

MENTAL HEALTH

Women are still the emotional custodians for the workplace, report finds

A recent study shows that women are burdened with most of the mental health and DE&I initiatives in the workplace.

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Like the hypnotic chorus of Lipps Inc.'s 1979 smash hit "[Funky Town](#)," employees all across the corporate spectrum want to *talk about it* (whatever "it" may be). The strain of the ongoing pandemic, the struggle to find remote work-life balance, vaccination mandates, DE&I—all of *it* is making mental health a priority for HR like never before.

And according to the newest annual [Women in the Workplace report](#) from McKinsey and LeanIn.org, it's overwhelmingly women who are tasked with picking up the pieces of their coworkers' crumbling mental health and affecting change on DE&I efforts.

Emotional custodians

McKinsey's report, which surveyed more than 65,000 people on their workplace experiences across 423 organizations, lays bare a damning dynamic: Women are the emotional custodians of the workplace. Men, on the other hand, seem less inclined to grab a mop.

First, some statistics from the report:

- 61% of female-identifying managers checked in on their workers' well-being over the last year, compared with 54% of male managers.
- Women spend more time than men devoted to addressing DE&I concerns. The report states: "Senior-level women are twice as likely as senior-level men to dedicate time to these tasks at least weekly."
- Women trying to combat burnout among their colleagues are more burned out than ever. One in three women say they've considered leaving the workforce this year as a result.

Ishanaa Rambachan, the report's lead researcher, told HR Brew: "Women who manage teams are significantly more likely to be burned out than men at the same level—slightly over half (52%) told us that they are often or almost always burned out."

Office housework

Some of this boils down to centuries of inequitable gender dynamics, and how they've bled into the workplace over the years. Rambachan said that women are tasked with performing "office housework," by tending to the mental health and DE&I needs of their colleagues. This labor has gone unrewarded, she noted: "Only one in four companies recognize the additional work on colleagues' well-being and DE&I work that managers and leaders do as part of performance reviews."

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Suzanne Lucas, an HR expert and career coach, said that this unequal balance can be especially burdensome for HR, given that it's a female-heavy field. According to Namely's 2018 Workplace Diversity Report, women make up 67% of the HR industry.

"Then you also have the human resources department which is heavily female," she said. "They're the ones...who are tasked with making everyone else at the company feel better."

Making routine check-ins mandatory across departments could alleviate some of the voluntary burden that so many women experience. But that presents its own challenge, Lucas said, because managers often "don't define what 'checking in' means."

Putting out burnout

It might sound like a gargantuan task, but spreading the burden of emotional labor more evenly involves being adamant. "If you want this to be a top priority for all your managers then you need to make it clear that this is a top priority and you need to hold everybody accountable for it," Lucas advised.

Moreover, availing workers of certain resources, like an Employee Assistance Program, can go a long way. Lucas said EAPs give employees "a place to contact with help for everything, from

finding divorce attorneys to real-estate closures to therapists to drug-treatment programs for your teenager."

Rambachan said burnout can be reduced by implementing corporate policies that normalize more humane working hours. "Only one in five employees said their company has told them they don't need to respond to non-urgent requests outside of traditional work hours," she said. Part of changing this dynamic means changing the way workers are evaluated. "Companies could also make it clear that evaluations are based on performance, not promptness in answering a late-night email."

For all workers, but especially burned-out women, this would be a welcome reprieve.—SB

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