How to Approach Workforce Mental Health From a Multicultural Mindset

WHY NOW IS THE TIME TO INVEST IN LINGUISTICALLY AND CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE CARE

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If you’re reading this, chances are you already know and appreciate the organizational advantages of employing a multicultural workforce. And, you’re not alone. Study after study confirms that diverse teams drive greater innovation and growth.

In *Diversity wins*, the third report in a recent McKinsey series, the business imperative for employing a multicultural workforce is clear: ethnically and culturally diverse teams outperform their homogenous counterparts by an incredible 36 percent. But, the report goes on to caution employers that hiring diverse talent is only part of the equation.

You can open your doors to diversity, but if you don’t make the effort to welcome people in and make them feel like they belong, don’t expect them to stay long.

Only employers who commit to cultivating an inclusive employee experience will be able to attract and retain diverse talent. In addition to providing equitable leadership opportunities and competitive compensation, employers must also invest in culturally sensitive benefit plans that meet the unique needs of a diverse employee population—particularly when it comes to mental health support.

In the pages that follow, we’ll explore:

• Some of the barriers to accessible, equitable, and inclusive mental healthcare
• What it means to provide care that’s linguistically appropriate and culturally responsive
• How to improve outcomes for multicultural groups while fostering a work environment that delivers meaningfully on your Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) promise
Understanding the barriers to accessible, equitable, and inclusive mental healthcare

The social and cultural factors that help to shape mental health access and outcomes for diverse populations are numerous. They include physical health, education, income, social context, and language—to name but a few. The sum of these factors influence an individual’s perception and understanding of mental health, and may ultimately determine whether or not they are able to get the help they need.

Let’s explore some of those key determinants of mental health and how they uniquely impact multicultural employees.

1 Physical health and access to quality healthcare

Physical health and mental health are inextricably linked. In fact, the National Institute of Mental Health reports people with chronic illnesses are more likely to have or develop a mental health condition. Depression is one of the most common complications of chronic disease. That’s due in part to the fact that a diagnosis with persistent or long-lasting effects typically requires treatment of some kind, which may cause discomfort, strain finances, and limit a person’s daily activities. Despair and anxiety are a natural response.

Unfortunately, physical illnesses such as diabetes, asthma, and heart disease are more prevalent in people of color. This not only puts these communities at a higher risk for contracting other serious illnesses—including COVID-19—but it also makes them more susceptible to experiencing mental health issues as well.

Furthermore, these populations have historically had limited access to medical care, the cost of which has been (and continues to be) prohibitively expensive. Nearly 16 percent of Black Americans and 21 percent of Hispanic Americans reported being unable to see a doctor in 2019 due to cost. And it’s not just money that’s keeping these communities from getting the care they need.

Research conducted by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation in 2017 revealed that significant percentages of Americans avoided medical care for fear of being discriminated against or treated poorly. Some 32 percent of Black Americans, 20 percent of Hispanic Americans, 23 percent of Native Americans, and 13 percent of Asian Americans reported experiencing racial discrimination when visiting a doctor or health clinic.

DID YOU KNOW?
Only 34% of hispanics/latinx people receive treatment for mental health issues each year compared to the U.S. Average of 45%.4
The financial burdens on multicultural families are often different. For example, Black, Hispanic, and Asian employees are more likely to be providing financial support to extended families. They are also more likely to be providing unpaid care to one or more family members in their homes. And, they’re more likely to have experienced income loss due to the pandemic. Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) reports that 59 percent of Hispanic adults and 51 percent of Black adults said their household lost a job as a result of COVID-19 (compared to 39 percent of White adults).

The accumulation of wealth for these communities is also different. According to the Center for American Progress (CAP), the average White family possesses ten times the wealth of the average Black family and seven times that of the average Latinx family.

It should be no surprise then that a significant percentage of these communities also have little or no access to cash in a crisis. CAP reports that nearly 30 percent of Black college-educated households, and 20 percent of Latinx college-educated households, would not be able to afford to pay all of their bills after a $400 emergency expense.

Unfortunately, the relationship between financial and mental health is often cyclical. Economic insecurity can lead to poor mental health, and poor mental health can further strain finances. Studies show that people who carry debt experience higher rates of depression and anxiety than those who live debt-free.

Employers can help. Today, many organizations are adding student loan repayment assistance and tuition reimbursement programs to their benefit offerings. It’s worth noting here that student debt is yet another area in which marginalized communities shoulder a disproportionately higher share of the burden. According to a study conducted by Brandeis, Black college graduates owe an average of $25,000 more in student loans than White college graduates. Furthermore, some 20 years after taking out student loans, the median Black borrower still owes 95 percent of their debt. Meanwhile, the median white borrower has paid off 94 percent of theirs.

Providing loan repayment assistance is a meaningful and tangible equity initiative that can help employees of color shed the crushing burden of student debt that hinders wealth accumulation and perpetuates the racial wealth gap.

DID YOU KNOW?
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On a related note, many employers are also changing how they administer their 401(k) plans to help drive greater participation among diverse populations. Employees of color are less likely to participate in their company 401(k) plans, and when they do contribute, they save at much lower rates than their white counterparts.

Switching to automatic enrollment is one proven way employers can help to close the gap and reduce disparities in savings based on race and ethnicity. According to a recent study by Vanguard, 401(k) participation rates among new hires triple to a whopping 91 percent when people get enrolled automatically.

Finally, some employers are also factoring financial literacy programs into their employee benefit offerings. These programs teach workers valuable money skills including effective strategies for paying off debt, managing credit, budgeting for everyday expenses, and saving for future goals.
Community, Safety, and Social Context

Community and social connections are vital to creating a sense of psychological safety and belonging, but cumulative exposure to racial bias, discrimination, and xenophobia chip away at the very foundation of these support systems. And the stacked traumas of the last year-and-a-half have only exacerbated feelings of separation and anxiety for marginalized communities.

The pandemic brought with it heightened feelings of isolation as many people were forced to shelter at home. It also brought grief to communities of color who experienced disproportionately higher death rates. In addition to losing family and friends to COVID-19, these communities also lost trusted faith leaders, role models, guides, and advocates.

This, coupled with firsthand and vicarious exposure to repeated episodes of police brutality, ICE raids, and immigration bans, has had a devastating effect on the mental health and well-being of diverse populations.

Employers can help by acknowledging that employees from marginalized communities may need to occasionally “step away” from it all. Encourage your workforce to practice self-care and lead the way by offering employees the time and space to decompress.

Other ways employers can foster a culture of belonging include:

- Supporting the creation of employee resource groups (ERGs) and other psychologically safe spaces for employees to interact with cultural peers and build their networks
- Recognizing the importance of having role models in positions of leadership who reflect the diversity of your workforce
- Moving beyond performative allyship to commit tangible support to causes that impact diverse communities

Culture, heritage, and language

A person’s cultural heritage and upbringing plays a critical role in how they perceive mental health, and studies show that mental health stigma is notably higher among diverse populations. Often, guilt or shame surrounding religious/cultural expectations or the general fear of being labeled as “ill” or “incompetent” prevent people from seeking support. Traditional gender roles, pressure to succeed, and cultural norms around disclosure/trusting others also contribute to mental health perceptions.

Finally, language may pose one of the most formidable barriers to care. For example, there are more than 41 million native Spanish speakers in the United States, yet only 8,000 U.S. psychologists can provide services in Spanish. This shortage of providers makes it challenging to get an appointment and leads many to avoid care altogether. For the relatively small percentage of Spanish speakers who do decide to seek care from an English-speaking therapist, the difference in language can make communicating extremely difficult or even impossible.

DID YOU KNOW?
Immigrant communities are at a greater risk of PTSD, depression, and stress associated with acculturation.

DID YOU KNOW?
Therapy is shown to be TWICE as effective in one’s native language.
Investing in care that’s linguistically appropriate and culturally responsive

If you’ve ever struggled to find the right words to accurately express your feelings, you know how frustrating it can be when you’re unable to get your point across. Now, imagine that you’re trying to share deeply personal details with a mental health professional who isn’t fluent in your native language and knows nothing about your culture. This is currently the reality for too many non-native English-speakers seeking support, and it’s preventing them from getting the help they need.

Unfortunately, while therapy is proven to be twice as effective in one’s native language, only 5.5 percent of providers in the U.S. are able to deliver services in Spanish. At Ginger, we’re working to change that.

Soon, Ginger’s entire on-demand mental health offering will be available in Spanish. This new offering will give members of the Latinx community easy access to coaches, psychiatrists, and therapists who not only provide care in a member’s native language but understand their culture and customs as well.

WHAT CULTURALLY COMPETENT CARE LOOKS LIKE

Culturally competent care identifies, respects, and understands culture and how it impacts one’s mental healthcare journey. A culturally competent provider:

- Values the role of culture
- Addresses cultural differences
- Seeks advanced knowledge of cultures
- Adapts skills and interventions to serve the unique needs of individuals from particular cultures

Culturally competent care provides a safe and productive space to articulate trauma, helps diverse communities feel a stronger level of trust when seeking help, and contributes to building a higher level of confidence in the process.

CALLING OUT LANGUAGE BIAS IN THE WORKPLACE

As employers consider ways to make their organizations more inclusive, it’s also important to understand and acknowledge the role language bias—both conscious and unconscious—may play in shaping workplace perceptions.
Improving access, care, and outcomes for diverse employee populations

In this paper, we’ve established that mental health issues disproportionately impact marginalized and under-resourced groups. Ginger is dedicated to leveling the playing field and reducing the barriers to care for underrepresented populations and those experiencing the intersectionality of identity.

At Ginger, we hire quality care providers who reflect the diversity of backgrounds, cultural groups, and specialties of the member communities we serve. We also support the continued growth and development of our care team through multi-cultural competency training on topics relating to LGBTQ+, racial trauma, veterans, traditionally underserved communities, economically disadvantaged groups, and more.

By providing care that takes into account one’s background, beliefs, practices, and cultural identity, we hope to increase access, improve outcomes, and realize a future where mental health is never an obstacle.

NEXT STEPS

Even if your organization is not ready right now to invest financially in more inclusive healthcare benefits, you can still commit time and resources to creating a more supportive and psychologically safe culture. A good first step is to simply start the conversation. Discuss the link between physical and mental health. Talk about the impact of COVID-19 on marginalized communities. Invite employees to share their unique perspectives.

By leading with compassion, respect, and trust, employers can begin to chip away at unconscious bias, microaggressions, and other stressors that impact workplace mental health—and to build a more inclusive, welcoming, and productive environment for everyone.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Ginger’s chief people officer Désirée Pascual recently hosted *Lost in Translation*, a live webcast featuring our senior manager of coaching Erika Austin, Ph.D. and Enrique Rubio, founder of Hacking HR. In this one-hour session, the panel explores the value of linguistically and culturally appropriate care and the role technology can play in overcoming disparities. You are welcome to view the recorded session here at your convenience.

You’ll find additional webinars, reports, and case studies on how to build a more inclusive workplace environment at ginger.com/resources.
Ginger offers on-demand, confidential emotional support through live text-based coaching, video-based therapy and psychiatry, and self-care in-app resources—all from the privacy of your smartphone.