

# We need to talk...(more) about Mental Health at Work

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## Abstract

“Why are you so emotional?”  
“Can’t you just put your private life aside?”  
“We are at work, please be professional!”

Who doesn't know sentences like these?

In a world captivated by progress and achievement, mental health and well-being often find themselves relegated to the shadows or not taken seriously.

Embark on a transformative journey with me, redefining mental health discussions in the workplace. Visualize a setting where mental well-being is integral, fostering genuine support. Explore the tangible benefits for both employees and management, understanding how a supportive workplace elevates individual thriving and overall organizational success.

Offering examples of navigating mental health challenges at work and providing guidelines, insights, and ideas for supporting others, this talk goes beyond. Regardless of whether you encounter challenges or not, valuable tips and insights into supporting mental health issues in the workplace will be shared.

The question is not, “Should we talk about mental health at work?” but rather, “How can we talk about mental health at work?” This session will offer a direct answer to that question by giving examples and guidelines out of personal experiences.

Imagine a world where no one is stigmatized because of their mental health issues. Everyone is treated the same, regardless of whether they are neurodiverse, for example, or not. A world in which it makes no difference if a person is unwell physically or mentally. Just imagine if this were possible. In this paper, I will attempt to provide ideas on how we might not fully achieve this but take a step closer to this goal.

## Biography

*Veronika Betzel, also called Vero, started out studying to become a teacher, but ended up discovering a passion for Quality Assurance (QA) by chance. Initially working in QA part-time while studying, Vero made the switch to working full-time in QA after completing her bachelor's degree.*

*Vero loves the diversity of her job, but what she enjoys most is the opportunity to communicate and exchange ideas with others. She values directness and open discussions both personally and professionally. Vero loves to teach others, making her presentations both informative and engaging. Starting QA in 2017 Vero has already amassed some experience in the QA field, working for two different companies. When she's not working, Vero can be found giving back to her community as a volunteer firefighter or kicking a ball around the soccer field. Whether at work or play, Vero is a communicator at heart and always looking to make a positive impact.*

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Page 1

## Why is this topic so important?

Mental Health in the workplace is important whether the person is personally involved or not. This part of the paper will provide reasons why. It is divided into general and personal reasons.

### General Reasons

One of the main reasons why this topic is so important is how many people are affected by mental health issues. One in eight people worldwide lives with a mental health issue (Siemens-Energy 2023). Expressed as a percentage, that equates to 12.5%, meaning every eighth person reading this paper statistically has a mental health issue. What I want to emphasize with this is the high prevalence.

Another reason relates to a question posed by a German company called Shitshow<sup>1</sup>, an agency focused on mental health topics. For example, they offer various workshops and train people to become “Mental Health Ambassadors”. In different discussions, they asked around 600 people “Would you talk openly about psychological stress at work?” Considering that at least one in eight people has mental health issues, only 8% answered, “I’m open to it”. Eighteen percent said, “With HR/Leader”, 37% replied, “With colleagues I trust”, 10% said, “Only if there will be a change” and 27% responded, “No way! / I’m not sure”. Thus, 27% are not open to discussing psychological stress at work (Shitshow 2023).

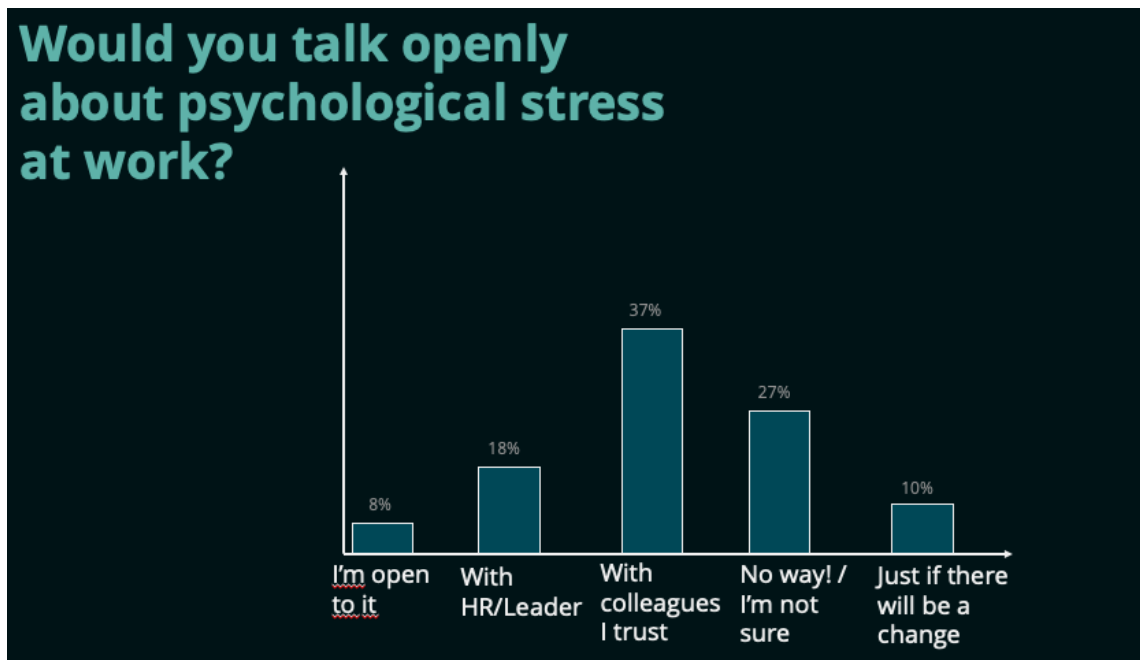


Figure 1: Shitshow 2023

It is clear that speaking about and addressing problems openly is always helpful, but so few people are willing to do so (Patterson 2002), and this is exactly what I want to emphasize in this explanation.

A third reason: There's a word for it — sanism. Sanism is 'a form of discrimination and oppression against people based on presumed mental type (e.g., ADHD or schizophrenia), mental action (e.g., stuttering), supposed intelligence, or neurology (e.g., neurotypical or autism spectrum disorder), especially those diagnosed with a mental disorder or mental illness' (Shitshow 2023). Similar to other forms of discrimination like racism or sexism, sanism leads to marginalization and systemic barriers. This term

<sup>1</sup> For more information: <https://shitshow.de/en/>

emphasizes how societal attitudes and institutions may unjustly discriminate against those with mental health challenges (Perlin 1992).

This happens because people tend to believe that there is a 'normal' type of person with a specific brain structure. Anything that deviates from this norm is considered abnormal. People tend to think in stereotypes, so when someone is placed into this specific compartment, the concept of 'sanism' is automatically assumed. This phenomenon can affect the workplace in various ways, such as employers not hiring people who fit this stereotype, giving them fewer opportunities for advancement, or simply not talking about it (Telwatte 2017).

## Personal Reasons

In the previous paragraph, general reasons were presented to explain why it's important to discuss mental health at work or why to even start doing so. In this paragraph, I want to clarify things further by providing a personal reason. I want to share my challenges, my personal 'disabilities,' and how they can negatively affect my daily work. This will be the most personal section of this entire paper. I think it's important to highlight this in the paper because I want to encourage people to talk openly about their mental health situation, and it wouldn't be a good start if I didn't begin by doing so myself. Also, it seems that I am a really good fit for the concept of "Sanism".



*Figure 2: ADHD Brain<sup>2</sup>*

This is my brain, or at least it shows how my brain works every second of the day when I am not sleeping. This is my ADHD. Imagine a brain working like a train that never stops and is always on the run. It would just stop to think if your physical exhaustion is so high that you can just concentrate on this and on nothing more. To mention a few side effects that it can have on my workplace — and also my private life — as shown in the picture, I have many thoughts at once, just hopping into my brain. Imagine a browser with 300 tabs open, and at least 3 of them are playing music. It can also lead to impulsive actions and being unfocused — because of the 300 tabs and the music. Additionally, others sometimes feel that I am impatient, although it is just another tab opening in my brain.

These are just my personal types of mental health issues. I am quite sure I am not the only person on the planet with ADHD or other squad members like this. Someone else could have other, stronger, or different symptoms. Now, here is the problem: A normal full-time workday is around eight hours long.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.adhdevidence.org/blog/eight-pictures-describe-brain-mechanisms-in-adhd>

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Eight hours of work. What can we do with those feelings during this time? How can we move from the assumption "Just put your feelings aside at work" to the idea of "Using them to make your work better"?

## Fundamental Assumption

The first part of this paper discussed the general importance of this topic. This part will now introduce a fundamental assumption necessary for providing guidelines to address the topic "talking about mental health at work." The fundamental assumption is that it is a three-dimensional approach to make further steps on this topic at work. The different parts will provide ideas on how this can possibly be done, communicated, and achieved. The first part is about me: "How can I improve my workspace so that it better fits me?" The second part concerns the colleagues: "What can colleagues do to build a supportive workplace culture?" The last part is about the employer: "How can the employer offer support?"

My assumption is that all three of these fundamentals — imagine a building, each of these is its own pillar — are needed to build the house of well-being at work. If one of the pillars is missing, this achievement cannot be accomplished.

## Ideas for myself

What can I do for myself to improve my individual working day?"

The first idea is very simple: It is called self-organization. Self-organization can lead to better mental health at work by reducing stress, increasing productivity, enhancing time management, and better allocating time for leisure, especially if you work in an environment with flexible working hours (Allen 2001). At first, it may sound very abstract, but I will provide an example. I found that the perfect working hours for me are primarily in the morning and then spread out. I cannot work for 6 hours straight without taking a break every one or two hours. Therefore, I structure my workday extensively in the calendar with blocks for breaks. I normally start working at 6 am after waking up at 5:30 am because this time really suits me well. I do a little stretching beforehand—this has been found to prevent my back pain. For example, I will work on Jira tickets for a customer for about two hours at the start of the day. At around 8 am, I definitely need a small coffee break for about 15 minutes. After this, I continue to work for about one more hour. Then another small break with breakfast. After this, around 10 am, my day usually continues with a daily meeting and various other meetings. Sometimes there is some time left for working on internal matters; sometimes, I go straight from meetings into my lunch break. Here, I try to take at least a one-hour break and do something like sports or go for a walk to disconnect from work. Then I continue to work for the rest of the day, again with small breaks. I try to finish my work around 3:30 pm or 4 pm, so I can still do something else other than work during the day. And that's it! This is how I structure my day, and it helps me greatly in organizing myself and reducing some internal stress. Of course, this is not the "one and only way" a workday can be planned, but it is the "one and only way" I have discovered over the years that fits me perfectly. I would encourage you to try out some planning and see what best fits you and your daily life. However, don't be too rigid and always leave some space for spontaneous activities.

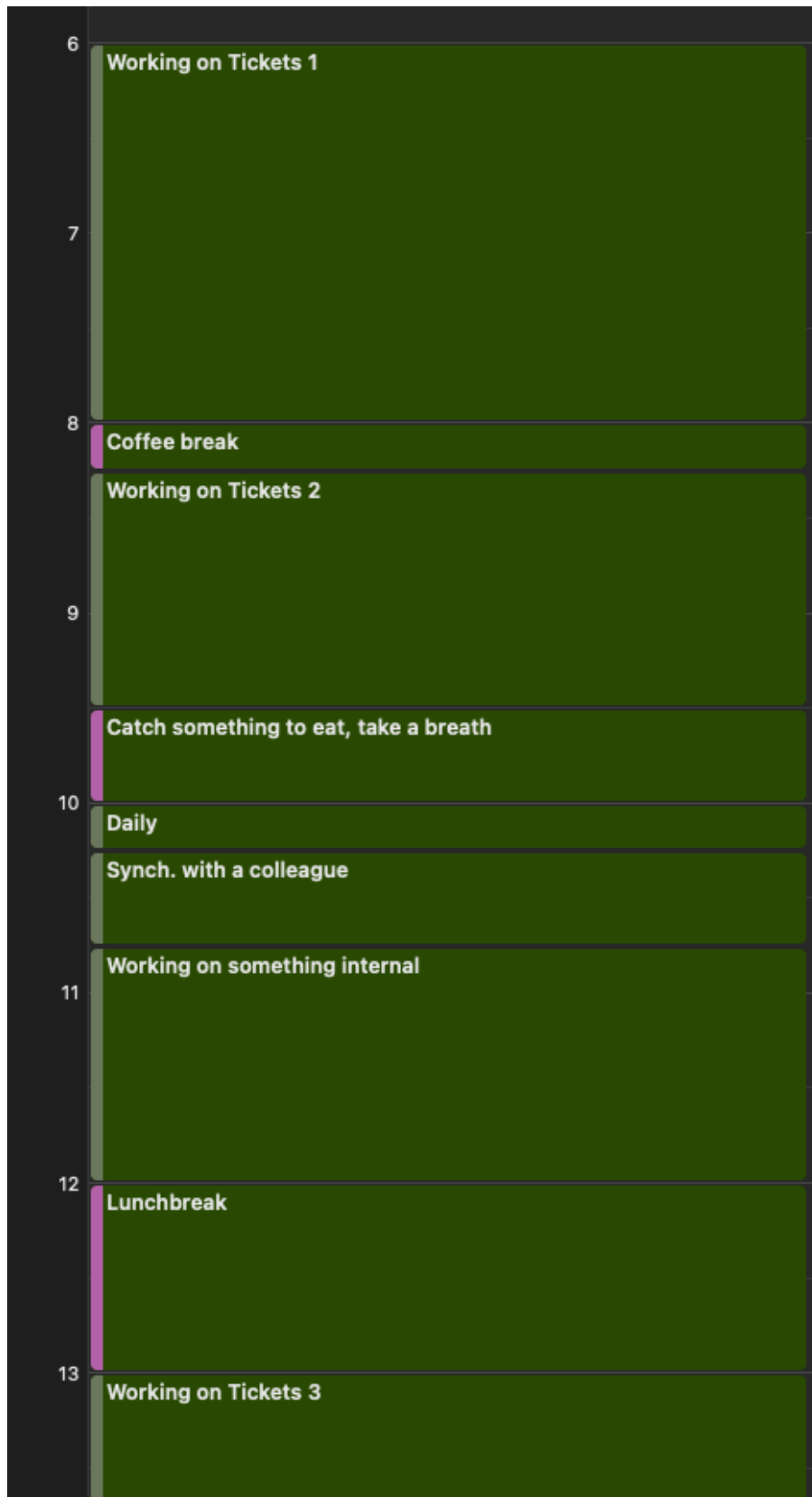


Figure 3: Typical workday example for myself

The second idea is quite similar to the first and is so important that it needs to be emphasized. The second idea would be "Listen to yourself." Ask yourself questions like, "What do you need?" and "What are your feelings?" Be aware that it's important not only to ask yourself these questions but also not to ignore the answers. Make sure to take breaks if needed, and don't forget the following statement: Being sick because of an urgent mental health issue is just the same as being sick from something visible to others.

Idea number three is not just an idea initially, but a definition. I call it Burnout vs. Boreout. What exactly does this mean? Burnout is a state of extreme exhaustion due to chronic work-related stress. It is caused by prolonged overload, excessive job demands, and a lack of adequate recovery. Symptoms could include emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a sense of reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach and Leiter 2016). Boreout refers to the feeling of boredom and underutilization in the workplace. It is caused by the feeling that one's skills are not adequately utilized, or tasks are too unchallenging. Possible symptoms are boredom, disinterest in work, lack of energy, and frustration (Rothlin and Werder 2008). What both have in common is that they can have some negative impact not only at the workplace but also in private life. Just to mention a few: both can lead to a negative impact on well-being, reduced job satisfaction, impaired job performance, potential for physical symptoms, an impact on relationships, workplace dissatisfaction, and an increased risk for other mental health issues (Maslach and Leiter 2016; Rothlin and Werder 2008). Why is this pointed out as an idea? In my humble opinion, everyone needs to work between these two extreme states. Thus, the employee has to find the space that is neither connected to burnout nor boreout. For myself, I have found that this space is really small and not easy to find. I get bored very easily and quickly experience the feelings and symptoms of boreout. I also get stressed easily but cannot work constructively without a bit of stress. However, if I have too much stress, I also easily veer towards burnout. In this case, I would say we go back to idea number two or forward again to idea number four.

It is necessary to listen to yourself also in a work-related context. Ask yourself questions like "What do you need?" or "What are your current feelings?" and don't ignore them.

## Ideas for my colleagues

These were just a few ideas of what can be done by a person as an individual, but of course, many of the mentioned things are also based on social interactions. And based on social interaction, there are always at least two people involved, so the next question would be: How can others help to build a supportive workplace culture?

The first idea for this is the topic of supportive communication. Communication is always a two-sided thing because you have the person who is communicating and the other one who is listening or recognizing (Berlo 1960). It will not work if just one person is communicating "correctly." So, what are possible strategies? Possible strategies could include Active Listening, Setting Boundaries, Maintaining a Non-judgmental Attitude, and Showing Empathy. By Active Listening, I mean something like giving the speaker your full attention (by nodding, for example, if you appreciate what is said).

Another point would be to avoid interrupting. Setting boundaries means being clear about your own limits but also respecting those of others. For example, if I need to prepare a talk or write a paper, I require deep focus and should not be interrupted. Some music is nice and necessary, but perhaps not messages. Therefore, I set a blocker on my text messaging tool at work for this deep focus period, setting a boundary that others need to respect.

Having a non-judgmental attitude means avoiding making judgments. If a person is doing something a certain way, there is always a reason behind it. Imagine a situation where a meeting is set up at 10 am. One person is always late to this meeting. A first reaction might be, "Oh, this person is just too irresponsible to make it on time." What could you do instead? You could communicate with the person

and ask why they are always late. Maybe the time isn't suitable, perhaps there is a meeting beforehand, or maybe a reminder is missing, but asking will handle the situation better than simply judging.

By empathy, I mean the idea of understanding and acknowledging the emotions of others. Emotions are basic for human beings; some people are more emotional than others—especially during work. From my perspective, I get called “emotional” a lot. I tend to think with my brain but also with my heart; however, I don't like being called “emotional.” If I am emotional, it is more helpful to ask me why that is the case. Most of the time, there is a reason behind it, like being stressed or other valid reasons.

One different idea for the part “What can I do as a colleague?” is the concept of creating a safe space at work. A safe space has numerous positive impacts on employees and overall organizational benefit, such as encouraging open communication, fostering psychological safety, and other great benefits (Edmondson 2019). For me personally, this means having a space where I can be emotional without being judged, a place where people can ask me, or I can ask if everything is okay, if there is a feeling that something is wrong; a place where no one needs to answer because a boundary was set there; a place without discrimination and that supports creativity. For me, it would also mean that I can talk openly about having a girlfriend without facing any problems or sideways glances about the issue.

Of course, this cannot be done only by myself or together with my colleagues. To tackle this topic, a third party is needed.

## Ideas for my employer

So, after gathering some ideas and guidelines for myself and other colleagues, the last part addresses the employer. How can the employer support?

First of all, I want to point out that in my opinion, it is not necessary to involve an external party to initiate discussions on “Mental Health,” and making a start is definitely better than doing nothing. A start could also involve making people aware of the issue by raising the topic—for example, by holding a talk about it. This can be done by just one person.

The employer can also support by providing emergency plans and designating at least one person (or more) who is responsible for them. An idea in this case would be to establish some kind of “Mental Health Ambassador,” for example. In my current company, we have an external company that provides urgent help if needed. You can simply write them an email or call them, and you get help from professionals as soon as possible. It is not just for work-related problems; they help deal with serious life situations where assistance is needed.

Another idea concerns company values. Don't just talk about them, write them down. Make sure everyone understands them and aligns with them. In my current company, we have a Confluence page where the company values are written down. When we are searching for a new employee, we focus not only on technical skills but also on personal and social skills. Maybe we go to dinner together to get to know each other better. We conduct not just one interview but also several more, including possible new team members. This way, during decision-making, it can be seen whether the person respects the company values and is not just a technical fit but also a personal fit for the company.

Support work-life balance by looking out for the employers, perhaps supporting sports programs, after-work events, respecting free time, and so on. In my current company, we have a sports program called “Hansefit.” This means that the employee can go to several gyms, sports clubs, or other sportive activities without having to pay. Furthermore, we regularly hold socializing events that help at least me to maintain a balance between doing “real” work and socializing.

Last but not least, in my humble opinion, it is necessary to evaluate the status quo. Don't adopt the attitude as an employer that “If I don't know anything about problems regarding mental health, then there

are no problems, so it's not my problem." Ask the employees about it. Try to define a status quo to have a chance to change it if necessary. As a side note, there are also some ready-to-use surveys for evaluation.



## Conclusion

I have just talked to you about mental at work. My goal was to give ideas to help you create a more supportive workplace culture and discuss potential guidelines for you. It shouldn't matter if you are an employer, colleague or if you are taking inventory of your own mental well-being at the workplace. Mental Health at work should be everyone's concern...let's talk about it!

Right from the beginning, I mentioned three parts necessary to achieve what seems to be "well-being at work." So, to summarize, well-being at work cannot be achieved alone, nor by my colleagues or even the employer alone. For me, it requires three pillars to build the house of well-being at work that influences it. First, the employer, who creates the space for it and provides opportunities by defining, evaluating, and asking. Second, it needs the colleagues who collaborate with each other and take the opportunities provided by the employer, respecting the framework that was created by them. And last but not least, it needs myself, who works at a company, collaborates with colleagues, is open to communicating problems openly, and also has space to support others.



*Figure 4: The house of well-being at work*

To finalize this, I would like to end with a quote found in the World Wide Web: "8 billion people need to redefine what success looks like. It's not to make a billion dollars, it's to wake up in the morning and actually be in a good mood." (Vaynerchuk 2023)

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