigma in the workplace can provide a sense of belonging for employees, which allows them to be more engaged in their work, feel more loyalty to their organization, and remain at their jobs. Having a sense of belonging is shown to [protect individuals against the effects of self-stigma](#), especially within marginalized communities.

While diversity in representation is important within teams or leadership, fostering belonging within workplaces can increase the impact on employee well-being and safety. According to Mind Share Partners' [2021 Mental Health at Work Report](#), employees who felt supported by their employer with their mental health were 2.5 times more likely to intend to stay at their company for more than two years and 5.6 times more likely to trust their company and its leaders.





How to Address Stigma to Foster Belonging

Have mental health conversations in the workplace

Normalizing conversations around mental health in your workplace can help reduce stigma and bolster employee belonging. These conversations can occur across various settings within your workplace (e.g., ERGs, team meetings, Slack channels, one-on-ones, informal conversations) and should consider the ways factors like culture, gender, and socioeconomic status can impact mental health.

Showcase mental health benefits

You can also take steps to ensure employees are well aware of mental health resources at your organization:

- Promote specific mental health benefits available to employees (e.g., EAPs, mental health platforms, wellness stipends).
- Showcase mental health benefits as often as physical health benefits to position them as table stakes within your benefits suite.
- Provide concrete instructions to help employees access mental health benefits.
- Highlight culturally centered care and services that support each individual's unique mental health journey.

Integrate wellness into workplace culture and norms

You might consider formal and informal strategies to infuse mental well-being into your culture. Formal strategies might include company-wide mental health days, mental health week or month campaigns, or other avenues in which mental health is discussed or highlighted in a non-stigmatizing and inclusive way. Other informal tactics may not directly focus on mental health but can still have an indirect impact on reducing stigma associated with mental health. These can include promoting well-being by encouraging employees to take more breaks throughout their day, reminding employees to use their PTO if applicable, focusing on self-care and balance, or setting boundaries and recognizing those individuals who do.





Promote a culture of reflection and learning in the workplace

Stigma often stems from negative assumptions that people have, so employees should be encouraged to reflect on their biases, assumptions, and judgments. Expose employees to mental health topics and inclusive language practices — and focus on facts, further education, and debunking myths. If possible, have a company leader share their own mental health journey and ways they cope with professional goals and other life stressors. Employees will be more inclined to talk about mental health and utilize their mental health benefits when they know their organization is a safe space to do so.

Instill empathy and compassion in the workplace

A great way to foster psychological safety in the workplace is to instill in your employees empathy and compassion. Employees may also be hesitant to talk about mental health at work or with colleagues for fear of saying something wrong. Fostering a culture of empathy and understanding may alleviate some fears of saying the wrong thing, as the intention is to create space for conversation, understanding, compassion, and growth. Through these conversations, we can all continue learning, as mental health is a fluid topic. Consider offering regular empathy and compassion trainings.

Modern Belonging Pro Tip: Determine specific company strengths and resources that may assist in reducing stigma. Consider existing or potential company initiatives that may address stigma. Try featuring a book that covers a mental health topic as part of your company's book club or creating physical or virtual community spaces to help cultivate [psychological safety](#).



Resources Available to You and Your Employees Today



Community Circles

Circles are live and on-demand group sessions led by Modern Health therapists and coaches. Your employees will walk away from each session with skills to navigate challenges that may impact them at work, at home, or in their relationships. The most popular Circles are available on-demand in multiple languages.

We invite you to share Modern Health's Circles series with your organization as a resource to help employees of all identities and backgrounds, including allies, find belonging and reduce stigma around mental health.

We also continue to offer our **foundational Circles** on topics like Emotional Resilience, Sleep, and Stress & Burnout.

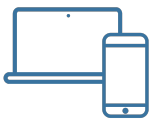
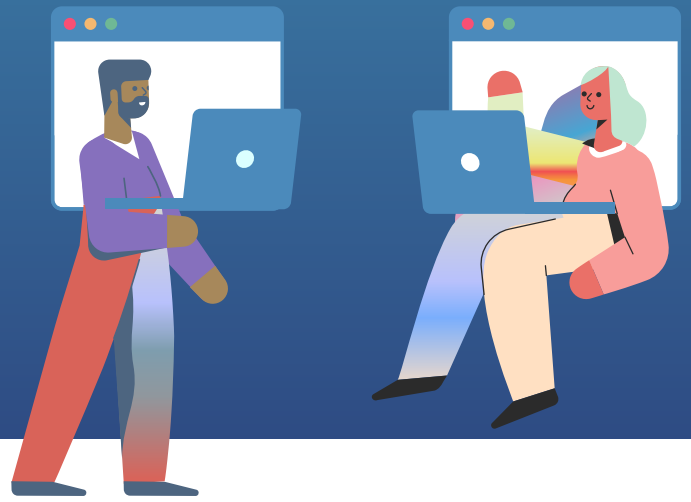


One-On-One Care

Modern Health can match your employees with a certified coach or therapist trained in evidence-based methods to support their unique needs. You can include race/ethnicity, language, gender, sexual orientation, or other characteristics in your provider search to ensure the best possible fit for your needs and preferences.

All our providers have access to clinical training in cultural humility and use proven techniques to provide culturally centered and thoughtful care. Getting started is quick and easy. [Get matched with a provider today!](#)





Self-Guided Digital Resources

With Modern Health, your employees have access to digital resources on-demand 24/7 with self-serve care options they can engage with at their own pace. These resources include digital programs, guided meditations, and courses that help employees explore their social identity and reduce mental health stigma. Some examples include our:

[Talking About Social Identity in Relationships course](#)

[Connecting to Others meditation](#)

[Take Action: Sharing Kindness program](#)

[Increase Belonging, Understand Your Social Identity Daily Pause](#)

