

Mental Health in the Workplace

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"I cannot remember the last time I did not worry, I did not spend my day worrying about so much stuff. Every day is something different. I just want to wake up and go through my day and not worry, and not wonder and not know what the future holds – because this right here sucks.....It just feels like failing, every day, at everything I do."

(New York Times, 2/7/2021)

The feelings of despair, anxiety, depression, general mental health issues, have reached a crescendo over the past year and employers are going to be faced with the challenges of a workforce grappling with complex mental health issues. The pandemic has only increased the challenges, whether financial, physical or emotional.

Studies by Kaiser Family Foundation, McKinsey and Alight, all have shown similar trends....employees are stressed, exhibiting symptoms of burnout, concerned about their financial situation (Alight: 24% say "My level of debt is ruining my quality of life"; 43% of employees surveyed said they were experiencing symptoms of burnout – 2020 Employee Wellbeing Mindset Study). And our employees are lonely and feeling isolated. In data collected by SocialPro in 2019 (Time Magazine), 71% of Millennials reported being lonely, and since the pandemic 34% in the survey said that they were always or often lonelier than before the pandemic. For all age categories, the pandemic has made the situation more complex and more widespread. Data tells us:

- An estimated 10% of the global population experience mental health issues (World Health Organization)
- Depression is now the leading cause of disability around the globe (World Health Organization)
- Depression, stress and anxiety are closely linked to increases in diabetes, heart disease and musculoskeletal issues – all driving health care costs
- Loneliness is a growing challenge for all age groups
- Parents, particularly working women, are challenged by the relentless demands of work, childcare, and new teaching responsibilities
- Addiction, both alcohol and drugs, is increasing

In a nationally represented online survey conducted by Leading Indicator Systems (LIS) in September, 2020 on mental health issues for employees and employers, the data highlighted some critical issues:

- 36% of employees are concerned about their own mental health and 40% about mental health of friends and family
- 24% of employees are concerned about their vulnerability to addiction

The key for employers to address this crisis begins with understanding the stressors that are driving these mental health issues. Two of the main culprits are the stresses of caregiving and social isolation, according to LIS data. Employees with unmet childcare or eldercare needs are twice as likely to report mental health concerns (63% vs. 33%) and two and a half times more likely to report addiction concerns (51% vs. 21%). Employees who are socially isolated (i.e., they don't have access to a support network of family, friends, healthcare or mental health services) report significant mental health concerns (55% vs. 34%). For employees facing both of these stressors simultaneously, the incidence of mental health concerns is a whopping 82%.



"It's not just the working from home, the record unemployment or the remote schooling. The coronavirus pandemic has unleashed a mental health crisis too. This is a primal scream."

(New York Times, Feb 7th)

While mental health issues have always been a challenge for employers, they have frequently been off limits and simply not discussed, certainly at the top of the house. The pandemic has made them front and center. The good news is that the issues are being talked about and CEO's and Boards have gotten involved and are playing, in many cases, a leadership role. If leaders are willing to talk about the issues, to tell their own personal stories, there is a great deal that employers can do to change the mindset, make it ok to talk about challenges in addition to providing access to support, services and tools.

As senior leaders and corporate boards have begun to listen differently, there is a growing awareness of the issue of mental health, the costs associated with ignoring the problem including engagement, productivity, retention, reputation, medical claims, and substance abuse. And, the 18-25 year olds entering the

workforce, who also have the highest prevalence of behavioral health issues, are also more willing to talk about their struggles and to ask and expect support.

In 2021, a Human Resources Executive article on the top HR trends highlighted, “mental health support becomes the norm.” “Employers will work to de-stigmatize mental health by expanding mental health benefits, creating collective health days and supporting other initiatives to improve mental healthcare.”

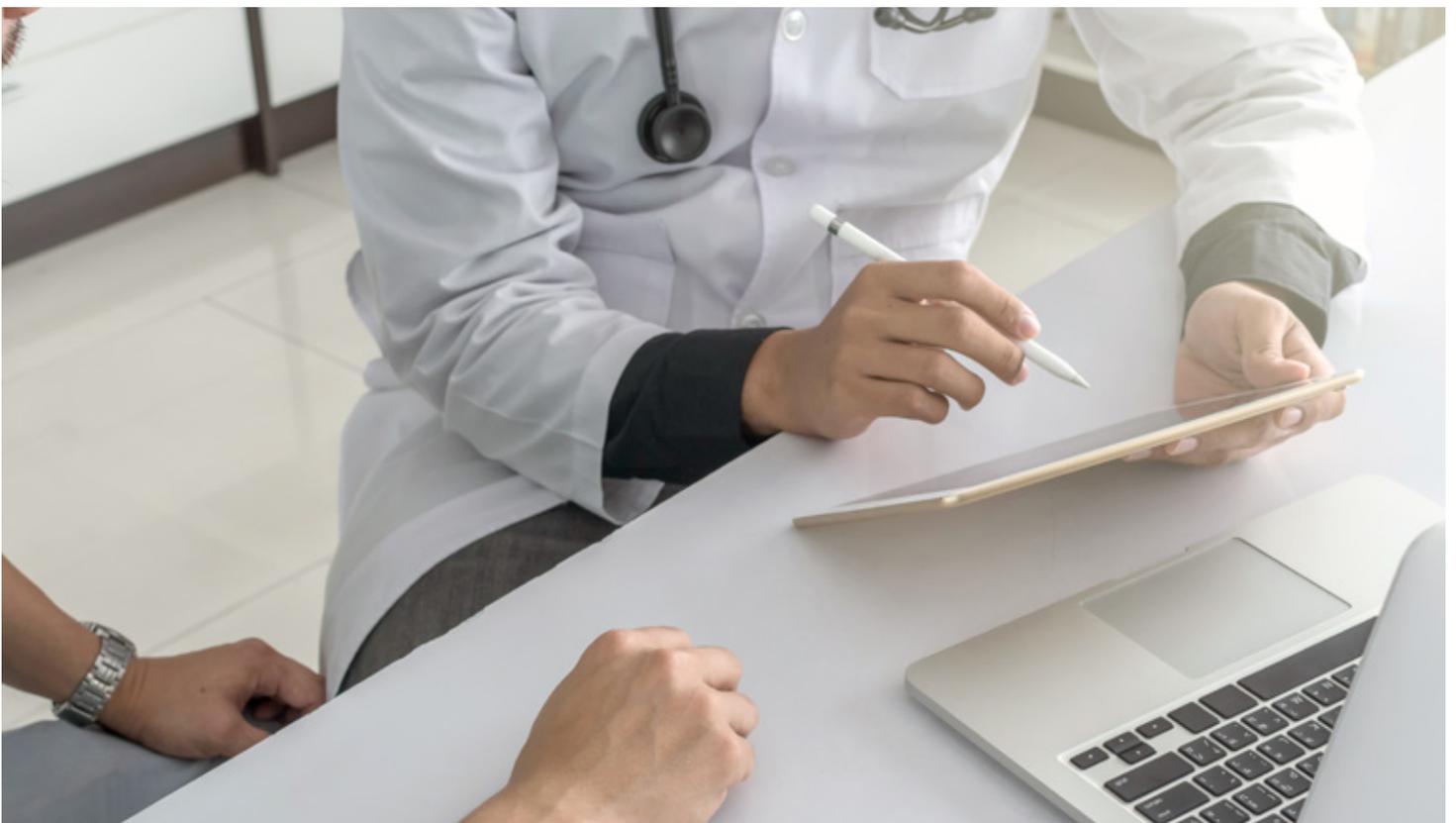
Employers are focused on having tools and services to help employees and their family members deal with a broad spectrum of wellbeing issues, from depression, anxiety, and stress, to financial wellbeing, sleep and health care. In addition to employee assistance programs, many of which offer virtual counseling sessions, there has been tremendous growth in cognitive behavioral therapy, including app- based mental health tools—apps that focus on mindfulness, stress reduction, and better sleep. Lyra, Ginger, Headspace, Big Health and many other apps have been made available to employees. Starbucks began providing therapy benefits for all U.S. employees and eligible family members last year, early in the pandemic—giving access to up to 20 sessions per year with a mental health therapist or coach at no charge—in person or via video chat thru Lyra. This is in addition to Headspace, a mindfulness and meditation app. Target has added on-line resources to help their employees improve their overall wellbeing and they have added services from Big Health, both Daylight (app to address stress) and Sleepio (app to address sleep issues). Ginger’s on demand behavioral health coaching model is being used by major

employers including Pinterest, Sephora and Dominos. In a recent study on workplace productivity, Ginger found that 69% of workers claimed that this was the most stressful time of their entire professional career and that 62% reported losing more than one hour per day in productivity, 32% losing more than two hours based on COVID-related stress.

Employers can offer the best tools/apps/ services in the world. However, if employees don’t know that they exist, or how to enroll, or feel that there is a penalty associated with asking for help, you may be spending a lot of time and money with no benefit.

Make it easy for people to find the resources they need. Communicate and then do it again. Depending on your population/culture, send information home, use email, use your benefits portal, or do all of the above.

Equally important is manager training and the role of leaders; helping to equip managers to reach out more effectively to employees, showing empathy, letting employees know that they care as well as supporting more work/life flexibility and recognizing situations where employees are at risk. Managers need to lead with empathy, to talk about their own personal journeys—we all have them. Investing in your employees, helping them navigate the challenges they are facing—working from home with kids in virtual classrooms, being at home with a significant other 24 hours a day, dealing with parents who need care and support, financial fears, fears of getting sick.



So, as we move into 2021 and think about the challenges we face, where do we need to focus?



Listen to your employees. Understand the challenges they are experiencing and make sure that your benefit programs support their needs. Consider...

- Monitor the emotional wellbeing of your employee population. Scalable and accurate methods are available to help employers keep their finger on the emotional pulse of their employees, which is critical for identifying those most at risk. Staying ahead of mental health issues provides employers the ability to proactively address them.
- Mental health tools/behavioral apps that address stress, anxiety, sleep disorders



Access to care for depression that is easily accessible and affordable can be delivered through services like Lyra and Ginger as well as EAPs—24/7, virtual, and app-based.

- Review your communication strategy. Are you reaching your employees? Do family members know what is available? If employees aren't using the services you already provide, is it because they can't find them or don't really understand how they work? If you don't know the answer, ask your employees! Don't assume that they don't need help.
- The role of leaders/managers has probably never been as complex and as critical. Provide the training to help them identify employees at risk.



Work/Life Balance is at crisis levels for many employees. Do your leave policies support working parents with scheduling flexibility or emergency child care services? A Willis Towers Watson survey concluded that 42% of employers have made or are planning enhance PTO programs, to allow for carry over of vacation days, to adjust sick and vacation day policies to reflect the needs of working families.



Wellbeing challenges have grown during the pandemic. Review your programs. Think about access to virtual fitness solutions and healthy nutrition and weight management programs. Again, make sure that your wellness programs are easy to find on your benefits platform.



Health care challenges continue to grow. Mental health needs (stress, anxiety, depression) all contribute to health issues—diabetes, heart conditions, addiction. Access to virtual care, particularly primary care has grown tremendously during the pandemic, and will likely continue post-pandemic. Many employers have waived or reduced COVID-19 costs.



Financial Wellbeing programs have continued to be added to employer benefits programs and should be considered as part of an overall wellness strategy. Student loans, childcare costs, medical costs – particularly for those in high deductible health plans – continue to place employees under high levels of financial stress. Providing access to basic financial education programs to help employees make better choices around debt, retirement accounts, HSA contributions are a critical part of a comprehensive wellbeing strategy.



Judith Verhave is founder and CEO of Next Chapter Solutions LLC, an independent advisory/consulting practice established in August, 2018. Until her retirement in April, 2018 she was an executive vice president and Global Head of Compensation and Benefits for BNY Mellon. She was responsible for the design and delivery of compensation and benefits for BNY Mellon's 50,000+ person global workforce. She was also responsible for Board of Director's support and Corporate Governance/Regulatory Affairs in addition to Global Mobility. She was a member of BNY Mellon's Senior Leadership Team.

She joined BNY Mellon in February, 2008 from Fidelity Investments where she was an executive vice president and was responsible for the delivery of HR services including compensation, benefits (health, welfare and retirement), worklife programs and expatriate services for Fidelity's 50,000 employees. She was also actively involved in Fidelity's Research Institute where she played a key role in developing Fidelity's health care policy expertise. Prior to assuming this role, she was Senior Vice President for Human Resources responsible for Fidelity's global investment business including talent management, succession planning, workforce planning, compensation and employee relations.

She was a member of the Senior HR Leadership Group. In addition, she spent several years supporting the development of Fidelity's retail business in Japan.

Before joining Fidelity in 1989, Ms. Verhave was vice president and Chief Human Resources Officer for DDS, a start up health care company. Prior to joining DDS, Ms. Verhave was a consultant and research associate for Braxton Associates, a strategy consulting firm.

She holds a B.A. from Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota. She is a member of the Board of Directors at Castlight Health where she is a member of the Compensation and Talent Committee and the Nominating and Governance Committee. In addition, she is a member of the Advisory Boards of Vertus, Big Health, and Ginger IO, as well as an Advisor to Maven, Mt. Sinai, and Fertility IQ. She retired in July 2018 as Chairman of the Board of the National Business Group on Health. She is also an Officer of the Handel and Haydn Society, Chair of the Personnel Committee and on the Executive Committee.

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