



**ENVIRONMENTAL
FINANCE CENTER**



Tips for Retaining a Happy, Healthy Water Workforce: Mental Health Awareness for the Water Utility Workforce

March 26, 2026



- Water utility board and council workshops, asset management.
- Career with federal and state natural resource agencies.

My experience:

- **Occupational Therapy**: Pediatrics, rehabilitation, and psychiatry (pain & stress management)
- **Workplace Health Promotion**: Health risk reduction and population health management
- **Organizational Change & Stress**: What drives resilience and adaptive capacity? Influence of leaders/managers.
- **Brain Research**: What supports individual and organizational health?

My mission – To help build healthy and high-performing individuals and organizations through a shared responsibility for resilience.

A Special Connection

(Source: Center for Workplace Mental Health)

- Male dominated industry, with men experiencing the highest suicide rates
- Toughness and strength are valued, mental health conditions, or seeking help, may be seen as personal weakness
- Stigma and fear of consequences associated with mental health issues and help seeking
- Shame and fear of judgment
- Chronic pain
- Seasonal and cyclical work contributing to family and financial strain
- High stress and deadline driven work
- Limited job control
- Long work hours including potential for large volume of overtime leading to fatigue
- Separation of family when working away from home

When it comes to mental health conditions, the best outcomes occur when people seek and connect with care early.

What is Mental Health?

- Mental health includes emotional, psychological, and social well-being.
- Affects how we think, feel, act, handle stress, relate to others, and make choices.
- Everyone has mental health — it's about wellness, not illness.

Why Mental Health Awareness Matters

- Mental health is essential to overall well-being and workplace productivity.
- Water utility work can be high-stress and physically demanding.
- Raising awareness helps reduce stigma and encourages early support.

Its Time to Raise Awareness

IT'S OKAY TO NOT BE OKAY

If you're depressed, that's okay

If you're overwhelmed, that's okay

If you're frustrated, that's okay

If you're hungry, that's okay

If you're exhausted, that's okay

If you're stressed, that's okay

If you're anxious, that's okay

IT'S NOT OKAY TO STAY THAT WAY.

**CARE Team is here to help!
Visit wichita.edu/care for support.**



📍 @wsucareteam 🌐 wichita.edu/care 📞 (316) 978-3149 📍 Rhatigan Student Center - room 231



Common Issues in the Workplace

- Stress and burnout
- Anxiety and depression
- Substance use disorders
- Post-traumatic stress (especially in emergency roles)

Warning Signs to Watch For

- Talking about wanting to die or feeling hopeless
- Withdrawing from others
- Dramatic mood changes
- Giving away possessions or saying goodbye
- Increased substance use

Creating a Supportive Workplace Culture

- Encourage open conversations about mental health
- Educate employees and leadership
- Offer peer support and check-ins
- Use respectful and non-judgmental language

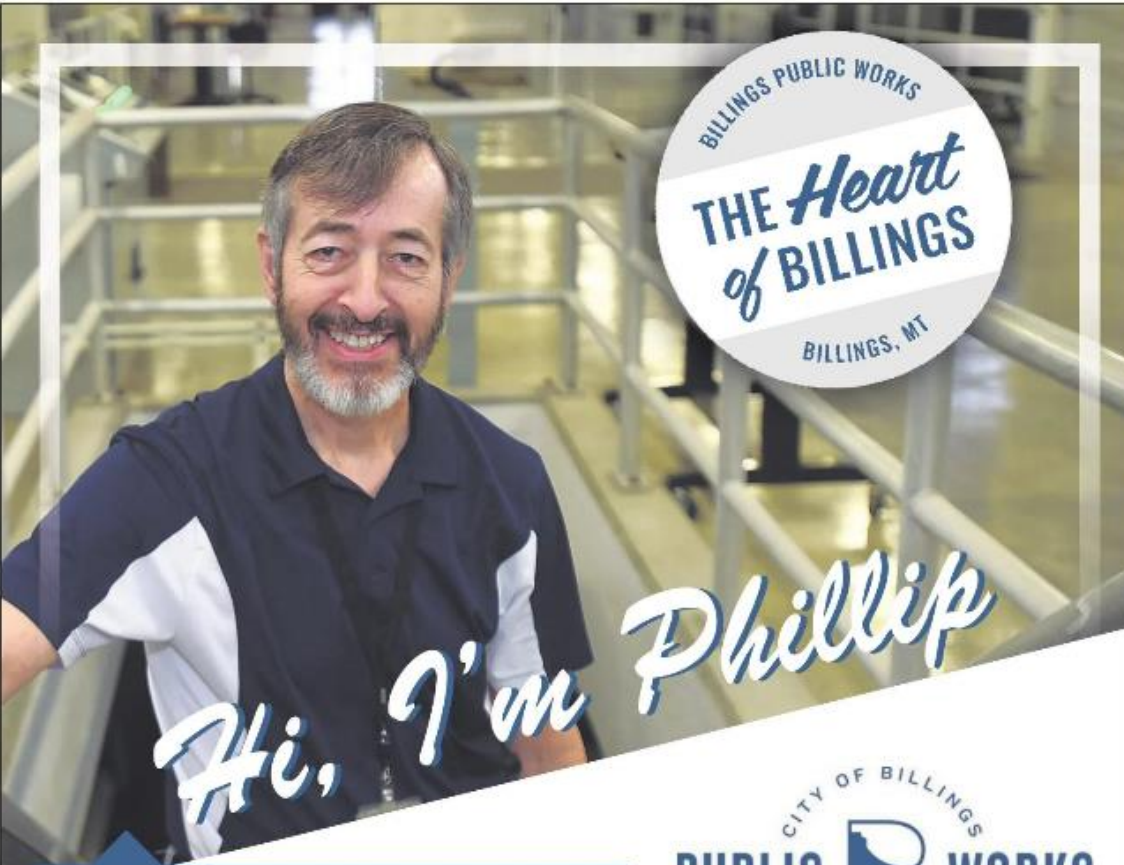
Supporting Your Workforce

- Implement Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs)
- Provide mental health days and flexible leave
- Train managers to recognize and respond to mental health concerns
- Create a mental health resource hub
- Host regular wellness workshops

Building a Resilient Workforce

- Offer training in stress management and mindfulness
- Encourage physical activity and healthy routines
- Foster teamwork and social support
- Recognize employee achievements and contributions

The Billings Montana example



BILLINGS PUBLIC WORKS

THE Heart of BILLINGS

BILLINGS, MT

Hi, I'm Phillip

CITY OF BILLINGS

PUBLIC WORKS

EXCELLENCE • INNOVATION • INTEGRITY

🔧 ⚙️ 🚛 🏗️

"I've been working for the city for 27 years and I do what needs to get done. It's important to keep our facilities clean and safe. It's not unusual for me to mop 2 miles of hallways and floors, vacuum another mile and a half of carpets and clean 50 desks during the day. I really enjoy my job and make my own fun as I go through the course of each day."

- PHILLIP TILLEY, Building Service

Building a Resilient Workforce

- Recognizing automatic thoughts, emotions, and reactions that aren't helpful, learning to pause and be curious, and then being more intentional with responses.
- Sleep habits
- Communication skills, especially asking open ended questions and getting the other person talking.
- Compassion -- for self and others

Building a Resilient Workforce

- Breathing -- with a full exhale
- Living our values
- Smiling and laughter
- Enjoying the outdoors

Do We Have To? 😊

Encourage physical activity and healthy routines, foster teamwork and social support, breathing, smiling.

The DC Water example:

<https://www.youtube.com/shorts/AgMr5VSI1pA>

Creating a Crisis Response Plan

- Have a clear, confidential protocol in place
- Train supervisors to respond to mental health emergencies
- Connect with local mental health professionals
- Communicate the plan regularly to staff

But....

- Use your plan, if established.
- Listen and trust your instinct.
- 911 is a resource.

Free and Low-Cost Mental Health Services

- 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline – call or text 988
- SAMHSA Helpline: 1-800-662-HELP (4357)
- Local community mental health centers
- Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs)
- Online counseling platforms with free trials

Other Good Resources

- Mental Health America, <https://mhanational.org/>
- Health Action Alliance, <https://www.healthaction.org/mentalhealth>
- Headspace App, <https://www.headspace.com/>
- Calm App, <https://www.calm.com/app>
- Mindful Momentum, <https://mindful-momentum.com/mbps/> (for information on peer support training)

Key Takeaways

- Mental health is everyone's responsibility
- Early support saves lives
- Free help is available
- Leadership and culture make a difference
- Together, we can foster a healthier workforce

Thank You

- Together we can support mental health in the workplace.
- Questions or feedback?

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