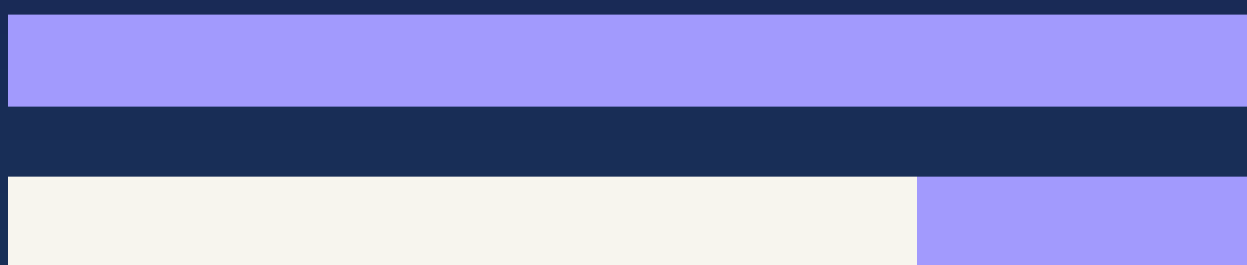intellect | **Engage**Rocket

THE WORKPLACE GUIDE

How to talk about mental health with your employees

A definitive guide for managers, team leads, and people leaders to start and deep dive into conversations about mental health with employees

A handy guide to mental health conversations in the workplace

The changing nature of work, and changing impacts of the pandemic have led to unexpected stressors for employees. From what was once considered to be "acceptable pressure," most employees now recognise unhealthy levels of stress and anxiety – with 78% of the 3300+ respondents in EngageRocket's study showing that they feel burnout at work.

This may have lasting effects on one's mental health, and consequently their overall well-being and productivity. As organisations look forward to a renewed period of growth and innovation post the pandemic, mental health in the workplace needs urgent attention. By normalizing these conversations and empowering managers to enact on them, employers can build work environments that are conducive to health, happiness, and meaningful outcomes.

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The prevalence of mental health challenges at work

While mental health has been top of mind due to the attention it has been receiving globally, the problem is much more pervasive than employers imagine. Research suggests that up to 80% of people will experience a diagnosable mental health condition in their lifetime, often without acknowledging it. Among the workforce, the prevalence of symptoms is felt by nearly every employee from frontline workers to the C-suite – yet over 60% of employees have never discussed the challenges they face with anyone at work.

This is a worrying statistic, and may indicate a lack of trust and psychological safety, making it difficult for employees to confidently discuss their issues. The widespread nature of mental health stressors indicates that managers may not always have the answers or resources to support team members (or, indeed, themselves). Yet, an average employee spends nearly half of their waking hours at work (whether in person or remotely), which makes workplace issues an important variable in a person's overall mental health constitution.

However, it is during these crucial hours that people are often not comfortable talking about their mental health, their symptoms, stressors, and potential resolution pathways. In the absence of these conversations, unhealthy coping mechanisms may crop up, such as avoidance. This refers to the practise of keeping away from specific situations, individuals, or activities that are perceived to cause anxiety, which can be helpful in compartmentalizing the various facets of work -- but unhealthy when employees begin to practise avoidance during their daily tasks, teamwork, and other productive scenarios where they should be engaged.

As per Intellect's Workplace Health Survey 2021, around 84% of employees across APAC reported feeling a sense of exhaustion and 88% felt disengaged. This degree of burnout risk and eventual disengagement makes a major difference to the bottom line. EngageRocket's report on the state of work-life harmony in 2022 found that satisfaction with one's work-life balance and general mental wellbeing improved engagement.

This has a direct impact on the company's bottom line by preventing disengagement arising from avoidance, loss of productivity, potential safety issues, and dip in customer satisfaction. Research confirms this direct correlation -- companies that score highly and invest heavily in employee experience may see up to four times the average profit compared to those that didn't.

1

Introduction:
State of mental health in the workplace

Barriers in improving mental wellness at work

BURNOUT LEADING TO DISENGAGEMENT

Exhaustion, burnout and disengagement continue to be a major problem for Asia's workforce.
- According to research by the payroll company ADP, employee engagement in Singapore is 3 percentage points lower than the global average. This is echoed by Intellect's survey.
- EngageRocket found that 78% of Singapore employees experience burnout at work. Statistical analysis shows that these employees are less likely to stay on with the company, are less motivated to contribute at work, and would not recommend their workplace to others.
- Research by Intellect found avoidance/disengagement to be the top coping mechanism, adopted by 40% of workers. 23% are absent from work for 12-36 days per year, costing the company up to 1.2% of revenue per employee.

DUAL STIGMA AROUND MENTAL HEALTH CONVERSATIONS

In recent years, mental health in the workplace has received more attention and companies are increasingly open to addressing this issue. However, two types of stigmas still exist around such conversations –
Sha-En Yeo, Founder of Happiness Scientists refers to them as **self-stigma** (internalized negative attitudes such as low self-confidence and shame) and **societal stigma** (the fear of discrimination and repercussions in the work). These factors hold back open and transparent discussions around this vital issue.

"Employees often suffer in silence for long periods of time or "check out" so they turn up to work but are not motivated or engaged, these are also insidious and show more prevalent signs of poor mental health. Managers need to utilize or enhance their emotional intelligence to better assess and read team members' responses to stress, personal boundaries or ability to speak openly."

Robyn Cam
Behavioural Health Coach at Intellect

How organisations can champion mental health and resonate with employees

Managers are often the front line when addressing mental health challenges in the workplace. EngageRocket's research found that among employees who have low levels of burnout, ~91% feel that their managers are approachable and offer them with support, and this is much higher than ~60% among those who have high levels of burnout.

Conversely, employees who are at greater risk of burnout said that they do not receive clear or regular feedback from managers.

Further, due to the stigma around these conversations, managers play an even more important role in creating an atmosphere of psychological safety.
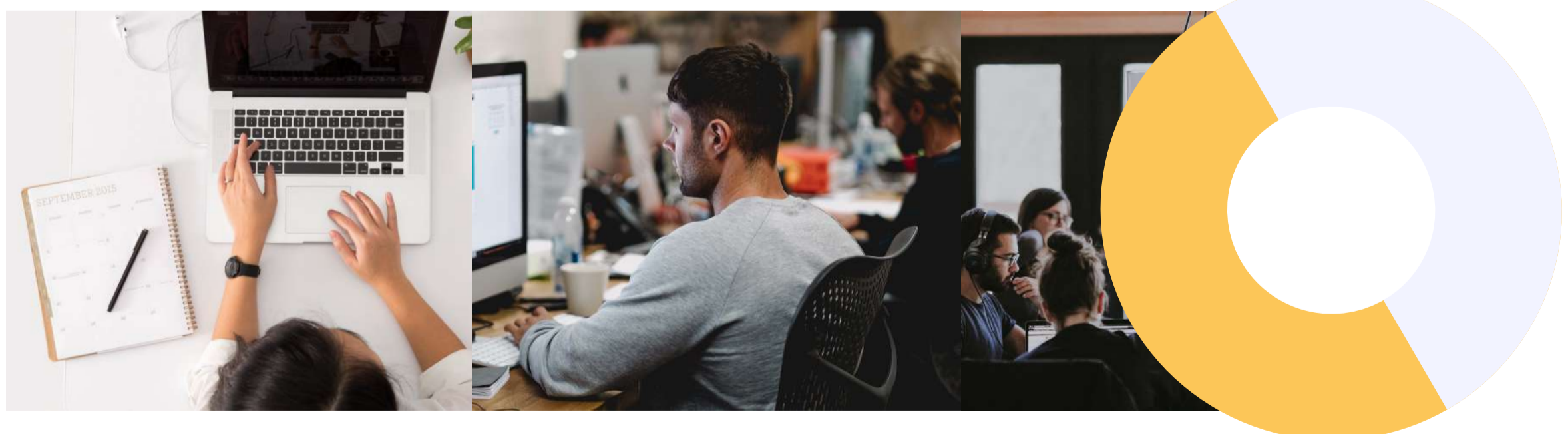
How organisations can champion mental health and resonate with employees

"A lot of issues manifest when people keep things to themselves. Being able to talk to someone, whether they are a trained professional or not, can be a cathartic experience for them. Of course, we can't take for granted that all managers have the aptitude for it, but training those who genuinely want to support their team members is a big step."

Theodoric Chew
CEO, Intellect

For this reason, companies can empower managers to handle these tough conversations with confidence. To begin with, hiring for managerial and leadership roles could be more than hard skills or work outcomes alone. Additional capacity to understand, listen, and act with empathy, could be useful for a manager addressing mental well-being challenges within their team. Even with HR-led programmes in place, individual managers must champion the cause of mental health at the team and last mile levels.

"To support the relational needs of the evolving organisation, managers will need to be empowered, enabled, and equipped with tools to help nurture teams at the ground level. HR can no longer do everything in a world that is hyperlocal and deeply diverse."

Sonali Sharma
Vice President of Product and People Science at EngageRocket
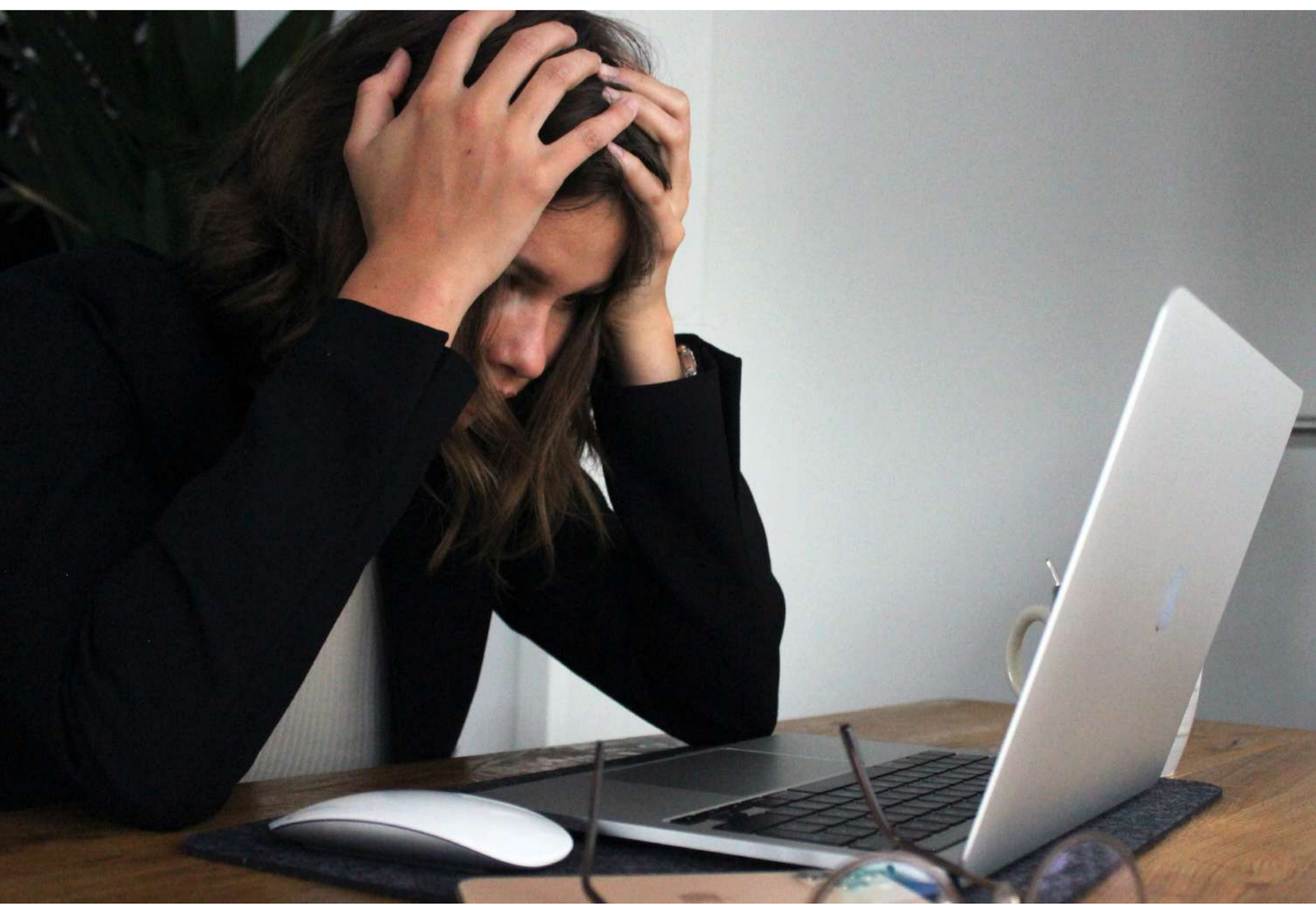
Setting managers up for success

This requires the following interventions from the company:

1   **Managers must be emotionally and psychologically equipped** to conduct mental health conversations. They need proper training through leadership courses, mentoring programmes, executive coaching, and other mediums. Equipping managers with a tool to understand team members' sentiments like EngageRocket is also crucial in identifying early signs of burnout and disengagement.

2   **Getting organisational/C-level buy-in is essential.** This will ensure that company leaders are on the same page as what is actually happening in the workplace. This will also speed up policy interventions (e.g., making flexible work arrangements to minimise stressors) when the time comes.

3   **Managers must focus on overall psychological safety even outside of mental health issues.** This means that employees should feel comfortable enough to discuss any matter they feel is relevant to their work. Ultimately, this goes a long way in preempting and eliminating the triggers of stress and conflict.

"One of the most important things managers can do to create a psychologically safe and compassionate work culture that is conducive to good mental health and positive wellbeing is to lead by example. Being vulnerable and demonstrating good self-care, coupled with authentic concerns about the team's well-being will do wonders for the team's well-being and will over time create a more mentally strong and resilient workforce."

Oliver Suendermann
Deputy Director of Clinical Psychology at National University of Singapore and Clinical Director at Intellect

Encouraging proactive interventions with 1:1 check ins and an empathic approach

Once the organisation has taken the necessary steps towards empowering managers, it is important to remember that prevention is better than cure. Right now, employee experiences are not always designed to mitigate mental wellbeing issues and help employees cope with triggers in a healthy manner.

For instance, Gallup found that <u>almost half of employees</u> received manager feedback a few times a year or less. Yet, daily feedback can boost the likelihood of engagement by nearly three times. Daily feedback and regular check-ins have a myriad of benefits – they allow managers to connect with team members on a one-on-one, human or non-transactional level. This makes it easier to detect mental health symptoms early on and act on them with empathy.


"The nature of 1:1 conversations have evolved dramatically with the advent of technology, in a post-pandemic. However, it remains one of the most relevant and powerful 'moments' for an employee where they feel connected with the organisation. Managers no longer need to use 1:1 for sharing top-down information in a Slack-connected asynchronous world. They can check-in more often and with more people, but with the same goal. It's important to use these check-ins optimally to address each part of an employee's experience for maximum productivity and well-being."

Sonali Sharma
Vice President of Product and People Science at EngageRocket

This also allows managers to be more proactive and identify the potential sufferers. Linda Rinn, Clinical Psychologist at Intellect, recommends the following indicators that managers can watch for:

- **Physical signs** like changes to personal hygiene, visible changes in weight, and signs of excessive exhaustion like falling asleep at work are common symptoms of chronic stress.
- Employees may display **behavioral and emotional changes** such as changes in punctuality, irritability, increasingly short temper, and being more social or more withdrawn than usual.
- Managers may observe **patterns of change that diverge from usual behavior**, while keeping in mind that there is no one-size-that-fits-all. That being said, it is important to treat this as assumptions that need to be clarified through having 1:1 mental health conversation with affected employees.
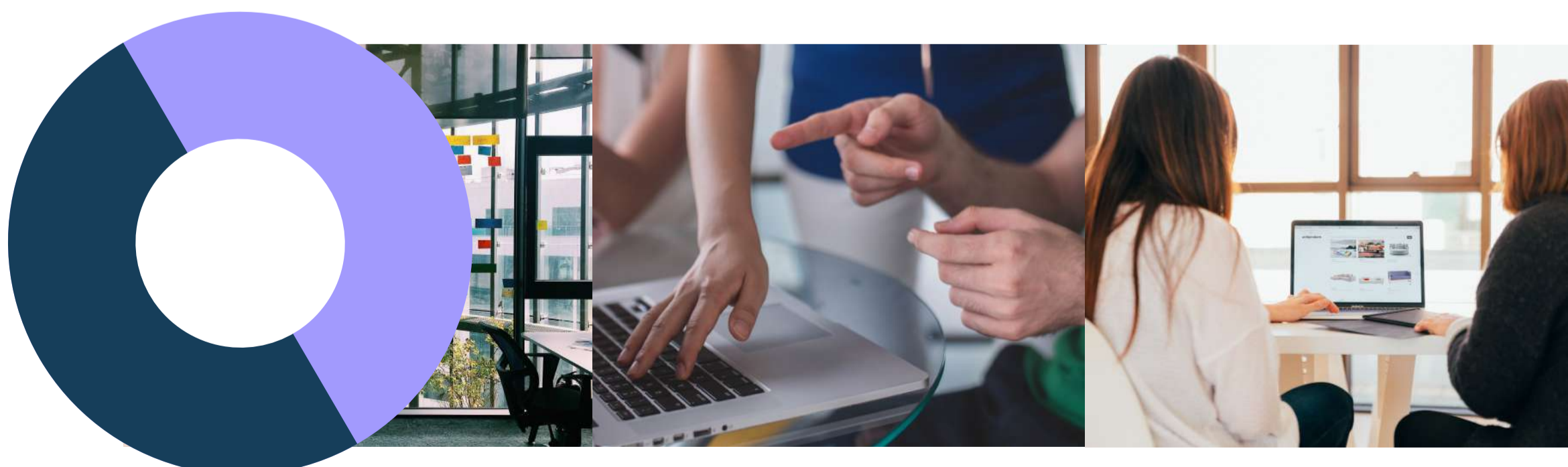
How managers can better approach mental health conversations

Productive conversations around mental health require two phases of intervention – setting the stage and speaking with the team member. Without adequate preparation, the conversation will remain a one-off activity without context or outcome. Therefore, the first phase should look as follows:

Setting the Stage

In this phase, the organisation and its managers lay the foundations for discussions and one-on-one conversations around mental health, both pertaining to individual issues as well as the larger field of mental well-being and self-care.

1

EMPLOYEES SHOULD NOT FEEL SINGLED OUT OR TARGETED IN ANY WAY

To avoid this, managers may first build a culture of regular check-ins and conversations, where they touch base with everyone on the team. Importantly, these talks should include more than just work-related matters and must invite employees to bring up issues around anxiety, stress, and even home-life stressors.

"Switching gears from work meetings to personal conversations doesn't happen overnight. It's a conscious effort that happens every day. For example, before a meeting starts, you might ask a parent how they're feeling about school reopening soon, or how a team member's part-time studies are going. The idea is to have employees see one another beyond their titles and roles."

Theodoric Chew
CEO, Intellect

2

MANAGERS MUST ACKNOWLEDGE THE SENSITIVE NATURE OF THE TOPIC

Be mindful of causing any awkwardness. They are the ones who should initiate the conversation, and create an atmosphere of psychological safety before the employee can join in.

"Especially in more traditional Asian cultures, it may be important for leaders to first show vulnerability in order to create a psychologically safe environment for the employee to share. Ideally this is a simple anecdote that is personal to the leader, shared authentically. This opens the path to sharing from the employee, with the leader committing to mutual confidentiality in the conversation."

CheeTung Leong
Co-founder at EngageRocket

3

MANAGERS MUST KNOW ABOUT BOTH VERBAL AND NON-VERBAL CUES BEFORE CONVERSING

The former includes things like greetings, asking questions, reflective statements, and even silence. The latter comprises non-verbal elements like tone, volume, eye contact, posture, expression, and gestures. By watching for these cues when employees are communicating with them, managers can anticipate issues and pick up on latent signs even without employees articulating them in detail. Learning about verbal and non-verbal communication techniques can remove awkwardness and aid in more insightful, supportive conversations, as shown below.

Communication tips for managers

Managers can benefit from Verbal and Non-verbal cues to ease mental health conversations

| Verbal Cues	Non-Verbal Cues
Seek permission. Greet your employee and ask if you can discuss the issue.	Maintain a neutral tone and match the volume of the person you are talking to.
Avoid "you" statements that may sound judgmental. Instead, lead by saying "I have noticed that..." or "I sense that..."	Whether it is an in-person discussion or a virtual call, it is important to maintain eye contact. This builds rapport, displays interest, and shows that the person is being listened to.
Ask questions, encourage sharing, and avoid interrupting the person. Be wary of asking "why" as that might sound attacking; instead, ask "how" or "when" to encourage them to elaborate.	Your posture should not seem confrontational. It is better to sit squarely with an open posture to make the person feel comfortable talking.
Use reflective statements to show empathy and summarize so then they feel heard. For example, "Sounds like that must be very difficult."	Congruence of expression is essential. Follow the nuance of the conversation to express that you understand what they are going through – for example, smile when appropriate to show empathy.
Be comfortable with silence. A healthy pause in the conversation can focus your attention and encourage team members to introspect before they share.	It is a good idea to nod to show affirmation and encourage the person to talk more without interrupting.
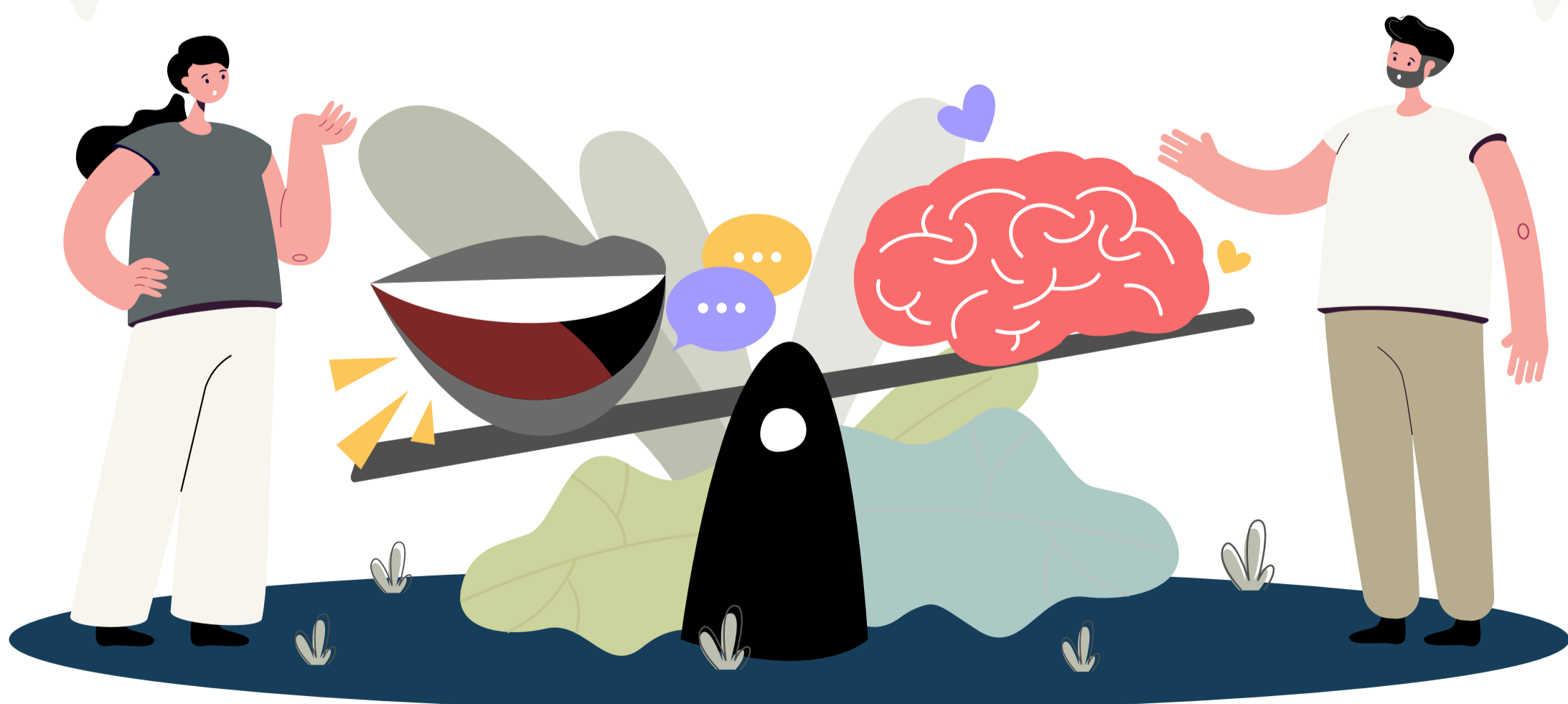
3-Step guide

"It is important to foster the feeling of "us against the problem" and not "you against your problem" by knowing how to appropriately respond when an issue is brought up."

Linda Rinn
Clinical Psychologist at Intellect

While employees may approach managers with issues, it is also crucial to start these conversations proactively and not let minor symptoms snowball. There are three steps to achieving this.

1

Step 1: Seek to understand the problem

As mentioned, most mental health struggles go unreported, particularly in the workplace. Therefore, managers need to show genuine interest and know when to start and stop probing. One may assume that one or two questions are enough to get a full picture of the situation, but this could only scratch the surface. Follow-up statements like the following can reveal hidden nuances and also make the employee feel more at ease:

- "Tell me more about that…"
- "How does this affect you?"
- "Have you had something similar happen in the past?"
- "If it's comfortable for you, I would like to hear more about…"
- "I want to make sure I understand this correctly. So, what I'm hearing is that…"

It also conveys interest, particularly when the manager maintains eye contact. At the same time, it is important to pick up on non-verbal cues if employees seem unwilling to share more, but show signs of discomfiture. For example, when their speech starts to stagger, managers should step back and start changing the topic.

"More often than not, the reality of things is that employees can struggle with their mental health on a daily basis. Yet despite this, leaders only become aware when they notice a change in behavior or when they investigate an issue relating to performance or attendance. Leaders can show genuine interest when they ask how their employees are doing from the start as that would make their employees feel that their leaders care about them, not just professionally but on a personal basis as well."

Shang Trinidad
People Experience Lead at Intellect

3-Step guide

2

Step 2: Show empathy and reflect emotions

Statements that show empathy and emotion can make employees feel more comfortable and help them open up about their personal experiences. Statements like "That is something that would have me worried, too" or "I can see why you'd be annoyed here" convey that both parties are on the same page and what the employee says is likely to resonate with the management. However, managers should not force-fit anecdotes into the conversation as this could have a counterproductive effect. Also, empathy statements should be brief so that the conversation does not shift to the manager's perspective.

"Empathy as a managerial skill has always been critical but it rose further in relevance and impact in the last two years of the pandemic. One of the most powerful ways to build empathy in communication is by listening. The good news is that there are many tools that enable managers to really listen to what their employees are saying (Feedback), feeling (Sentiment), and doing (Behaviour). It has never been more important and yet never easier to listen to your team."

Sonali Sharma
*VP of Product and People Science at EngageRocket*

3

Step 3: Offer support, not advice

Managers should be careful to cover steps 1 and 2 comprehensively before moving to this third and final step, as this will ensure that they have an understanding of the full picture. It is advisable to provide support in a manner that does not constitute only giving advice or suggestions.

Statements like "you should do this" or "you should try that" are usually not helpful. The person would not feel understood and might feel like it is them alone against this problem. Instead, managers can ask "Is there any way I can help you solve this?" or "how can we tackle this together?" or "Is there any way I can support you?" Even if the employee says no, they will feel supported as they were offered help, and they will know that there is always a recourse for similar issues in the future.

The ultimate objective of mental health conversations is to ensure employees feel more understood and supported and less alone. These three steps – together and in this order – reinforce the sense of psychological safety and **foster a feeling of "us against the problem."**
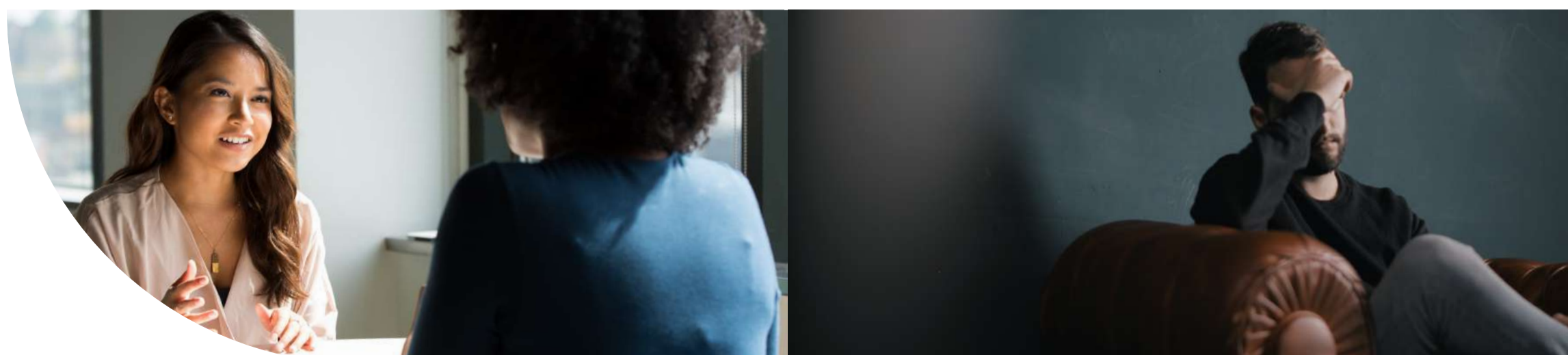
Do(s) and don't(s)

While preparing the stage and conducting the conversation properly will set managers and their team members up for success, one should remember a few pitfalls and best practices. Keep in mind that this is not an exhaustive list, and employers should explore each individual's needs and be as creative as possible when thinking about how to address the issue.

1 DO explore solutions collaboratively

Instead of focusing on the "why" or "how" managers can pay greater attention to the solution aspect. The goal is to mitigate the impact of a stressor or challenge on one's productivity and remove any workplace-related mental health triggers. The manager must discuss with stakeholders before offering a resolution and should not over-promise on any perk or benefit.

"After going through the 3 steps, a positive conversation would lead to a mutual agreement on key practical support measures. Managers could bring up suggestions about how to address the issue, but the final support measures have to be decided together."

Linda Rinn
Clinical Psychologist at Intellect

2 DON'T take away opportunities for engaging work

In certain scenarios, self-esteem and anxiety issues can be exacerbated when employees feel that their work is not meaningful or lacking in motivation – for example, if a person is suddenly shifted from a customer-facing, daily interfacing role. Managers should not arbitrarily reduce work volumes and in the process, remove opportunities for engaging work. Instead, they could communicate with employees regularly, keep checking in on what works for them, and tweak their support as needed.

3 DO provide greater psychological space

Managers must provide regular opportunities to discuss, review and reflect on employees' positive achievements in the workplace. This can be complemented by additional training or coaching, more positive and constructive feedback, and increased support from the manager. For example, the simple act of saying thank you can reassure employees and alleviate anxiety. Mindful interventions like a check-in after a difficult client call can create greater psychological space for conversations.

Do(s) and don't(s)

4

DON'T overstep boundaries

This is a common pitfall managers may face when broaching the topic of mental health for the first time. When sensing that the employees are not comfortable discussing certain topics (through verbal and non-verbal cues) or if you notice you might not be the best person to support in a certain situation, it is better to step back from the conversation.

While managers are often at the front line, other forms of help and different resources may be required in different situations. In such scenarios, managers could refer the employee to support from mental health professionals. A personalized coaching app like Intellect will connect the employees with behavioural health coaches to work with them in a safe space so that they can scale obstacles in daily life and thrive. Utilizing the app will also help managers maintain employees' privacy and confidentiality. This is also a particularly handy tool if there is limited rapport or issues between the manager and employee.

5

DO practise honesty and transparency

Honest communication, in every aspect of the employee experience, can improve mental health in the workplace. This includes being objective about feedback, sharing team performance data transparently, communicating with employees on policy changes, and respecting privacy. Further, a manager who is transparent and forthcoming about their own mental health experiences could encourage employees to discuss the issues that they face and work towards a resolution.

"I believe the most important aspect of being honest and transparent, or giving honest and transparent feedback is building a trusting relationship with your team members. Humanizing yourself can make your team members feel more receptive to opening up about challenges he or she is facing both inside and outside of the workplace."
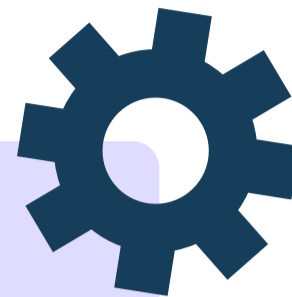
Marcus Theodore
Head of People at Intellect
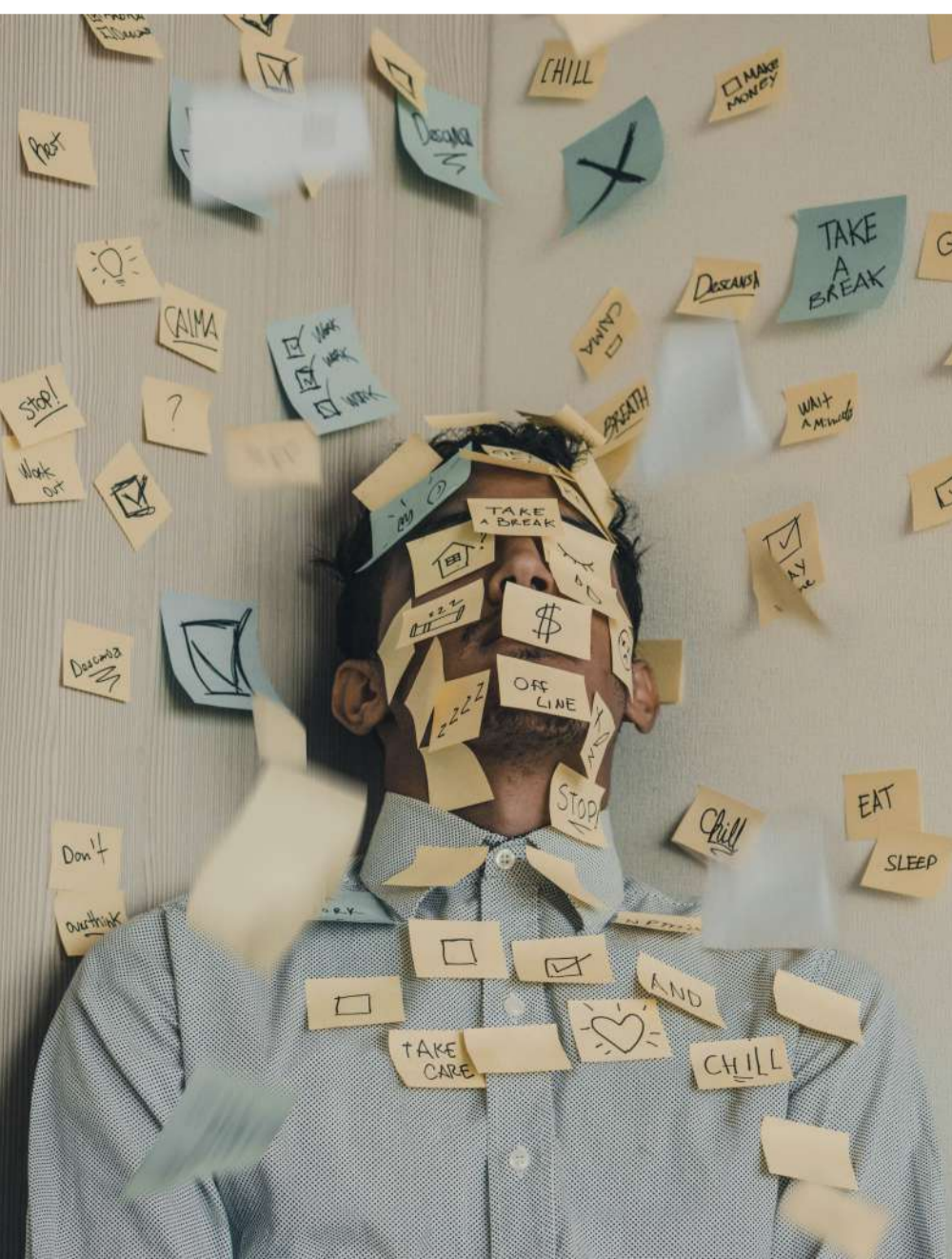
Summary: Fostering the feeling of *"us against the problem"*

Setting the stage

- Employees should not feel singled out or targeted in any way.
- Managers must acknowledge the sensitive nature of the topic
- Managers must know about both verbal and non-verbal cues

Conducting proactive mental health conversations in 3 steps

Step 1: Seek to understand the problem

Tip:

Ask follow-up questions like "tell me more about that", "how does this affect you?" and "have you had something similar happen in the past?" to reveal hidden nuances.

Pick up on non-verbal cues if employees show signs of discomfiture, e.g.: when their speech starts to stagger, step back and start changing the topic.

Step 2: Show empathy and reflect emotions

Tip:

Show empathy, such as by stating "That is something that would have me worried, too" or "I can see why you'd be annoyed here" to convey that both parties are on the same page

Empathy statements should be brief so that the conversation does not shift to the manager's perspective.

### Step 3: Offer support, not advice

Tip:

Provide support in a manner that **does not constitute only giving advice or suggestions**. Statements like "you should do this" or "you should try that" are usually not helpful.

Managers can ask "Is there any way I can help you solve this?" or "Is there any way I can support you?" Even if the employee says no, they will feel supported as they were offered help.

5 Dos and Don'ts to remember during the conversation

1. DO explore solutions collaboratively
2. DON'T take away opportunities for engaging work
3. DO provide greater psychological space
4. DON'T overstep boundaries
5. DO practice honesty and transparency
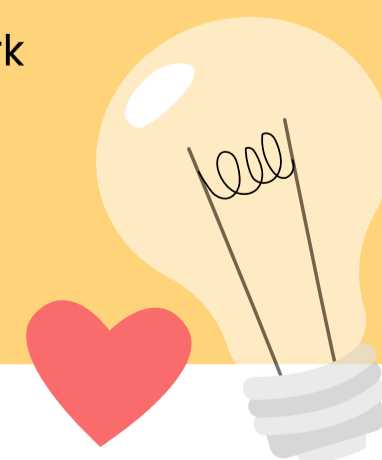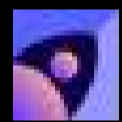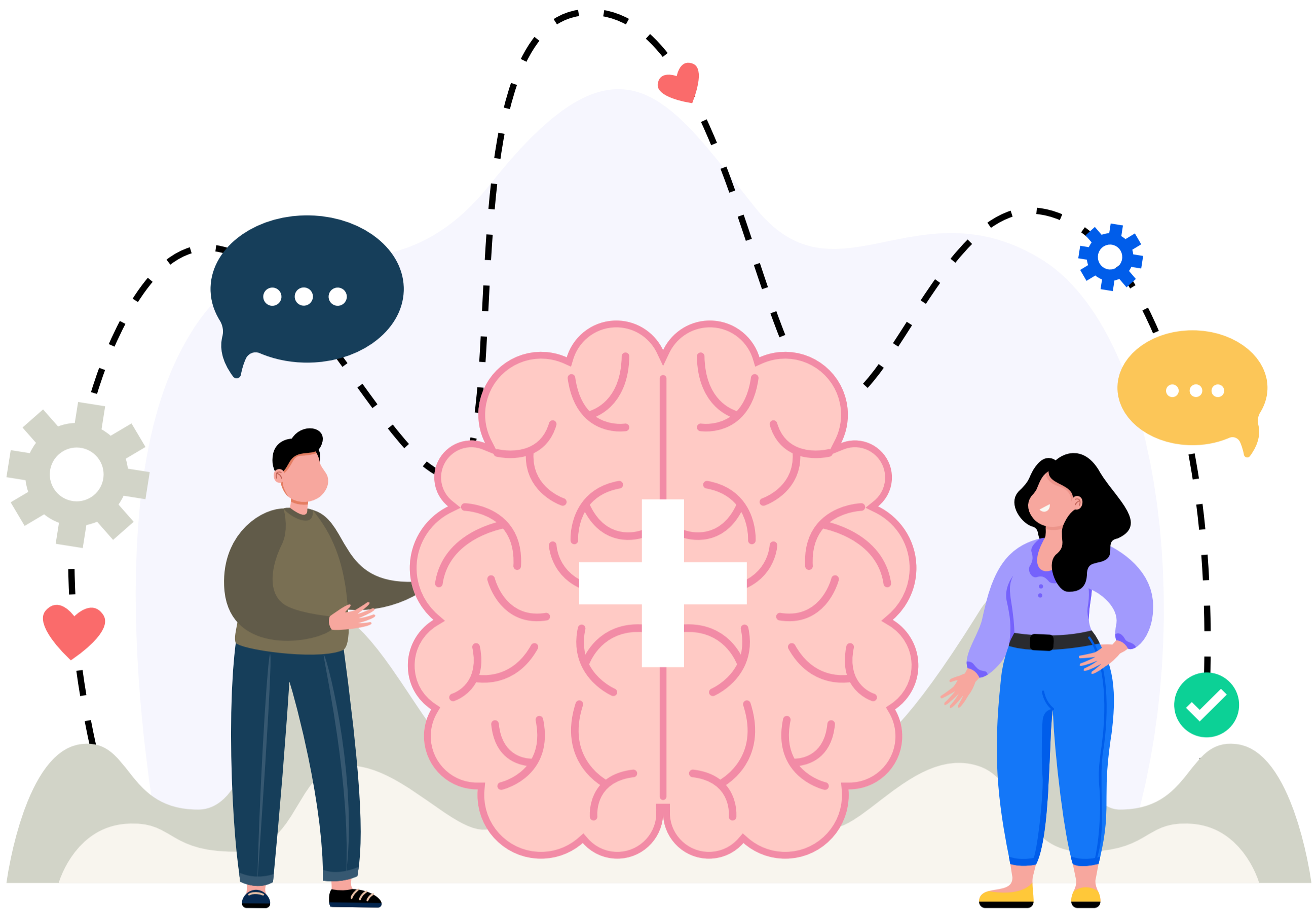
EngageRocket

EngageRocket is APAC's fastest-growing employee experience technology provider that empowers companies to enable human connections at scale. Companies across 14 countries and 20 industries such as Sephora, StarHub, Love Bonito, and Epson use EngageRocket to drive sustainable people and business outcomes with relevant and timely people insights.

Learn more at www.engagerocket.co

Intellect

Intellect is a modern-day mental health company with a mission to make mental healthcare and well-being support accessible for everyone. Today, as the largest and fastest growing mental health tech company in the Asia-Pacific, over 3 million members and leading organisations globally trust Intellect to provide personalized, evidence-based well-being support. Intellect was also selected as one of Google's Best Apps of 2020.

Learn more at www.intellect.co