

Episode 166: It's Time to Prioritize Mental Health in the Workplace (Transcript)

[00:00:00] Speaker A: Into the fold is part of the Texas podcast Network, the conversations changing the world brought to you by the University of Texas at Austin. The opinions expressed in this podcast represent the views of the hosts and guests and not of the University of Texas at Austin. Hi, this is Ike Evans of the Hogg foundation for Mental Health, and you are listening to into the fold, the mental health podcast. Today we are delighted to bring you episode 166. It's time to prioritize mental health in the workplace.

[00:00:32] Speaker B: I think the better that we are able to recognize our own positionality within this experience. Not only do we humanize ourselves, but we create the space to help others humanize themselves. Because once we start to understand our experience, we could create room and model for other people to show up in their experience.

[00:00:52] Speaker A: Here at the Hogg foundation, there is a phrase that we have grown quite fond of, and that is to transform the places where people live, learn, work, play, and pray.

It is a succinct way of characterizing our mission and vision as an organization. So for today's episode, we are going to be focusing on the places where people work in observance of World Mental Health Day and its theme it's time to prioritize mental health in the workplace. We have brought back an old friend and a previous guest, Doctor Ryan Sutton, an associate professor in the department of education psychology at the University of Texas at Austin and a former postdoctoral fellow for the Hogg foundation.

We discuss how we can transform workplaces into spaces that support mental health and well being. It is easy to take for granted just how the work that we do, the conditions under which we work, the places where we work, the people with whom we work, can impact our mental health. But it bears repeating, scratch the surface of just about any mental health challenge that a person might have, and work in some form or fashion, will always be implicated, whether as part of the problem, perhaps holding a key to the solution, an exacerbating factor, or just one more example of a person's failing to thrive. And so, in observance of World Mental Health day and its theme of it's time we prioritize mental health in the workplace, we have brought back a former guest and an old friend, Doctor Ryan Sutton.

He is an assistant professor in the department of education psychology at the University of Texas at Austin, as well as a former postdoctoral fellow for the Hogg foundation. We are discussing mental health in the workplace and how workplaces can be transformed into spaces that are conducive to mental health and well being. And so I take you now to my conversation with Ryan.

[00:03:11] Speaker C: So Ryan, welcome back, man.

[00:03:13] Speaker A: It's good to have you back on the podcast. How have you been?

[00:03:16] Speaker B: I've been great. Thank you for having me back on.

[00:03:18] Speaker A: The so we are hearing a lot.

[00:03:21] Speaker C: More these days about workplace mental health, employee wellbeing programs, et cetera.

So in your mind, what has spurred the attention to mental health in the workplace?

[00:03:35] Speaker B: I would address it to two main factors. I think the first one is that as a field, we've been doing a pretty good job and a strong increase into increasing attention. Efforts to

increase mental health literacy within schools, within communities, within households, within neighborhoods, ultimately to destigmatize mental health. And this ultimately leads people to have the ability to speak about their experiences, speak about mental health, their own experiences with mental health in a way that makes it a little bit more open. And when we add on to that, we have a younger generation that has grown up around these discussions. They're less afraid to talk about mental health, talk about their own experiences, and not only are they less afraid, they're seeking places and spaces to do so. And they're walking into the workforce and this is a priority for them. They're looking at their career placement based on where do they feel happy and fulfilled, and their needs are being met in ways that haven't been part of the conversation previously. But the second thing I would say to that is coming off of the Covid-19 pandemic spurred a lot of this discussion. We see the merging of the workplace with the home life in ways that we've never seen before. And where historically workplaces might have this philosophy of check it at the door, you've come here to work that was out the window. And with all the adjustments and modifications that had to be made on behalf of the organization, but also on behalf of the people, we had to, we end up coming face to face with mental health in the workplace right when we start talking about Zoom fatigue, not having connections with other employees, trying to navigate the demands of the household while meeting, getting on this meeting, and meeting the demands of the office. And as we transitioned back into the office, we had to keep the demands of mental health front and center. I think previously, where mental health might have been an individual factor, the Covid-19 made it an everybody factor, and employers had to recognize it. And going back, people still understand this is a leading issue that impacts how they show up.

[00:05:45] Speaker C: So when we talk about mental health in the workplace, what are we talking about? What is the scope of work or attention that is covered by that term?

[00:05:57] Speaker B: Great question. I would answer this in two ways. I think the first question is the who? Who are we talking about? And the short answer to that is everybody. On one end, we have individuals who have lived experiences with mental illness. This might be depression, anxiety, post traumatic stress disorder, schizophrenia, bipolar. The list goes on. We see through the numbers that there's upwards of 300 million people living with anxiety, 280 million people living with depression, over 60 million people with schizophrenia and bipolar. And it's easy for us to think about these individuals within a silo or a vacuum, but we have to remember that they're worshipping and playing and living and shopping and working in the same places everybody else is. So that means that it's critical or imperative for organizations and companies to understand what are the working conditions that have been set up that all people, including those who have lived experience with mental health suitable to thrive within. But also when we talk about who, even if you're not diagnosed with a mental health disorder, we all live on the spectrum or the continuum of mental health. We know that the absence of mental illness does not equate to mental health, and that we can find ourselves swinging on this pendulum any given day based on the daily stressors or traumas or incidents that we come up against. And for that, we have to be mindful about how does the work environment is conducive to handle where people are, the emotional spaces people find themselves in, and how they thrive. But the second way I would answer that question is what constitutes the workplace? And I think we talk about mental health in the workplace. It's easy to pitch ourselves right there at the desk and the office. But when we understand that even coming through Covid-19 we see the work floods out and the home life could be in the community. But then we have different stages of that, developmental milestones of career or job, from seeking gainful employment, maintaining employment, moving up early career, mid career, late career transitions, transitioning out of employment. All of these impact or affect the mental health in the workplace.

[00:08:18] Speaker C: Okay, so you mentioned workplace structures. I was wondering if you could maybe provide an example or two about particular workplace structures, maybe ones that

are very familiar and that we take for granted, even ones that were originally created with good intentions, that do exist in friction with people's mental health.

[00:08:45] Speaker B: Great question. I think one that we can speak to is scheduling and time. Those that are inflexible scheduling or inflexible calendaring that makes it difficult for people to show up, to be present, to engage in work. Because we know of the many life stressors and issues that impact how people and when people get to work. I think what we saw through Covid, people were able to have a little bit more control of their schedule. They were able to show up when they can take off when they needed to in order to be present when they are with the work. So trying to merge back into or transition back to fully in person or what have you. The inflexibility of structures or schedulings could be one that conflicts, but for good reason, too. You want to make sure it's organized, that you know who's on staff and who's working where, but it could cause those conflicts. I think another thing is hierarchy. I think hierarchy is a huge one within organizations. You know, we put together the chart, and it serves a good purpose to understand who reports to who and how it reports, but also also understanding what does hierarchy do to interpersonal relationships. How does things like micromanaging come into play to make people feel like they have less autonomy or less control of their situations that will negatively impact mental health. Once again, two structures that there's a reason for them to be there. But depending on how we manifest them in real time, can impact mental health one way or the other.

[00:10:22] Speaker C: We think of employment as a social determinant of mental health. And as such, can be done well in ways that support mental health or done poorly in ways that are detrimental to mental health. Examples of it done poorly. If you can expound on that a little bit, right.

[00:10:43] Speaker B: I would say in those examples, you would see negative power dynamics within the workplace. And this might be lack of communication. This may be withholding information that allows people to fully operate at the top of their caliber and operate independently. We see things of having organizational culture that may continue to stigmatize mental health, not talk about it, not have the open communication about it. Not really permitting people to bring themselves, their full selves into the workplace. So we end up engaging in activities or behavior that look like identity covering, covering aspects of our identity that we think we might get judged on or have punitive nature taken out on us. But in the same breath, that takes a lot of cognitive, emotional energy to try to show up in a way that mask identity masking that masks certain aspects of your identity while still engaging and being present. I think when it comes to not having the appropriate resources or policies that permit people to take the time or capitalize on the resources they need to promote their mental health, or even if it is there, leadership is not modeling it. I think we get into this position where leaders will say, you know, protect your mental health or do what you need to do for yourself, but then send an alternative message through actions or behaviors that say, hey, there's time deadlines here. I need this turned around. I need your work late after hours. So despite what I'm saying, my behaviors send a different message. I think those are a few different ways. And I, the last one that I would say is not having systems in place to combat things like discrimination that may be experienced within the workplace. If you don't have those avenues for people to lean on or report to, it further perpetuates this idea that you're in this yourself. You're isolated, you have to keep quiet and just kind of persist through the struggle.

[00:12:44] Speaker C: What consequences or symptoms do people experience in relation to these factors?

[00:12:52] Speaker B: Yeah, I think individually, we can look at it emotionally, cognitively, behaviorally, and even physiologically. And what I mean by that is when we talk about

emotionally, people may start to feel overwhelmed with sadness or worry or fear, easily angered or easily annoyed. So you kind of always feel like you're at your wit's end. And I think we probably all can relate to that at various points of our lives, right? A lack of connection to others, low energy, low self esteem, loss of interest in things that were once pleasurable to you. Right. Lack of or low self efficacy, almost feeling hopeless or helpless within the job front. But then you mix that with cognitive symptoms, and you have trouble focusing, you have trouble with your memory, you have trouble concentrating, you become indecisive. So even mentally, it's hard to be present. I think behaviorally, we'll start to see individuals who become absent from work don't show up to work, maybe sleeping quite often and still fatigued or having difficulty sleeping at night. We bring these issues home with us. It impacts our eating. And then lastly, physiologically, I think we carry stress within our bodies. And some of us have got so used to walking around stressed that it's become normalized for us. So our shoulders are high, intense, we have back pain and shoulder pain and neck pain. We're walking around with clenched teeth or our feet pressed against the floor. So these are ways it shows up within our emotions, our cognitions, our behavior, and our physiology. And what that translates to is presenteeism or absenteeism. Right. This idea of not showing up from work, this idea of even if you do show up from work, you're present, but you're absent because your mind is gone, your emotions are gone. In fact, the center for Disease Control, or, I'm sorry, who? World Health Organizations, they said that the us economy loses probably about \$1 trillion a year on presenteeism. That's a huge factor. People physically in their seats, but emotionally and mentally not present.

And outside of that, we see the common things like feeling burnt out.

We see things like quiet quitting that we've seen through the pandemic. So we have all these number of ways that those internal factors that we experiencing start to get manifest outwardly if there's not any type of quote unquote, treatment, solutions, policies, programs, leaderships that could connect with people where they are.

[00:15:33] Speaker C: Have you personally experienced any of these struggles?

[00:15:38] Speaker B: Absolutely, I definitely have experienced those. I've experienced going home in the evening time and being there with my kids. But my mind was on an issue at work. I've definitely experienced sleepless nights where I was worried about deadlines or dynamics within the office space, and definitely engaged or have been part of dynamics and office spaces that made it difficult to be present. Sometimes I think the better that we are able to recognize our own positionality within this experience. Not only do we humanize ourselves, but we create the space to help others humanize themselves. Because once we start to understand our experience, we could create room and model for other people to show up in their experience.

[00:16:24] Speaker C: Okay, so you mentioned that there is hierarchy in the vast majority of workplaces of one kind or another, and there are different levels at which any kind of change can be made or implemented. So just what are some of the different strategies that can be taken at the different levels, individual, departmental, organizational, to begin to address some of this?

[00:16:54] Speaker B: Definitely. First of all, I want to say I think it's critical that we understand that strategies have to be implemented at each one of those levels. I think too often as an organization, we could get caught up and focused on instituting changes or strategies at an individual level and kind of keep it there, because, one, it directly impacts and directly connects with the employees. Two, it's low hanging fruit. We put a little bit money around an aerobics class on a Wednesday, and they feel good about that. And then three, it doesn't really have to cause us to create a deeper level of change within the organizational culture.

The issue with that is when we start to increase individual strategies to promote mental health or

wellness in the workplace without taking the organizational or managerial levels of strategies, then it actually can increase frustration and impair the mental health functioning of individuals, because it sends the message that your wellbeing, that your mental health is solely your responsibility. And if you wanna thrive here, that's something you need to do, not us. So when we start looking at all three levels organizationally, we wanna look at what are we doing to assess the current conditions, but then also alleviate the negative impact of those current conditions on individuals. So this might be assessing the culture. How are we assessing feelings of belongingness, inclusion. Right. Employee perception of support and opportunities.

How are we creating a two way conversation with the employees to understand, take heed and implement the feedback that we receive from the individuals. Right. This also forces organizations to do policy audits. What things do we have in our policies that are going to promote or hinder individuals from thriving within the workplace that might go to return to work policies? Somebody may have been out struggling with depression. What does it look like to have that individual transition back into the office space with us? What does it look like to have mental health days? What does it look like to policies around prevention of bullying, discrimination and reporting transparency? I think the list goes on and on in terms of the policies and structures we put in place, but also at the organizational level. How are we increasing awareness and support of the resources and changing of the language?

[00:19:25] Speaker C: I want to spend some time on one of the challenges that you mentioned a little while ago, and that's the identity masking. If I am right about what that entails, and just to kind of something I highlight periodically being a man of color and having dealt with talked about imposter syndrome and kindred challenges throughout my working life, I would imagine that identity masking would be a rather challenging thing for some to even begin to talk about, much less explore remedies to.

But I mean, what either advice or caveats would you have for organizations who would try to make that any kind of addressable issue?

[00:20:20] Speaker B: Yeah, I would say the first thing is you have to have an environment where people feel safe to speak psychologically, safe to speak up about their experiences. Right. As a black man, as a woman, I mean, the list goes on and on. Whatever identities that you show up as I get recognized, you have to be able to be able to speak about what it is that you experience, the microaggressions, the micro assaults, the micro invalidations that happen within the workplace, and the outright discrimination. I think once you have that space where it can be talked about and addressed and you have the systems in which people can report and gain that support, I think then we start getting into the ideas of, in what ways are implicit bias showing up within our organization, within leadership, within people, around the organization? And what do we do about that? I think to make one, you won't be able to make one swoop to knock all that out. But you really have to understand, to specifically address what people are going through. And if you don't create the space to hear from them, you won't be able to do that.

[00:21:21] Speaker C: Okay, as we end our discussion today, what would you in particular like to leave our listeners with?

[00:21:30] Speaker B: I would say that this idea of mental health in the workplace incorporates everybody. Whether you're diagnosed with a mental health illness or not, you have a role within this realm in two ways. One, you're a recipient of the benefits of improved mental health in the workplace. And when you start to understand your own struggle and how you benefit from it, then you create the space to understand how other people benefit from it as well. But also, we have a responsibility, no matter what level we operate at, to increase mental health in the workplace. And that might be coming from you're in a position of power to create organizational

change. You're in men management position, where you have the power to model for your employees or your team, what this can look like, or you're another employee within the organization. And your interpersonal engagements with other people can come from a place of humanizing, mindful behavior, of how do we engage one another within this space? But at the end of the day, if we don't recognize our role and the plates that we have within this conversation, then I think the conversation stalls out and we find ourselves at the same point where we are today and the next one five or ten years later. And what we want to do is advance the ball down the field.

[00:22:42] Speaker C: Okay, Ryan, thank you so much for taking the time.

[00:22:47] Speaker A: I believe this is your third or fourth.

[00:22:50] Speaker B: I believe so. So, hopefully I'm doing something right.

[00:22:53] Speaker C: Yeah, very much so. Very much so. And it would be hubris for me to say on behalf of the entire foundation, that we consider you one of ours, in a way. You are having once been a postdoctoral fellow here, and it's just really great to see you thriving and just making the impact that you are. Really appreciate it.

[00:23:17] Speaker B: Thank you so much for having me. Always feels great to be back.

[00:23:20] Speaker A: Before we close, I wanted to give y'all a heads up. The Hawk foundation impact report will be coming to you in early November. If you are subscribed to any of our emails, you will be hearing more about this in the days and weeks to come. It is a one stop source for the most significant achievements over the past two years for the Haage foundation. If there is anything that you are dying to know about the Hogg foundation that you cannot already find on our website, this is the resource for you, so if you haven't done so already, please subscribe to our emails. You can find a sign up link on our homepage at hog.utexas.edu or just be sure to check back at the Hawke foundation website. There will be an entire page that is all about the impact report. You will be able to find a very prominent link to it on our homepage. It is scheduled for not an exact date, but that's our estimation at this time, so we hope that anyone who may be listening checks it out. You will find no better source for kind of the most recent history of the Hagg foundation and we're excited about it. And that does it for this episode. We are so glad that you could join us. Thanks as always to the Hawg foundation for its support.

Production assistance by Kate Rooney, Darrell Wiggins and Anna Harris just as taking care of ourselves enhances our ability to support others, so it is that by supporting others we enhance our own mental health, resilience and well being. Taking us out now is Anna's good vibes by our good friends friend Anna Harris thanks for joining us.