MindWise
INNOVATIONS

How Can You Help Your LGBTQ+ Employees Flourish

Addressing the behavioral health needs of your workforce is not a one-size-fits-all solution. Our own personal histories are part of our overall well-being; thus, mental health and substance use initiatives often must take individuals' past experiences into account.

One group where these variegated experiences factor heavily into behavioral health is the LGBTQ+ community. Here are some stark statistics:

LESBIAN, GAY, & BISEXUAL (LGB) INDIVIDUALS ARE

2x MORE LIKELY

as straight adults to experience a mental health condition.

- National Alliance on Mental Health

TRANSGENDER INDIVIDUALS ARE

4x MORE LIKELY

as their cisgender counterparts to experience a mental health condition.

- National Alliance on Mental Health

This higher prevalence of behavioral health issues among LGBTQ+ adults means higher likelihood of absenteeism, presenteeism, turnover, and increased healthcare expenses in the workplace.

LGBTQ+ Risk Factors to Know

Before we look at actions businesses can take to promote positive mental health and well-being for LGBTQ+ identifying employees, it's useful to understand some of the factors that contribute to the disparity in mental health.

"Coming Out"/Rejection
The near-universal experience for LGBTQ+ individuals of sharing their sexual orientation and/or gender identity with others can be fraught with anxious uncertainty in the best of circumstances. In other situations, it can be a significant source of rejection and trauma with negative impacts on behavioral health and well-being.

Trauma Due to Forms of Identity-Based Shaming or Bullying
57% of LGBTQ+ Americans report not only experiencing slurs against them but also harassment or threats, while 51% report personal experience of violence because of their sexuality or gender identity. While not everyone who experiences a traumatic event will develop a behavioral health condition, it can increase risk of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and other serious mental health problems.

Substance Use
Given that mental health conditions can contribute to substance use disorders, and substance use disorders (and substance use) can contribute to the development of other mental health conditions, it's significant that "LGB adults are nearly twice as likely as heterosexual adults to experience a substance use disorder" and transgender individuals are almost four times as likely as cisgender individuals.

Homelessness
It's estimated that LGBTQ+ "youth and young adults have a 120% higher risk of experiencing homelessness — often the result of family rejection or discrimination based on gender identity or sexual orientation." Like substance use, homelessness has a two-way relationship with behavioral health: homelessness can exacerbate mental illness and mental illness can increase the risk of experiencing homelessness.

Inadequate Behavioral Healthcare
Each "letter" of the LGBTQ+ community has its own unique challenges and experience of mental health and substance use. When the needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or otherwise marginalized individuals are taken into account, they can receive compassionate, effective treatment. But often, culturally competent providers are difficult to find and LGBTQ+ individuals do not feel safe sharing information about their sexuality or gender identity.

9 Workplace Strategies to Show Your LGBTQ+ Support

Fortunately, the "antidote" to much of the LGBTQ+ community's particular risk factors for behavioral health issues is to openly and visibly support LGBTQ+ people and issues, advocate for inclusive policies and practices, and speak out against acts of discrimination.

As an employer, here are nine strategies your business can adopt to show your support for your LGBTQ+ employees in particular and LGBTQ+ rights in general.

1 Establish a diversity and inclusion policy that spells out your organization's commitment to providing a safe and empowering environment for all employees.

If such a policy is already in place, promote it to your workforce and demonstrate your adherence to it. (The internet is littered with guides and templates, but a good place to start is this strategy piece from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.)

2 Educate your workforce on microaggressions.

Defined as "discreet, often unintentional discriminatory actions or behaviors directed towards marginalized groups," microaggressions can be made with the best of intentions yet still contribute to a culture of disrespect or far worse.

Rather than rely on your LGBTQ+ employees either to stomach these microaggressive acts or stand up to each and every one of them, teach your workforce about how to recognize and call out microaggressions.

3 Ensure you're offering equitable benefits for LGBTQ+ employees and families.

The Human Rights Campaign Foundation offers this resource guide on employee benefits and policies.

4 **Train your employees - particularly managers and team leaders - on inclusive language.**

5 **Establish an employee resource group (ERG) for LGBTQ+ employees.**

The Human Rights Campaign has put together an online guide for establishing an ERG. It begins with how to get organization support for doing so – if your leadership team is already championing this, you're well on your way.

6 **Partner with experts (or hire one) to run workshops to educate your employees.**

However great your organization's diversity and inclusion policy is, your employees need more than a document to learn how to be inclusive. More than a third of non-LGBTQ+ Americans said in 2018 they'd be uncomfortable seeing a same-sex couple holding hands (more than a quarter said they'd be uncomfortable seeing an LGBT co-worker's wedding photo) – there's lots of room for growth.

7 **Roll out an inclusive Pronoun Policy.**

Such a policy can serve both to contribute to a respectful, welcoming work environment and to raise awareness of and educate about the importance of using inclusive language. Learn more here.

8 **Visibly support LGBTQ+ events such as Pride and the Transgender Day of Visibility.**

Demonstrate to your employees, customers/clients, and community that your organization's support of diversity and inclusion is more than just words. Fly rainbow flags at your office locations, sponsor your LGBTQ+ ERG's participation in Pride, publicize your commitment to LGBTQ+ equality.

9 **Listen to your LGBTQ+ employees.**

Ensure that LGBTQ+ employees in your workforce have a forum in which their voices can be heard. Allow their experience to be part of your diversity and inclusion efforts.