

NATIONAL CULINARY REVIEW

MODERN BARBECUE AND GLOBAL SMOKE

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MENTAL HEALTH TODAY

Steps you can take right now to improve health and well-being for yourself and staff // By Jeffrey Spear

Restaurant and foodservice work is relentless, demanding an ever-present smile, even when you have bad-mannered customers or insensitive co-workers. At this pace, coupled with irregular schedules that leave little time for rest, recovery and self-care, chefs, line cooks, servers, bartenders, hosts and managers are confronted with environments that are both physically and emotionally challenging. All too frequently, this leads to exhaustion, depression and substance abuse.

According to Culinary Hospitality Outreach and Wellness (CHOW), an organization whose mission is to support wellness within the hospitality industry, 63% of food, beverage and hospitality professionals suffer from depression. CHOW also reports 84% feel stress from their job, 65% report using substances at work and 53% feel they've been pushed to their breaking point.

Adding to this, there has been an unspoken rule among restaurant workers that, while just about anything can be discussed in the kitchen, issues related to mental health and well-being are swept under the rug and never openly discussed. For many, this creates feelings of isolation and leads to emotional damage.

Although conditions are slowly changing, restaurant workers are still reluctant, or do not know how to express their feelings. Fortunately, there are a growing number of individuals and support groups that are taking an interest, providing the love and support that have been missing for far too long.

This includes **ACF Chef Jeffrey Schlissel**, owner and executive chef of the Bacon Cartel, a private

chef and catering consultancy, and co-creator of the Farmers Craveable dinner series in Tampa, Fla. Originally from West Palm Beach, he says conflicts at a previous workplace motivated him to make changes in his life. "I learned about my own self-worth and the emotional impact restaurants can have; I had to give up my [restaurant] business to preserve my mental health," he says.

It was around that time that Chef Schlissel noticed other restaurant workers were enduring similar hardships linked to stress and abusive behaviors at work. In addition, they were coping with less-than-ideal conditions at home and struggled with various types of addictions. "These workers were in a bad place, had no idea how to communicate their problems or even know where to turn for help," he says.

In the wake of these realizations, he has become a staunch advocate for health and well-being in the workplace. By telling his own stories, he has helped restaurant owners and workers learn how to engage with each other, make valuable connections and encourage each other to seek support from wellness organizations familiar with the darker side of the restaurant industry.

As the author of the forthcoming cookbook and memoir, "Craveable Obsessed: Memoirs of a Food Addicted Chef," Chef Schlissel offers recipes and talks about his experiences in the restaurant industry, identifying the negatives he endured coupled with the positive steps he took to improve his outlook and overall mental health. The book also includes a comprehensive list of health and wellness support organizations that are set up to assist with industry-

specific challenges. In addition, as co-host of the Walk-In Talk podcast, Chef Schlissel continues to promote health and wellness in the restaurant industry and discusses similar obstacles faced by local farmers.

Based on the issues that Chef Schlissel has identified, as well as those highlighted by many of the support organizations he recommends, these are seven easy-to-implement things that you and your co-workers can do — right now — to promote enhanced mental well-being.

1. **Reward victories.** Even if they are small achievements, take the time to say, “good job.” Let your co-workers know they are valued.
2. **Shake hands.** When your co-workers arrive, shake their hands and welcome them to work. After service, shake their hands again and wish them well.
3. **Tell stories.** Use family mealtime to talk openly about how you feel. Have an open conversation with your co-workers about mental health. Make it safe to acknowledge that it’s OK not to be OK. Make this the new norm.
4. **Become a leader, not a boss.** Make an effort to engage, mentor and inspire your co-workers. You’ll find they’ll become more involved, happier and willing to contribute.
5. **Hold their hand.** Sometimes individuals are too distressed to look after themselves. Take a personal interest, show love and support, and guide people to the resources that will be most helpful.
6. **Adjust your schedule.** In light of ongoing labor shortages, some restaurants are finding that closing for a couple of days each week helps minimize staff burnout and attrition without significant revenue impact.
7. **Stay connected.** Even when they’re not on the job, your co-workers might be feeling burned out or depressed. Reach out with frequent texts, phone calls, video chats and emails. Ask how they’re doing. Take an interest in their situation and overall well-being.



ACF Chef Jeffrey Schlissel is a strong advocate for mental health management for foodservice professionals.

There are numerous organizations offering much needed support to the foodservice community. Visit [acfchefs.org/ACF/Resources/Wellness](https://www.acfchefs.org/ACF/Resources/Wellness) to check out a comprehensive list.