



# STEWARDS CORNER

Monthly Newsletter for Union Stewards

## Mental Health Matters: How can you help?

We may have stereotypes of who is dealing with stress and other mental health issues, but we need to cast those aside. Recently, during a discussion on mental health, a fit, jovial, tattoo-covered brother said, "People may not realize it but I struggle. The hardest part for me is when you go home, and try to get out of it, the stress," Another member followed up, "I can't shut it off."

These feelings can be all too familiar among our union siblings, especially those in difficult or contentious workplaces. Aside from work and union stress, we know those in our union family are dealing with illness, divorce, problems with their children, domestic violence, and financial worries, among other things.

The ancient Greeks told a story about a man named Sisyphus whose eternal sentence in Hell was to push a rock up a hill every day only to have it roll back to the bottom before reaching the top. The torture isn't pushing the rock; it's the inability to fulfill the desire to reach the top. Work without purpose is a recipe for despair.

### We Aren't Alone

Our unions can play an important role in creating community in our workplaces and give members a sense of belonging to something bigger than they are. When we think of each other like a family, our unions are support systems. There's a reason we refer to each other as "sister," "brother," and "sibling." We build social identity through these connections. In psychology, this is known as "meaning-making."

Humans need food, water, and shelter for our bodies, but we also need a sense of belonging and purpose. With a union, we build strength through community so that even if we have to move mountains, we're never alone.

### We Bargain Mental Health

Researchers have found that the issues we negotiate can support mental health, and the grievance procedure can aid in members sense of having a voice. What workers need is "decent work." Fundamentals like our contractually guaranteed rights to breaks, health care, decent and predictable wages, healthier and safer workplaces, and job protections matter. If you know what's going to happen and you feel secure, that reduces stress and anxiety.

Our union has also launched initiatives that broaden our impact in these areas:

- ▶ New hire orientations language to make new members feel welcome
- ▶ Domestic violence leave for sisters, brothers, and siblings that need support
- ▶ Health care that includes mental health coverage
- ▶ Diversity initiatives aimed at creating safe workplaces for all

That rock rolls a lot easier if we put key structures in place.

### How can you help?

First, take care of yourself by exploring ways that help you reduce your stress, find someone you trust to talk, talk to a therapist. As they say, put on your mask first!

In the USW, we pride ourselves on making workplaces safe and healthy. And just as our Stewards and Health, Safety, and Environment Committee members are not medical doctors, we don't need shop floor therapists. But we can help by talking to our union siblings.

Below are some tips from Waleed Sami, a professor of psychology at the City College of New York. Dr. Sami studies the impact of unions on workers' minds, hearts, and spirits (his preferred way for us to think about mental health). As you read, reflect on how you can have conversations with members that need a hand finding their way to counseling and other forms of care.

### Nine Helpful Suggestions When You Notice Your Co-Worker's Mental Health Decline

1. Remember, relationships decline when someone's mental health is suffering. The most important thing you can do is try to reach out and form a connection or keep a connection going that may weaken.
2. Avoid saying phrases such as: "What is wrong with you?" "Why are you acting this way?" "do you have depression?". These phrases put people on the defensive, and they may want to hide how they feel from you to avoid feeling blamed or judged.
3. Try to engage them in conversation and see what is going on with their closest relationships. This usually involves friendships, family, and romantic relationships. Mental health declines when a relational loss or challenge exists in someone's life.
4. Avoid offering advice on how to "fix it." Unless they ask directly for your suggestions, avoid giving them advice. Listen and try to reflect what they are saying back to them so they feel understood.
5. Avoid gossiping about your co-worker's mental health decline with other co-workers. They may hear and learn about it, alienating them further.
6. Sometimes self-destructive behavior outside of work that starts to interfere with work is a sign of someone struggling with their mental health. Try to express concern about the behavior without being too judgmental.
7. Workplace anger, arguments, frustration, and bullying often indicate that someone is struggling to control their emotions through healthy outlets. This should alert you to more profound things going on with this person.



**8.** Remember that sometimes folks need to know that support is there even when they aren't feeling their best. Writing notes, dropping off food at their house, and inviting them to group outings so they feel included goes a long way in helping someone who is struggling with mental health feel less alienated.

**9.** If you have a good and trusting relationship with your co-worker, they may need your support in seeking help. Gently suggest they seek professional support if the

situation is warranted, but always be careful and sensitive to the situation. Many folks do not trust mental health professionals and prefer to rely on family or religious communities' support.

## Sorting out the Differences: Grievances versus Gripes

As a steward, your job is to determine whether the issue a member brings to you is a “grievance” or a “gripe.” These terms are often used interchangeably but are very different. This article explores their differences and some good approaches to handling them. Be sure to follow the links to past articles if you need help understanding some of the terminology used in this article or want to explore related points more in-depth.

### What's a Grievance?

Most collective bargaining agreements (CBA) [define a grievance](#) within the grievance procedure article. Each CBA is unique, and the definitions vary. Generally speaking, a grievance refers to a perceived violation of the CBA by the employer. It typically involves a formal process in which a union or an individual employee files a written document with their employer stating the alleged breach (AKA violation) of their obligations under the CBA. Generally, violations of these items are grounds for a grievance:

1. CBA
2. Past Practice
3. Relevant employment laws
4. Employers' policies and rules
5. Unjust disciplinary actions

### All Grievances are Gripes – But Not All Gripes are Grievances

So, what's a “gripe”? For starters, they are not in the list above. Typically, a gripe expresses dissatisfaction or discontent about the workplace, a perceived management slight, or an issue that falls outside the CBA or established past practice. To say it another way, a gripe is when a member is irked about something and wants their steward to act – and to act quickly.

If a gripe doesn't violate items 1 – 5 above, it isn't a grievance,

and the grievance procedure isn't the appropriate way to handle it. If you do, you will wind up with a backlog of issues that management won't be willing to settle. It's no coincidence that serving as a steward is one of the most challenging jobs in the Union because you may have to tell a coworker you've worked alongside for years that they don't have a grievance.

Still, we should listen to gripes and hear the person out. In many instances, these are widely-held and deeply-felt issues among the affected members of a department or unit.

Consider the nature of the gripe. Does it have any legitimate grounds worth pursuing? Personality clashes between members and management are a frequent problem for stewards, and we need to handle them honestly and with empathy. And they may or may not be a grievance. Has the personality conflict transitioned into harassment or differential treatment? How you handle gripes shapes your credibility as a Union representative to members and management.

### What's in Your Toolbox?

There's an old expression: “If the only tool you have is a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail.” Stewards have other tools besides the grievance procedure. There are often situations where you can use your [persuasive skills](#) and a [good working relationship with front-line supervision](#) to work out an acceptable solution. Sometimes your best asset is your ears and using them to “listen” somebody to an answer by encouraging them to talk out a problem.

Consult your Union leadership or Staff Representative if an issue is questionable. It might be necessary to request information and demand to bargain, organize a collective action, or grieve it. The bottom line is that stewards and grievance chairs must constantly make judgment calls on issues brought before them. A good, [thorough investigation](#) will only [improve your judgment](#). You can address valid grievances with the grievance procedure but also think seriously about the gripes that members bring to you. How we listen to them matters to members.



<http://usw.to/teachingtuesdays>

All classes are held at **11 AM (EST)** and **8 PM (EST)**

- September 5th, **Investigating Grievances (11 AM) (8 PM)**
- September 19th, **Mental Health Matters: How Can You Help? (11 AM) (8 PM)**
- October 3rd, **Just Cause (11 AM) (8 PM)**

