

STARTING CONVERSATIONS ABOUT PRESENTEEISM

Supervisors and managers are often the first to spot signs of presenteeism — when employees are present on the job but not productive — among team members. It can be difficult though to recognize when an employee is struggling with a medical condition versus being disengaged due to burnout. Consider these approaches to better understand what may be causing presenteeism while also expressing support for the well-being of your employees and encouraging utilization of available resources.



MANAGER TIP

TIP #1

Be Alert for Signs of Difficulty

CONSIDERATIONS

- Health problems, including behavioral health conditions, often lead to a change in a person's appearance, behavior, or performance.
- Don't immediately assume a person is struggling with a medical issue, but don't ignore the possibility.
- The line between burnout and other health issues is often difficult to identify, so treat every concern as if it might reflect either possibility.
- If an employee discloses an issue in a public forum, follow up to schedule a private conversation and prepare in advance for the meeting.

SAMPLE APPROACHES & CONVERSATION STARTERS

- Acknowledge workplace challenges openly:
"We're under more stress than ever, and I know some people may be struggling."
- Be open to statements about medical issues, including statements about pain:
"To be our best selves at home and work, it's essential to use all our benefits to stay healthy — wellness services, employee assistance program resources, health insurance, and so on."
- Be alert for expressions of burnout and disengagement:
"It's also important to catch burnout before it impacts our performance. Please let me know if you're starting to feel overwhelmed or discouraged."
- Use (and don't avoid) specific terms associated with behavioral health conditions:
"More people than ever are dealing with anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, alcoholism, and addiction."

MANAGER TIP

CONSIDERATIONS

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TIP #2

Start the Conversation

- Employees want their employers to support their well-being, including their mental health.
- Employees, especially younger workers, expect their employers to be open about work-life balance, burnout, and health issues, but they may wait for their manager to raise the topic.

- Be specific when sharing your observations privately:
"I noticed you've been late to work three times this week. What can I do to help?"
"I heard you complaining about back pain in the break room. How can I help?"
"You seemed frustrated during the team meeting earlier, and I'm wondering if everything is ok and how I may be able to help."
- Listen empathically to your employee's response — being curious without becoming defensive. For example, it can be difficult to receive negative feedback, especially if an employee is blaming you for issues a team or company is facing. It is okay to take time to absorb and review feedback before responding. Transparent and honest communication is essential to create the psychological safety needed for effective teamwork.

TIP #3

Address Fear and Stigma

- Fear and stigma are still major reasons employees hide their difficulties.
- Employees with health conditions, including chronic conditions and behavioral health diagnoses, may be unaware of or misinformed about their protections under the law, particularly with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).
- Struggling employees may fear punishment for disclosing when they're feeling burned out, disengaged, or resentful.

- Reassure employees that they will not be fired or retaliated against for disclosing what's going on:
"It's hard enough dealing with these issues without worrying about the impact they might have on your job, but remember that we don't discriminate on the basis of any medical condition, including mental health or substance use conditions."
"I know it's difficult to express concerns directly, especially when you might be feeling negatively about me or the company, but the only way to solve problems is to talk about them openly and honestly."
- Reassure and help educate employees who disclose a health condition:
"I'm glad you feel safe sharing this information with me, and I want you to know that I won't treat you any differently because of it. Along with resources the company offers, you may have specific protections under federal law. You can follow up with the HR department directly for more information, or I'd be happy to contact them with you if you prefer."
- Thank workers who talk about burnout rather than just acting out or quitting:
"I'm glad you told me how you're feeling. I know it's difficult to share when we're feeling burned out. You're an important member of the team, and I'm committed to doing what I can to help you feel valued and productive."

MANAGER TIP

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TIP #4

Know Your Resources

- Employees are often not sure who to talk with about their concerns, and they don't always know what resources are available to them.
- If you have an employee assistance program (EAP), be prepared to share information about it with employees.
- If the person is in crisis, you might offer to contact the EAP or insurance company along with them.
- If your company offers disability insurance, ergonomic assistance, or ADA compliance services, it's helpful to remind them about any stay-at-work services available and explain how to access them.

- Make sure employees know where to find available resources or how to access benefits:

"Remember that we provide benefits to help employees with these types of issues, and we want employees to use them."

"Our disability insurance provider/ergonomics department/ADA compliance service provider can provide assistance to help you do your best work by finding reasonable accommodations and/or ergonomic equipment that can minimize the impact of health conditions on your job."

- If they're in crisis, it's best to help them develop a specific plan for next steps if they're comfortable doing so:

"The EAP is a good place to start, or you can also contact your health insurance company for referrals to an appropriate professional. If you'd like, I'd be happy to reach out to the EAP with you or call your health insurance provider to request a referral."

- If they don't disclose an issue, you can still mention resources that may be helpful:

"I'd be happy to review the information on our EAP, health insurance, and other benefits with you or to help you contact HR to discuss what's available to best assist you."

TIP #5

Follow Up

- If you met with someone individually, check in with them after a few days to see how they are doing.
- Following up is particularly important for employees who are becoming disengaged or burned out; feeling like no one cares or values their contributions is a main driver of these issues.

- Be clear you are checking because you care and want to help. They don't have to disclose anything about their health, like whether they followed up with treatment, unless they want to:

"I've been thinking about you since we talked the other day, and I wanted to check in to see if there's anything else I can do to help."