



Q&A: Improving mental health in the workplace from a UN system-wide perspective

Safe and healthy working environments are essential to mental well-being. This is why the [United Nations System Mental Health and Well-being Strategy for 2024 and beyond](#) (hereafter “Strategy”) provides to all UN entities a road map for creating an inclusive, sustainable work environment where mental health and well-being are embedded in the organizational culture and systems.

To find out more about the Strategy and how it is put into practice across the UN, we spoke to Regan Shercliffe, Global Lead for the implementation of the UN Mental Health Strategy.

Q: This might seem obvious but worth repeating: Why is mental health in the workplace important?

A: Just as the statement “safe and healthy working environments can act as a protective factor for mental health” is true, the opposite is also true.

Work conditions can have a huge impact on how we feel, how we act, and how we engage with others, at work and in our lives outside work.

Poor working conditions such as stigma, discrimination and inequality, excessive workloads, low job control and job insecurity can affect our mental health, participation or productivity at work and overall quality of life.

One thing that I have learnt over my 15 years of experience as a UN staff counsellor is this: mental health does not exist in isolation. And, often, mental health issues are reactions to circumstances.

I have seen time and time again how problems stemmed from the systems we work in or from our relationships. These issues arise regardless of the location, whether one is in a country office, amid a humanitarian emergency or at the headquarters of the organization.

We also know that UN personnel’s mental health has been declining over the past decade. We know this as sick leaves and disability claims linked to mental health have been on the rise.

And UN personnel will be facing many challenges in the foreseeable future.

All this is to say that more needs to be done to improve and promote mental health in the workplace.

And while everyone has a role to play in creating a safe and healthy work environment that is good for our mental health, it is also crucial to address poor mental health as part of broader organizational processes.

Q: How is the UN looking at mental health in the workplace from a system-wide perspective?



A: The Strategy, which builds on work spanning a decade, is the main mechanism that we have for identifying and addressing mental health-related challenges arising from internal processes and policies at a system-wide level.

In fact, a key aspect of the Strategy's implementation involves identifying best practices in different areas of mental health (from psychosocial risk to insurance for mental health coverage) at one or several UN entities and then creating tools and processes so these practices can be scaled up across the UN.

Q: How is the Strategy “brought” to all UN entities? And how are UN entities putting the Strategy in practice?

The Strategy is brought to each UN entity by their representative or representatives who are part of the Strategy's Implementation Board. Each UN entity has a member or several members on the Board whose role is to oversee and support the roll-out of the Strategy.

A small team based in the Mental Health Hub (established in 2024) in Bonn, Germany is guiding the roll-out of the Strategy across the UN. I.

The roll-out of the Strategy is possible thanks to inter-agency efforts. For example, there are six working groups in 2025, each focused on a specific priority area of mental health and designed to support UN entities better meet the requirements of the Strategy's Scorecard Indicators, which are related to promoting and supporting mental health and well-being in the workplace.

Each group has experts in mental health/HR/policy etc from a range of UN entities and these experts are also part of the Implementation Board.

Another important aspect is how UN entities assess the work they have done to implement the Strategy. To help them do that, the Strategy comes with a Scorecard – a rating system that allows UN entities to assess and report on their progress against 12 Scorecard Indicators. The Strategy Team has guided UN entities on how to use the Scorecard, will analyse the Scorecard results and based on these, will propose recommendations to help accelerate organizations' efforts to roll out the Strategy.

Q: What are some examples of internal processes or policies that need addressing and some examples of best practices that should be scaled up?

A: When it comes to internal processes, an obvious one is the need to better equip staff. This can involve a range of things - from being clear about where and how staff can access mental health-related resources and services to educating staff to better recognise signs of poor mental health or providing managers with training on how to better manage people.

Regarding examples of best practices, the working groups have identified best practices in psychosocial risk management, mental health literacy training and quality psychosocial support. For instance:

- A family support program currently run by the World Food Programme (WFP) has been recognized as excellent in terms of supporting families and building communities. This program is available to all UN agencies via cost sharing arrangements.



- The Mental Health Literacy Working Group put forward materials that have proved effective in building UN staff's knowledge, understanding and skills to promote mental health and well-being in the workplace and reduce the impact of mental health conditions. This helped the Group create a presentation package - "Introduction to Mental Health Literacy" – that can be used by all UN entities and might be especially useful to smaller agencies or agencies with fewer resources or less focus, so far, on introducing or reinforcing mental health literacy. The presentation can also help UN entities better meet the requirements of the Strategy's Indicator 5: mental health literacy, which focuses on including mental health literacy training in onboarding learning programmes and making such training available to UN personnel in learning programmes.
- We also want to quickly scale up and make sophisticated psychosocial risk programs available to every UN entity, using existing networks like the Human Resource Network or the High-Level Committee on Management (HLCM).

Q: What should we expect in the medium and long term?

A: In the medium term, we aim to address mental health stigma through a human rights approach rather than traditional stigma reduction methods, which have had mixed results. A Stigma Reduction Working has been created to carry out this work, and we expect to apply some of the group's recommendations during the 2025 World Mental Health Day (10 October).

For the long term, the goal is to embed mental health considerations at the highest levels of UN management. By integrating mental health and well-being into corporate frameworks and enterprise risk management models, we aim to create a comprehensive approach that not only supports staff well-being but also improves organizational effectiveness.

Q: What is the biggest challenge and opportunity when it comes to getting buy-in for and putting into practice the Strategy?

A: Efforts to improve mental health in the workplace are not new. This is why we are not looking to reinvent the wheel; we are building on existing good work. The challenge is to scale up this work and at speed. That said, the Strategy was launched at the end of 2023, and the progress so far is tangible.

As for the opportunity, this is straightforward. We know that by improving systems, we improve mental health. This translates into higher staff engagement, productivity and morale. Ultimately, this work helps us deliver on our mandate—this needs to be understood at the highest levels of our organization.

Q: What can we all do to promote the ethos and objectives of the Strategy?

This is a great question as it is important to remember that everyone has a role to play in creating a working environment that is conducive to good mental health.

And to do that, we suggest starting with looking after yourself, taking up training and awareness raising activities, and supporting your colleagues.

The UN Healthy Workforce website has a range of resources on how to recognise signs of poor mental health and tips on what to do if you or someone in your team needs support. Whether



you're a staff member or a manager, the site has something for you. I would encourage everyone to check it out.

Find out more:

- [Read the United Nations System Mental Health and Well-being Strategy for 2024 and beyond](#)
- [Find resources to support the implementation of the Strategy](#)
- [Find resources on self-care and on how to get help](#)