

3 Reasons Mental Health Must Be a Top Priority for Company Leaders

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By Mark Ray



As a 28-year-old consultant for Bain, John Donahoe found himself working constantly, traveling frequently, rarely sleeping and always struggling to find some semblance of work-life balance. Then he got a piece of advice that changed — and maybe even saved — his life.

A speaker at a training program explained how much effort professional athletes put into improving their [physical and mental health](#). “Michael Jordan has a bench coach, a personal trainer, a chef and a mental coach. He wants to get help so he can get better,” the speaker said. “But you businesspeople don’t take care of yourselves. You think not getting sleep is a badge of honor! And you want to be world-class? You think asking for help is a sign of weakness, not strength. I don’t get it!”

Donahoe took the speaker's words to heart. Now the CEO of Nike, he prioritizes his own mental health — and that of his employees. In a [2021 Yahoo! Finance article](#), he described in detail his self-care routine and how Nike helps employees take care of themselves.

If you're the stereotypical hard-driving, sleep-deprived CEO or founder, read on for three "just do it" reasons you should prioritize your own mental health.

1. Stress can kill

A few years ago, the National Bureau of Economic Research studied the experiences of 1,605 CEOs who entered the C-suites of large, publicly traded US companies between 1975 and 1991. Among other things, they looked at how industry-wide distress affected the CEO's lifespans. (They defined industry-wide distress as a 30% drop in the stock price of an industry's median firm.) Their conclusion: "CEOs who were in office during [industry-wide distress](#), on average, died 1.4 years earlier than those who did not experience such shock."

Not surprisingly, the [2008 financial crisis](#) had a similar impact. The "apparent age" of CEOs in industries that were the most affected rose by about 1.2 years more than their peers in less affected businesses.

2. Your company suffers when you suffer

As a CEO or founder, you play a very important role in your company, but it's hard to lead effectively when you're suffering from anxiety or depression. Unfortunately, that's more common in C-suites than you might imagine.

According to Headspace Health's Fourth Annual Workforce Attitudes toward Mental Health report, more than half of CEOs have missed a full week of work in the past year because of stress, anxiety or other mental health issues. And it's [safe to assume](#) they spent another week catching up on emails from when they were off.

Chris Federspiel, CEO and founder of Blackthorn.io, knows how many of those leaders feel. As he described to Bryan Robinson, Ph.D., founder of ComfortZones Digital, Inc., "I used to get sick for two weeks at a time because of the stress, dealing with symptoms resembling a cold that wouldn't go away. I'd get better for another two weeks, and then the symptoms would return. But these issues didn't just manifest physically. I'd get overwhelmed and take my frustrations out on my employees, causing tension and abrupt decision-making that was [detrimental to company morale](#)."

That brings us back to the Headspace Health report, which found that a quarter of employees say "poor leadership and management" is a top stressor at work. And we all know stressed-out employees are less effective than they could be.

3. Your example matters

For better or worse, employees will follow your example. When you send emails at 2 in the morning, they'll answer those emails at 2:05. When you imply that vacations are for losers, they'll hesitate to take the time they've earned.

On the other hand, when you prioritize your mental health and that of your employees, you encourage everyone in the company to do the same. A few years ago, Ben Congleton, CEO of chatbot developer Olark, offered a master class on how to do this. When employee Madalyn Parker sent a company-wide email saying she would be taking some time off for mental health reasons, he replied with a response that went viral: "I just wanted to personally thank you for sending emails like this. Every time you do, I use it as a reminder of the importance of using sick days for mental health — I can't believe this is not standard practice [at all organizations](#). You are an example to us all, and help cut through the stigma so we can all bring our whole selves to work."

And here's a bonus reason that connects directly to Madalyn Parker's story. Virtually every company on LinkedIn's Top Companies in the United States list for 2022 offered mental health days. In a challenging hiring environment, support for mental health is essential. And that [support starts](#) at the top.

About the Author

In a freelance career spanning more than 25 years, Mark Ray has written everything from tech tutorials to infographics to corporate annual reports. He has interviewed and profiled CEOs, history makers, athletes, astronauts and more. In addition to Mentavi Health, Mark's healthcare clients have included Aetna, BrainHQ, Humana, McKesson Medical-Surgical, Oscar Health, PBS Next Avenue and UnitedHealthcare.