

BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

U.S. Surgeon General Releases New Framework For Mental Health and Well-Being in the Workplace

By Dr. Joel Axler, *National Behavior Health Leader*



With more than 160 million people participating in the United States workforce and with the average full-time worker in the United States spending about half of their waking life at work, workplaces play a significant role in shaping our mental and physical well-being. Employers have a unique opportunity not only to invest in the mental health and well-being of their workforce but also to help strengthen their organizations' success by doing so.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought the relationship between work and well-being into clearer focus for many U.S. workers. According to recent surveys cited by Dr. Vivek Murthy¹,

76% of U.S. workers in a 2021 survey reported at least one symptom of a mental health condition (anxiety, depression), an increase of 17 percentage points in just two years.

81% of workers reported they would be looking for workplaces that support mental health in the future.

84% of respondents reported at least one workplace factor that had a negative impact on their mental health.

In the [Surgeon General's Framework for Mental Health and Well-Being in the Workplace](#), Dr. Murthy outlines Five Essentials for Workplace Mental Health and Well-Being to help organizations develop, institutionalize, and update policies, processes, and practices that best support the mental health and well-being of all workers. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has summarized the key concepts as follows²:

- 1 Protection from Harm:** Creating the conditions for physical and psychological safety is a critical foundation for helping to ensure mental health and well-being in the workplace. To promote practices that better assure protection from harm, workplaces can:
 - Prioritize workplace physical and psychological safety
 - Enable adequate rest
 - Normalize and support focusing on mental health
 - Operationalize Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) norms, policies, and programs

¹ Office of the Surgeon General: Framework of workplace mental health. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/workplace-mental-health-well-being.pdf>

² The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). [Hhs.gov](https://www.hhs.gov)



2 Connection and Community: Fostering positive social interactions and relationships in the workplace supports worker well-being. To promote practices that better assure connection and community, workplaces can:

- Create cultures of inclusion and belonging
- Cultivate trusted relationships
- Foster collaboration and teamwork

3 Work-Life Harmony: Professional and personal roles can create work and non-work conflicts. To promote practices that better assure work-life harmony, workplaces can:

- Provide more autonomy over how work is done
- Make schedules as flexible and predictable as possible
- Increase access to paid leave
- Respect boundaries between work and non-work time

4 Matter at Work: People want to know that they matter to those around them and that their work matters. Knowing you matter has been shown to help lower stress while feeling like you do not matter can increase the risk for depression. To better ensure a culture that demonstrates that people matter at work, workplaces can:

- Engage workers in workplace decisions
- Build a culture of gratitude and recognition
- Connect individual work with organizational mission

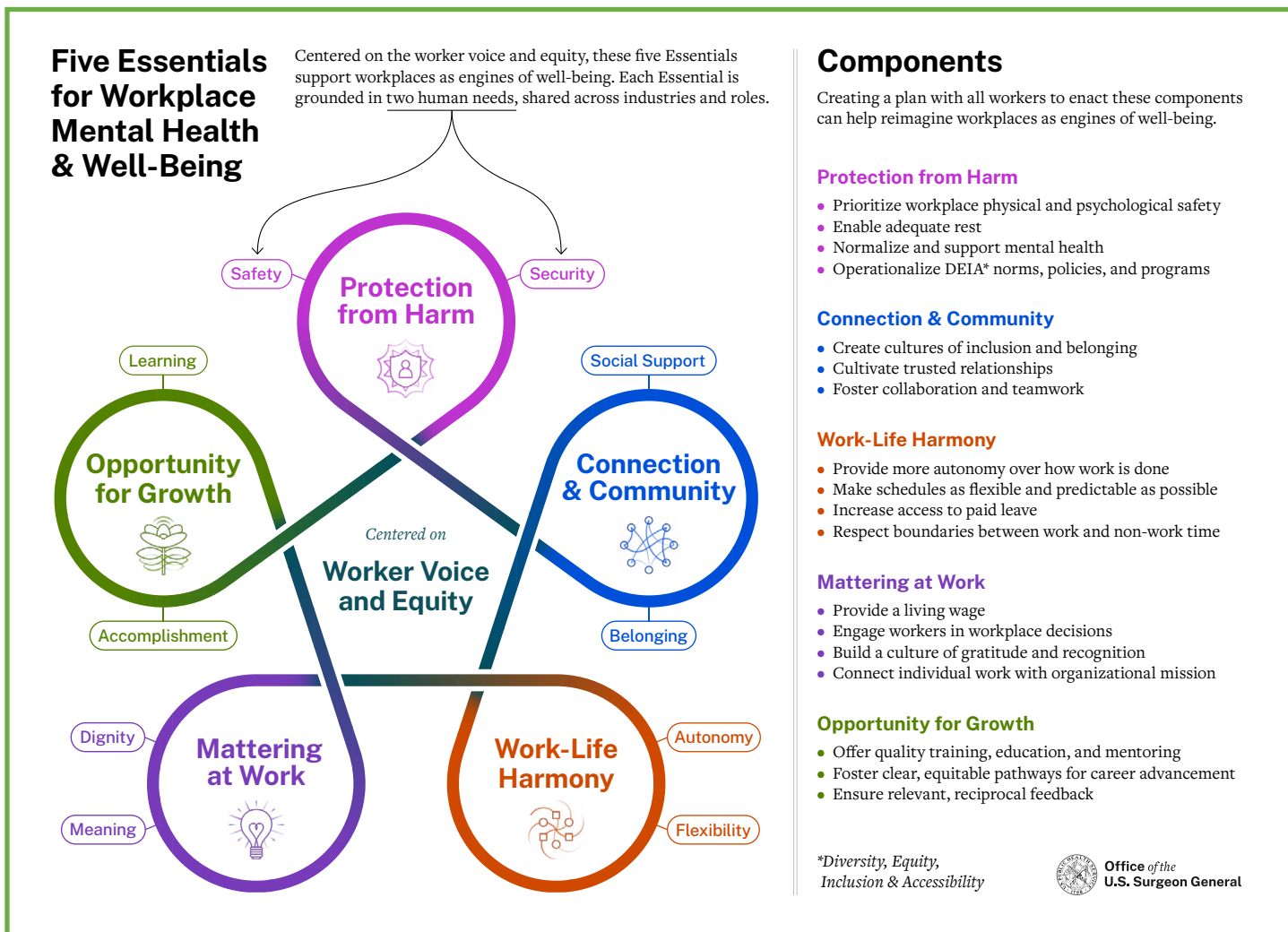
5 Opportunities for Growth: When organizations create more opportunities for workers to accomplish goals based on their skills and growth, workers become more optimistic about their abilities and more enthusiastic about contributing to the organization. To promote practices that better assure growth opportunities, workplaces can:

- Offer quality training, education and mentoring
- Foster clear, equitable pathways for career advancement
- Ensure relevant, reciprocal feedback

The Surgeon General’s Framework is a guide to call attention to a public health issue, developed to help the American public better understand and address factors that affect health. This framework provides Essentials, a foundation of key components, for workplace leaders to help engage all workers and equitably support their mental health and well-being. It includes evidence-informed practices that leaders

across workplaces of varied sizes and industries can apply to reimagine and reinvigorate their organizations.

You can read the complete Framework [here](#). The Health and Human Services website also has a [downloadable graphic](#) (pictured below³) employers can use around their workspace.



Please contact the [Brown & Brown Population Health](#) team for additional questions or consulting information.

3 Health and Human Services (HHS) <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/five-essentials-workplace-mental-health-well-being.pdf>



About the Author

Dr. Joel Axler, National Behavior Health Leader

Axler is a board-certified child, adolescent and adult psychiatrist with more than 30 years of experience in academic, private practice and insurance settings. He is a Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association. He serves on executive committees of organizations, including the National Council for Behavioral Health, the Georgia Psychiatric Physicians Association and the Georgia Council on Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.



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