

Mental Health and the Workplace

Nearly one in five US adults lives with a mental illness, according to [federal statistics](#). There is no typical profile of an employee struggling with a mental health issue, and issues can range from mild to severe. Anyone can experience a mental health issue at any time, and the signs are not always obvious.

Given the overall prevalence of mental health issues in the general population - and the exacerbation of many mental health concerns as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic - the work impact cannot be ignored. Even a relatively mild mental health issue can lead to absenteeism, presenteeism, declines in work performance, damaged relationships with coworkers and many other concerns.

When these effects are compounded across an entire organization, it becomes clear that it is in an employer's best interest to address employee mental health proactively. Employers can play a key role in:

- Destigmatizing conversations about mental health;
- Encouraging employees to reach out for help;
- Implementing policies that support employees' mental health needs; and
- Connecting employees to resources that offer needed help and support.

Common Mental Health Concerns

An employee's mental health condition may affect the workplace in a variety of different ways, regardless of whether employees are working on site or remotely. Issues related to an employee's mental health can influence their overall work performance as well as their relationships with co-workers, supervisors and vendors.

Understand common mental health conditions so that it may be easier to recognize an employee who may be struggling or experiencing challenges due to a condition. For example, the same symptoms may apply to various mental health conditions. As a result, do not be quick to "diagnose" an employee with a particular condition or address their mental well-being. Also, good and poor mental health is highly individualized - one person's presentation of good mental health can be another's presentation of poor mental health.

Mental health conditions and concerns that are prevalent today include:

- **Depression:** A person with depression may experience an unusually low mood that is long-lasting and persistent. Other symptoms may include feelings of unhappiness and hopelessness, crying, a lack of energy, low confidence, changes in weight, little or no appetite, feelings of guilt and no longer enjoying activities that they usually do.
 - Loneliness and isolation may also lead to an employee's struggle with depression. For example, an employee may feel isolated and lonely due to the COVID-19 pandemic and/or an extended remote work arrangement. Such feelings may lead to a person to develop depression or experience depression-like symptoms.
- **Bipolar disorder:** A person with bipolar disorder moves between periods of mania (highs) and periods of depression (lows). Highs and lows can vary in intensity and can last for days, weeks or even months.

- **Anxiety:** A person can experience anxiety in many different ways. However, when it becomes extreme and levels of fear and worry become severe, a range of disorders may be triggered. Symptoms may include feeling nervous, restless or tense, having a sense of impending danger, panic or doom and having an increased heart rate.
- **Panic attacks:** An extremely heightened state of anxiety can trigger a panic attack. Intense fear or discomfort can quickly create an accelerated heart rate, sweating, trembling, shaking and breathlessness.
- **Obsessive-compulsive disorder:** A person with an obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) has unwanted thoughts or images that continually enter their mind, causing them extreme anxiety. A person with OCD usually develops certain behaviors they feel compelled to perform to ease the anxiety caused by their obsessive thoughts.
- **Psychosis:** A person suffering with psychosis perceives and interprets things very differently from others. The main symptoms include hallucinations (seeing and hearing things that do not exist) and delusions (having staunch beliefs in things that are not shared by others). A delusion commonly shared by those suffering from psychosis is that there is a conspiracy to harm them.

Stress may not rise to the level of an official medical diagnosis, but it is a mental health concern that should be acknowledged by employers. For example, individuals experiencing stress may be careless and unsafe at work and be frequently absent or tardy. Additional symptoms of stress include anxiety, negative thoughts, worry, irregular eating and sleeping patterns and behavioral issues.

An employee who experiences excessive stress may also have feelings of burnout which not only negatively affects the employee and their performance but also that of the "team." Burnout typically stems from feelings of unfair treatment at work, unmanageable workload, lack of managerial support and a sense of not being appreciated. In times of extreme stress or pressure, whether it be external or internal, take care to note signs of burnout from employees.

Signs Indicating Poor Mental Health

Employees often spend more time with their co-workers and supervisors than with their own family and friends. As a result, an employee may make comments that may be shared with or overheard by a co-worker. Similarly, a supervisor may notice a drastic change in behavior or an increase in absences.

The following are some potential warning signs of poor mental health. However, do not assume that an employee who displays one or several of these signs is experiencing poor mental health. An employee may be experiencing a different form of health issue or a personal problem they may not feel comfortable disclosing.

Emotional and psychological signs include:

- Anxiousness or a feeling of hopelessness or distress;
- Loss of confidence and/or motivation;
- Noticeable mood swings;
- Feeling of resentment;
- Aggression and/or tearfulness;
- A sense of feeling low and/or confused;

- Difficulty relaxing;
- Struggling to absorb information; and/or
- Lapses in memory.

Behavioral signs include:

- Noticeable decrease in engagement during meetings, activities and tasks;
- Being withdrawn at work;
- Significant decrease in productivity;
- Inconsistent performance;
- Unusual hours at work (e.g., arriving early, leaving late, emailing on the weekend or when on leave; arriving late, leaving early and taking long lunches);
- Increased absenteeism;
- Restlessness;
- Chronic inability to get along with fellow employees;
- Flippant or negative attitude;
- Tendency to overreact to problems (e.g., tearfulness, anger or outbursts); and/or
- Taking risks that are excessive or out of character.

Physical signs include:

- Poor sleep or insomnia;
- A feeling of being run down all the time;
- Fatigue;
- Aches and pains;
- Headaches;
- Drastic weight loss or gain; and
- A sudden deterioration in work habits or personal grooming.

All in all, take notice of changes to an employee's usual work productivity, behavior and routine. The changes can be small, but they can all contribute to a sign that the employee is experiencing poor mental health. For example, if an employee who is typically boisterous and outgoing begins to withdraw from others and becomes quiet and introverted, perhaps the employee is struggling with a mental health issue or suffering a personal loss that may be affecting their mental well-being.

Suicidal Behavior

Suicidal behavior can present among employees with and without mental health conditions. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), [suicide is a serious public](#)

[health problem](#), and employers should take note of certain behaviors and signs that may seem concerning. For example, the following are warning signs that may be indicative of suicidal behavior:

- Talking or posting on social media about dying (e.g., ending their life or death in general);
- Feeling or expressing a sense of helplessness or hopelessness (e.g., making comments such as "What's the point of living?" or "No one would miss me if I were gone");
- Expressing or presenting increased anxiety;
- Noticeable and extreme mood swings (e.g., uncharacteristically sad, quiet, depressed or withdrawn);
- Increased anger or rage;
- Expressing the sense that they are a burden to others;
- Mentioning the means or plan to access items for self-harm, including pills and weapons;
- Showing signs of increased substance use;
- Making comments or plans about giving away possessions;
- Inquiring about life insurance policy details, especially as it relates to cause of death and benefits; and
- Showing an interest in end-of-life affairs (e.g., making a will, and discussing preferences for funeral).

Any of the above warning signs in an employee who has suffered a personal and significant loss, such as a divorce, loss of child custody or bankruptcy, may indicate an increased risk for suicide. Similarly, other contributing factors include legal problems, an event causing disgrace or shame and substance abuse.

FMLA Leave Protections

You need to understand and comply with the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) or its state counterparts, if it is confronted with a leave request from an employee dealing with a mental health condition. When faced with a leave request, keep in mind that no two requests will look the same. As such, evaluate each request on a case-by-case basis.

In addition, when it comes to mental health conditions, be aware that COVID-19 has had a profound effect on the workforce and the wellbeing of employees. Employers may have seen and continue to experience an increase in leave requests from not only employees who are experiencing flare ups of a preexisting mental health condition that is triggered by COVID-19, but from employees who were not previously diagnosed with mental health conditions who are now experiencing stress, anxiety and fatigue. For example, COVID-19 may have caused an employee to suffer depression requiring in-patient treatment. As a result, employers need to have a greater awareness of these types of leave requests and train their supervisors and managers to be prepared to address them.

In processing FMLA leave requests, there are various considerations, such as whether the employer is covered, whether the employee meets the eligibility requirements and whether the employee's mental condition is protected under the FMLA.

If an employee works for a covered employer and meets the eligibility requirements, understand that FMLA leave for an employee's own serious mental health condition is limited to 12 weeks in any 12-month period. This leave can be continuous or intermittent (i.e., taking leave in separate blocks of time) or can be taken by reducing the employee's normal weekly or daily work schedule. For

instance, an employee may need to take leave in separate blocks of time or have a schedule that reduces the usual number of working hours to attend counseling or therapy sessions or outpatient treatment. In addition, employees may need intermittent or continuous leave to take physician-mandated stress leave. Intermittent or reduced schedule leaves may be taken for both planned treatment and unanticipated medical treatment or medical issues.

The employee must try to schedule intermittent or reduced schedule leave in order not to disrupt the employer's operations. The employee and employer should work together to figure out a schedule that has the least impact on the employer's operations.

Remember an employee with a mental health condition who does not qualify for FMLA or has exhausted available FMLA may be eligible for additional leave protections under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Additional Leave Protections

In addition to the FMLA and its state counterparts, employees may be entitled to job-protected leave to obtain psychological or other counseling under other various state and local laws including:

- Domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking leave laws;
- Crime victim leave laws;
- Paid sick and safe leave laws; and
- Paid family leave laws.

An unfortunate effect of the COVID-19 pandemic is a rise in domestic violence as a result of employees who were quarantined or required to stay home with their abusers. In many jurisdictions, employees may be entitled to leave for a family member's mental health needs as a result of such abuse. Therefore, there may be a rise in leave requests for employees to attend counseling or to seek psychological care.

These laws contain their own notice and documentation requirements. The length of leave may also vary, and each law may have requirements as to whether the leave is paid or unpaid. Employers covered under multiple laws need to determine the interaction between all applicable laws (e.g., whether the leave protections are applied concurrently) to ensure that they are administered appropriately.

Further, a few jurisdictions, such as Nevada and Maine, require covered employers to provide paid time off for *any* reason; no qualifying reasons are required for taking leave. In those jurisdictions, an employee may be entitled to paid leave when seeking care for their mental health needs.

In light of the various leave protections an employee may be entitled to due to a mental health condition, employers need to be aware of the job-protected leave requirements in the jurisdictions in which they operate as well as where their employees work.

Disability Protections

The [Americans with Disabilities Act \(ADA\)](#) prohibits an employer from discriminating against an individual with a disability and creates a duty on an employer to provide reasonable accommodations for employees with *known* mental or physical disabilities. Unlike many physical impairments, it is important to realize that mental impairments may not always be obvious (e.g., depression). Mental impairments are often difficult to spot, and possibly even more challenging to identify in remote work situations.

All of the ADA obligations apply to mental health conditions, including the duty to engage the employee in an interactive discussion when an accommodation is requested.

Employers that have 15 or more employees for each working day in each of 20 or more calendar weeks in the current or preceding year are covered under the ADA. However, employers with fewer than 15 employees should be aware that many [states and localities](#) have laws prohibiting discrimination against individuals with disabilities that have a lower employee threshold number for coverage.

The ADA protects employees who:

- Have a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities;
- Have a record of having such an impairment; or
- Are regarded as having such an impairment.

A mental impairment is broadly defined under the ADA and encompasses a wide range of conditions and illnesses, including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder. An employee with a mental health impairment may be entitled to a reasonable accommodation if the condition, left untreated, would substantially limit a major life activity. Be mindful, however, that not all employees with mental impairments will need accommodations to do their job.

Major life activities include eating, sleeping, bending, breathing, concentrating, thinking, communicating, regulating thoughts or emotions and interacting with others. In evaluating whether a disability substantially limits a major life activity, factors to take into consideration include the nature, severity and duration of the impairment, as well as the impact on the employee's functioning. Further, an impairment that is episodic (e.g., bipolar disorder) is considered a disability if it would substantially limit a major life activity when active. Also, an employee does not need to stop treatment or stop taking medications to be entitled to a reasonable accommodation.

The employee must be qualified to perform the essential functions of their job, with or without a reasonable accommodation, in order to be covered under the ADA. For example, the ability to handle stress appropriately and interact with others can be an essential function of a job. Thus, an employee with a mental disorder may not be a *qualified individual* if they are unable to manage stress and interpersonal conflict. This may rise to the level of a *direct threat* in some circumstances (i.e., an employee poses a significant risk to their own or others' health or safety, and that risk cannot be reduced or eliminated by a reasonable accommodation), such as where serious and credible threats of violence are made.

In comparison, off-handed expressions of frustration, inappropriate jokes or a rude, gruff demeanor generally do not render an employee as not qualified. Keep in mind that not every problem expressed by an employee is due to a mental impairment.

Reasonable Accommodations

Once the possible need for a reasonable accommodation under the ADA is discovered, begin a timely, good-faith and meaningful discussion with the employee (i.e., the interactive process). The purpose of this discussion is to determine what, if any, accommodations may be needed and whether the accommodation is reasonable. The interactive process should:

- Begin promptly once on notice of the need for a reasonable accommodation;
- Be individualized;
- Involve the exchange of information with the individual about their disability and work restrictions; and

- Result in a mutually satisfactory decision about the reasonable accommodation to be provided (if any).

Consider the following questions when working with an employee to determine possible accommodations:

- What limitations is the employee experiencing?
- How do these limitations affect the employee's job performance?
- What specific tasks are made difficult or impossible by the limitations?
- What can be done to help with the specific tasks?

Examples of accommodations may include a modified or flexible work schedule (e.g., in order to attend therapy appointments), remote work, more frequent breaks, music or white noise with a headset to block out distractions or a leave of absence.

However, be prepared for:

- An employee who has an emotional response;
- An employee who refuses to participate in the interactive process; and
- Difficulties identifying the appropriate accommodation.

In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic may have worsened an employee's preexisting mental illness or disorder, such as anxiety disorder or obsessive-compulsive disorder. Even if an employee did not previously seek a reasonable accommodation for their mental illness or disorder, the employee may now be entitled to a reasonable accommodation for their condition because they may have more difficulty handling the disruption to daily life that has accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic, according to the [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission \(EEOC\)](#).

If a disability is not obvious or already known, an employer may ask questions or request medical documentation to determine whether the employee has a disability - regardless of whether an employee requests an accommodation for a medical condition at home or in the workplace. Ensure that the disability-related inquiries and medical exams are job-related and consistent with business necessity. Further, an employer may ask medical questions regarding mental health if there is objective evidence that the individual is unable to perform their job or poses a safety risk based on their condition.

Any information about the employee's medical condition or reasonable accommodation request must be kept confidential and maintained in a separate file and not intermingled with other personnel documents. Access to such information should be restricted to those with a genuine business-related reason, such as:

- The employee;
- Designated HR personnel with responsibility for handling reasonable accommodation/medical issues;
- Safety and first aid personnel, if necessary;
- The employee's supervisor, on a need-to-know basis; and
- Government officials, as required by law.

Keep in mind that employers do not have to accommodate unreasonable requests, such as removing an essential job function, excusing violations of conduct rules or modifying a work schedule that would disrupt the employer's business. Further, an accommodation is not reasonable if it imposes an **undue hardship** on the employer. An employer is also not obligated to accommodate an employee with a mental impairment if that individual would create a direct threat to health or safety. An employer must be prepared to show that, at the time the direct threat determination was made, it considered:

- The duration of the risk;
- The nature and severity of the potential harm;
- The likelihood that the potential harm would occur; and
- The imminence of potential harm.

The risk must be current, not speculative or remote. In that regard, do not rely upon subjective perceptions, irrational fears or stereotypes when assessing these factors. The mere fact that an individual has a mental impairment does not create a direct threat.

Compliance Steps

HR professionals, managers, supervisors and any other individuals who may be involved in the reasonable accommodation process should receive proper training on ADA requirements and company policies and procedures, such as:

- Acknowledging accommodation requests in writing;
- Addressing what information to, or not to, request from employees;
- Providing an employee's health care provider with information identifying the employee's essential job functions;
- Maintaining confidentiality of all medical information received;
- Timely scheduling a meeting with the employee to discuss the accommodation request; and
- Documenting the discussions in a confirmation letter notifying the employee of the employer's decision regarding the reasonable accommodation or the employer's need for additional information from the employee regarding the request.

The duty to accommodate does not end once the employer provides the employee with an accommodation. On an ongoing basis, make sure that the employee's accommodation continues to be effective. The supervisor is in the best position to monitor the employee's progress with the accommodation and evaluate whether the accommodation needs to be adjusted, ended or replaced with another one.

Discrimination and Harassment Concerns

Unfortunately, mental health issues and discrimination often go hand in hand. Individuals who fear that disclosing a mental health issue will result in discrimination, harassment or retaliation may hesitate to seek the help they need.

Employers must ensure that they do not discriminate, either intentionally or inadvertently, against employees with mental health issues. Discrimination can take the form of:

- Refusing to hire an otherwise qualified individual;

- Making assumptions about an individual's abilities or capacities;
- Withholding responsibilities or desirable assignments;
- Penalizing an employee facing a mental health challenge more severely than other employees for issues such as absences and missed deadlines; and
- Engaging in many other practices that employers must take care to avoid.

However, an employer is not required to hire and may lawfully discharge an individual posing a direct threat to the safety of the workplace (i.e., a significant risk of substantial harm to self or others). In doing so, an employer may not rely on myths or stereotypes when evaluating whether an individual can perform a certain job or whether the individual poses a safety risk.

An employer must have objective evidence that an individual is unable to perform the job in question or that the individual would create a significant safety risk before rejecting the individual. Further, an employer does not have to excuse poor job performance, even if it was caused by a medical condition or the side effects of medication.

Similarly, harassment based on a mental health condition is illegal. Employers should implement an antiharassment policy and a reporting procedure to prevent and identify harassment based on mental health issues. Antiharassment policies should address the use of stigmatizing language and jokes that perpetuate stereotypes surrounding mental health and make clear that such language is unacceptable in the workplace. Supervisors and employees alike should be trained to understand and follow these policies.

If an employee requests an accommodation for a mental health condition under the ADA, the employer may not retaliate against the employee by taking an adverse employment action in response. Examples of adverse employment actions include:

- Termination;
- Suspension;
- Reduction in pay or hours;
- Placement on involuntary or unpaid leave;
- Refusal to hire;
- Increased surveillance;
- Threats;
- Poor performance evaluations; and
- Any other action likely to deter a reasonable employee from engaging in similar protected actions in the future.

Supervisors and managers should be instructed in the organization's antiretaliation policies and trained to understand what constitutes protected activity.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Mental health is increasingly looked upon as a major workplace inclusion issue and has been called the "next frontier" in diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). Left unaddressed, workplace mental health issues can lead to *presenteeism*, where employees continue to show up for work but are less engaged, less productive and less effective overall at their jobs.

Additionally, an immense stigma accompanies mental health issues in certain cultures that may make it unlikely that certain employees will come forward for help. Thus, it is a mistake to assume that because someone keeps coming to work every day that they are OK.

A more diverse team may also help individuals feel less isolated and more comfortable in reaching out for help if they need it. The following are additional tangible ways to promote mental health and well-being:

- Promote wellness via regular workshops (e.g., for exercise or mindfulness);
- Allow for work-life balance through flexible work schedules;
- Create down time for employees to take breaks;
- Encourage empathy and inclusion (e.g., to avoid workplace cliques that make people feel left out); and
- Encourage employees to use their paid time off (PTO)/vacation time.

HR should work with managers on ways to create team-building events as a substitute for in-person engagement to further reduce feelings of isolation. Employee resource groups (ERGs) can also provide a valuable communication outlet for employees - whether remote or not - to connect and improve workplace inclusion and mental health.

Microaggressions at work also can affect employee mental health. *Microaggressions* are actions or incidents that are indirect, subtle and possibly unintentional that nonetheless communicate some sort of bias against an employee from a historically marginalized group. They may contribute to injuries to the psyche that can result in depression, anger and other ailments.

Another DEI issue that relates to mental health involves *psychological safety* - the belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up about ideas, questions, concerns or mistakes. A lack of psychological safety at work may lead to heightened stress and sleep loss among employees stemming from fear and anxiety.

These potential issues could harm an employer's bottom line in a variety of ways, including:

- Lower productivity;
- Reduced employee engagement;
- Increased absences; and
- Increased attrition rates.

Accepting diversity and creating an inclusive culture for all employees is an important step in achieving psychological safety.

Employee Assistance Programs

Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) are an important part of promoting the mental health of employees because they offer a variety of services on a confidential basis. An employee can call an EAP and speak to counselors with expertise in different areas such as psychology, finance or law.

Among other things, EAPs can help employees with combating:

- Alcohol and substance use;

- Anxiety;
- Stress;
- Depression;
- Grief;
- Family and relationship problems;
- Debt and financial issues; and
- Other mental health issues.

EAP offerings can vary, but they may include mental health assessments, counseling sessions, referrals, tools, apps or other resources.

An EAP is most effective when it is integrated with an employer's other benefits, such as health plans, wellness programs and disease-management programs. EAPs can also provide training to management on how to effectively handle behavioral problems and to determine when they should recommend an EAP to an employee.

Assure employees that the EAP is completely confidential. If employees do not feel like the program is fully private, they are not likely to use it when they really need help with mental health issues.

It is also critical to make sure EAPs and benefits providers are adequately equipped to address mental health challenges. This may involve:

- Reviewing all the different resources EAPs can offer to aid employee mental health, including less-publicized options (e.g., online support groups and information and resources on childcare, elder care, mindfulness and telehealth);
- Reviewing the scope of current EAP services and determining whether changes should be made; and
- Training supervisors on how to use and publicize EAPs.

One of the biggest problems with EAPs is that employees do not realize their employer offers them or what they entail. Remind employees about any EAPs available to them, making sure to:

- Emphasize what the employer's EAP provides in terms of access to mental health professionals and counseling services; and
- Let employees know that telehealth or virtual sessions may be an option.

Telehealth/Digital Solutions

The use of telehealth (or telemedicine) is an area that has continued to grow as a key employee benefit, and digital solutions addressing mental health in particular have also become prevalent.

There are a wide array of digital offerings, apps and tools designed to help with a variety of mental health and well-being issues, including:

- On-demand therapists;
- Chat-based coaching;

- Counseling chatbots;
- Subscriptions to mental health apps;
- Meditation and mindfulness apps;
- Stress and/or anxiety reduction apps;
- Sleep apps; and
- Videos and webinars.

Employees can use telehealth benefits from home instead of going to a therapist's office or clinic. This convenience can help encourage employees to seek help because it may feel like a less intimidating way to reach out for help with mental health issues. And since digital mental health options may also result in employees having easier access to mental health professionals, they may end up using them more often.

If telehealth or other digital tools are available to employees, emphasize how valuable they can be and how employees can use such offerings to address their mental health and well-being needs. If digital health options are not being offered yet, now is the time to look into them.

However, it is important to research digital mental health options and make sure they are vetted and legitimate solutions that will help meet employees' needs. When evaluating the options, consider each solution's:

- Effectiveness;
- Accessibility;
- Flexibility;
- Ease of use;
- Ability to engage with employees;
- Privacy and confidentiality;
- Legitimacy (i.e., the credentials of the professionals involved); and
- Proven outcomes.

Supervisor Training on Mental Health

Supervisors are central to building a mentally healthy workplace. Strengthen the ability of supervisors to foster mental well-being among their teams by helping them build a supportive culture and management style. This means promoting a culture that encourages participation, delegation, constructive feedback and coaching. Training is essential, because it helps supervisors understand how their management style and practices can promote, or impair, the mental well-being of their employees.

Training for supervisors should enable them to:

- Identify and respond sensitively to workers' concerns;
- Recognize symptoms of mental health issues, including when an employee is having more than just a "bad day";

- Understand the impact of employees' mental health issues on the workplace and colleagues;
- Have difficult conversations with employees who may be experiencing difficulties in or beyond work; and
- Understand when to refer a worker to other sources of help and support, including occupational health.

By training supervisors on mental health, the supervisor gains an awareness of the importance of acknowledging and promoting the mental well-being of their employees. It also provides them with the tools to create a work culture and dynamic that encourages employees to share their feelings and concerns, should they feel comfortable doing so.

Promoting Mental Health

Promoting employee mental wellness should be a priority since it is a vital part of achieving a healthy workplace. Develop strategies that can be integrated into a variety of policies and practices, and may include:

- Monitoring workplace mental well-being using employee surveys, absence data, etc.;
- Designating an HR manager or other senior manager to be responsible for promoting mental health;
- Encouraging a healthy workplace culture of open communication and inclusion;
- Emphasizing and encouraging personal employee development;
- Ensuring that employees are equipped to cope with changes in the workplace;
- Fostering a culture that helps employees have a healthy work-life balance; and
- Promoting benefits that help employees achieve mental health, such as employer-based health services and EAPs.

Importance of Communication

Since talking about mental health may be hard for employees, it is important to normalize such conversations and make sure the workforce understands that it is an organizational priority. Consistently communicate that it is OK not to be OK and try to eliminate any stigma around discussing mental health issues. Open communication and discussion of mental health issues should increase awareness and make it easier for employees to broach the subject.

Building an open and inclusive culture regarding mental health needs to start at the top. Recruit leaders in the organization to speak out about mental health issues and share any personal experiences they may have. For example, a manager casually talking about how they often take walks during lunch to take a break and clear their heads or discussing going to therapy could have a big impact on making employees feel comfortable and safe discussing mental health.

There are also resources available that can benefit both employers and employees and can be promoted across the organization. For example, there are mental health resources provided by:

- [The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention;](#)
- [The American Psychiatric Association Foundation;](#) and
- [The Department of Labor.](#)

Highlighting Mental Health Benefits

Most employers have already made a substantial investment in benefits offerings that can help promote the mental health of their employees. However, offering these benefits alone is not enough, especially when employees may not even know they are available. An employer also needs to encourage its employees to take advantage of all the resources and benefits in its catalog by using a wide range of forums to deliver engaging benefit messages.

Make it easy on employees. Ensure they know the details about how all the benefits offerings that can help with mental health issues work and how they can access them and obtain additional information and guidance.

Since people process information in various ways, consider different methods of communicating the value of mental health benefits. Such communication methods may include emails, texts, social media, webinars, town halls and announcements on an intranet or benefits portal. But do more than just send out the information. Make sure to get the word out about benefits in a more conversational way through one-on-one meetings and manager encouragement.

Plan to communicate benefits information all year. To create and foster employee engagement, promotion of benefits offerings and information should not be communicated only when new programs are rolled out or once a year around open enrollment. Set a schedule to promote different benefits offerings and make sure mental health benefits are part of it.

Benefits vendors are also a key resource that an employer can utilize for potential resources. They are usually ready, willing and able to help HR and benefits professionals educate employees about benefits and may be a key resource in promoting mental health benefits offerings.

Ways to Help Employees Cope

Employees need to know they are supported at work, especially during times when they may be struggling with a mental health condition. Whether an employer is informed of a formal diagnosis or suspects that an employee is experiencing poor mental health, take steps to help an employee cope with the challenges they may be having at work and in everyday life.

For instance, increase your engagement with the employee on a formal and informal basis. Schedule regular one-on-one or small group meetings and create a safe place for the employee to share any challenges they may be experiencing. Encourage the employee to open up by assuring them that everyone is concerned and willing to help.

Let the employee know that their feelings are valued. Avoid making comments that may make the employee feel judged or stigmatized. Do not minimize their pain or struggle. The purpose is to help the employee cope with what they may be experiencing, not to diagnose or condemn them.

Also, consider finding other ways to connect with the employee. For example, offer to share a coffee or lunch break with them. This will provide a first-hand opportunity to observe and listen to the employee to determine how they may be handling work and life, in general. After getting a reasonable sense of the employee's mental well-being, appropriate action can be taken (e.g., directing the employee to an EAP).

However, when an employee is working remotely from home or elsewhere, engaging employees proves more challenging. There are no more walks together to the coffee machine or discussions around the conference table. That lack of in-person time eliminates the opportunity for an employer to pick up on social cues and observe physical appearance and grooming.

For remote employees, an employer should not rely on Zoom or Skype to engage with the employee. Remote workers are at a higher risk of feeling lonely, isolated and anxious because of the

lack of contact with their co-workers and others. These can all be contributing factors for other medical health conditions.

Therefore, consider scheduling a time and place to meet with the employee to talk about how they are doing. If that is not possible, schedule a call or video call. Encourage them to step away from their computer and just share what they want to share. The employee may just need someone to listen to them, so this provides them with that opportunity without being judged.

Similarly, consider scheduling an outing where all employees (remote and on-site) may be able to come together for a team activity or celebration. This will allow the employee to engage with others and help the employer determine how the employee may be doing. If gathering everyone together is not possible, schedule team activities via video where everyone is encouraged to put themselves on camera and participate.

Do not underestimate the value of *belonging*. Taking steps to engage an employee who may be suffering from a mental health condition, experiencing a personal loss or feeling isolated or helpless may prove invaluable to them and the organization. Create the safe and inclusive place where all employees, regardless of what they may be facing, can feel supported and heard.

Promoting Self-Care

All employees should feel comfortable taking the time they need to take care of their mental and physical well-being. However, the reality is that if an employee is receiving (and expected to respond to) late night and weekend emails, then the employee is given the impression that their personal time and space is not valued. Consequently, that employee will not feel empowered to spend time taking care of themselves on an emotional and physical level.

Encourage employees, especially those who may be suffering from a mental health condition, stress or burnout, to engage in self-care. Whether it means stepping away from the computer to take a 15-minute walk or taking a corporate-sponsored virtual yoga class, these "breaks" may help an employee if they are experiencing a challenging day.

However, the notion of *self-care* is more than a 15-minute walk. The organization should play an active role in encouraging employees to do what they may need to do for their own mental and physical well-being. Ensure that employees feel empowered and able to take the time and steps to care for themselves. Send regular communications that discuss the importance of self-care or advertise wellness events in a way that strongly encourages employee participation.

It is also important for supervisors and managers to acknowledge the role they play in influencing the behavior of employees. If a supervisor denies an employee who wishes to participate in a wellness event the time away from a project or meeting to do so, then the supervisor is giving the impression that the purpose of the event is unimportant. Conversely, if the supervisor makes it a point to remind employees about a wellness event and attends, then the supervisor demonstrates that the time and effort spent is valuable and worthwhile.

For an employee suffering from a mental health condition or related issue (e.g., stress or anxiety), a healthy work-life balance is especially important. For instance, an employee may need to take time away from the workday to attend a doctor's appointment. Similarly, the employee may need to "clock out" at the end of their scheduled workday in order to get to their therapy session in time. As always, be open and listen to any concerns that an employee may present as it relates to their mental well-being and be willing to work with the employee to ensure they get the support and time they need.