## WHAT EMPLOYERS CAN DO TO SUPPORT
# EMPLOYEE MENTAL HEALTH

**Mental well-being includes mental health but goes far beyond treating mental illness.** One main roadblock that employees face when it comes to their mental well-being is chronic stress, which can lead to a lack of sleep, which in turn can exacerbate workplace stress. It's up to employers to implement various strategies in their organizations that are designed to support employee mental health. The following strategies are among the most common that employers across the country are focusing on.

# MENTAL HEALTH & YOUR WORKPLACE

**What is Mental Health?** An employee's mental health includes how they think, feel, and act, as well as their emotional and social well-being. Additionally, and employee's mental health can change over time, depending on factors such as their workload, stress, and work-life balance.

## Employee Mental Health by the Numbers

*According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness*
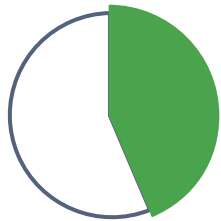
An estimated **43.8 American adults experience a mental illness** in a given year.

Serious mental illness costs the U.S. **$193.2 billion** in lost earnings annually.

This means **1 in 5 Americans** are affected.

**Less than 50%** of those with a mental illness receive treatment.

**10th** Suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the U.S.

**90%** of those who die by suicide have an underlying mental illness.

**Depression** is the leading cause of disability worldwide.

**Approximately 10.2 million adults** have co-occurring mental health and addiction disorders.

**WS WOODRUFF SAWYER**

# Create a Supportive, Stigma-free Environment

One of the best ways that employers can support employee mental health is through company culture. Company culture is the personality of a company and the environment in which its employees work. It is the unifying element that holds everyone in an organization together. Unlike an established mission statement, culture encompasses the written and unwritten behavioral norms and expectations of those within the company.

> Establishing a **stigma-free, supportive culture** that prioritizes and values employee mental health will go a long way in **improving mental health** at the workplace.

Many employers assume that creating this type of culture is expensive, but there are a variety of cost-effective strategies that employers can use to create a supportive culture. Here are some of the simplest ways to cultivate a supportive and stigma-free culture.

- **Communicate the importance of mental health awareness**—Many employees feel ashamed to ask for help or fear for their job's security if they talk about mental health issues they may be experiencing. While great social steps have been made to break down the negative stigma that's commonly associated with mental health, there's still work to be done in the workplace. Employers need to open lines of communication between senior leadership, managers and employees to start a dialogue about mental health. When employees hear their leaders talking about supporting mental health and even talking about mental health issues they've experienced, the negative stigma starts to fade away and employees begin to feel more comfortable talking about their struggles or asking for help when they need it.

- **Encourage employees to prioritize their mental health**—Companies that spread awareness about prioritizing mental health tend to have happier and healthier employees. Distributing information about recognizing the signs of mental illness, stress and burnout, and general overall wellness will keep mental health a top-of-mind concern. Moreover, to create a culture that is supportive of employee mental health, employers should build in mental health days to their paid time off programs

and encourage employees to take a mental health day responsibly if they need one.

- Check in with employees—Employers that regularly check in with their employees to see how they are doing and whether they need any additional resources are better equipped to make changes to their benefits offerings to support employee mental health. For example, if an annual or biannual employee engagement survey reveals that a majority of employees feel extremely stressed out at work, employers will be able to address this properly. On the flip side, if employers only check in after a problem has been brought to their attention, it's more difficult to properly manage and develop a strategy that works for all parties involved.

Investing in cultivating a culture that prioritizes and supports employee mental health will help diminish the negative stigma that's often associated with mental health. Moreover, when employees feel that their employer supports their mental health, they are more willing to get the help they need if they are struggling, which benefits both the employer and the employee.

## Tackle Workplace Stress

Nearly 80% of Americans consider their jobs stressful.

In fact, according to the American Institute of Stress, 46% of employees reported that their workload was the biggest cause of their workplace stress, and 1 in 4 employees view their jobs as a top stressor in their life.

While it may not be possible to eliminate job stress entirely for your employees, you can help them learn how to manage it effectively. Common job stressors include a heavy workload, intense pressure to perform at high levels, job insecurity, long work hours, excessive travel, office politics and conflicts with co-workers.

Moreover, work-related stress is more strongly associated with illness and health complications than financial or familial stress. Lowering stress can lower the risk of medical conditions and can help employees feel better on a day-to-day basis. You can implement various activities to help reduce employee stress, which can improve health and morale—and productivity. As an employer, you can take several steps to help employees reduce their work-related stress and achieve mental well-being.

- Make sure that workloads are appropriate.

- Have managers meet regularly with employees to facilitate communication.

- Address negative and illegal actions in the workplace immediately—do not tolerate bullying, discrimination or any other similar behaviors.

- Recognize and celebrate employees' successes. This contributes to morale and decreases stress levels.

Aside from addressing job-related issues, you can implement a variety of activities and initiatives to help reduce stress. Some suggestions include the following:

Provide a designated space where employees can sit quietly and use meditation to alleviate their stress.

Offer exercise classes—exercise is a great way to relieve and even prevent stress. Offer a variety of class times (e.g., before and after work, or during lunch) as well as various types of classes—such as yoga and kick-boxing.

Provide employees with the education and tools to manage time and tasks, to cope with daily stressors and to prevent stress from damaging their health. You can present a stress management class or provide educational materials.

Establish and promote an EAP. If an employee is significantly stressed, it's possible that they may seek unhealthy ways to cope with their stress. Offering an EAP can help employees get the help they need.

Additionally, the U.S. Surgeon General recommends that employers:

Implement organizational changes to reduce employee stress, including redefining roles and responsibilities, as well as providing reasonable accommodations, including flexible scheduling and telecommuting.

Include mental health services as a covered benefit under their health insurance and encourage employees to take advantage of such benefits.

Another thing that employers can do is offer healthy food options at work. A study from the United Kingdom revealed that eating lots of fruits and vegetables is beneficial to your overall mental health. If you combine these recommended initiatives, you're more likely to see positive results and a higher ROI than if you only offer one initiative focused on mental well-being.

By giving your employees the tools and resources they need to reduce their workplace stress, you can help them be

well on their way toward achieving a state of mental well-being. Openly communicate your organization's commitment to cultivating the mental well-being of your employees. Too often, employees don't seek out mental health services because they feel ashamed. By communicating your commitment to mental well-being, you will incorporate it into your organization's culture and everyday way of life. Doing so will help encourage employees to seek the services they need.

## Prevent and Address Employee Burnout

When workplace stress isn't addressed or is severe, employees are at risk of burning out. If employees experience burnout, they are more likely to be unproductive, miss days of work and even leave the company. Employee burnout is a trending HR concern, and for good reason. In 2019, the WHO decided to classify burnout as a workplace syndrome, communicating its serious stance on burnout and the dangers it presents.

According to the WHO's International Classification of Diseases, doctors can diagnose an employee with burnout if they exhibit the following symptoms:

• Exhaustion or energy depletion

• Decreased engagement at work, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job

• Reduced productivity or efficacy

For some employees, the negative effects of burnout extend beyond their work life and into their home and social lives. Moreover, burnout can increase an employee's risk of getting sick or developing a chronic condition. Since burnout is the result of prolonged and chronic workplace stress, employers must learn how to recognize the signs of stress and develop mitigation strategies before stress turns into burnout.

## Prevent Workplace Bullying

Workplace bullying can take many forms—it can be directed at specific people or related to certain work activities. Specific definitions of bullying vary, but many describe it as negative behavior targeted at an individual, or individuals, persistently over time.

Workplace bullying can include, but is not limited to, the following:

• Ignoring or excluding

- Assigning unachievable tasks

- Spreading malicious rumors or gossip

- Delegating meaningless or unpleasant tasks

- Making belittling remarks

- Undermining co-worker integrity

- Withholding information deliberately

- Undervaluing contributions

- Degrading others in public

Bullying can cause psychological health problems, such as depression, and physical health problems, such as sleep difficulties or stomach pains. In general, targets of bullying feel a sense of isolation. In some cases, workplace bullying can leave the victim so traumatized that they feel powerless, disoriented, confused and helpless. Workplace bullying can also result in:

- Decreased productivity—Bullying directly affects a victim's confidence and is likely to decrease his or her productivity at work. Victims may also experience high anxiety, which can be very distracting and debilitating. Reduced productivity is bad for business and can lead you to discipline the employee, take away responsibilities or possibly terminate him or her. You may not realize the employee is being bullied, and therefore do not have the chance to offer any counseling or other assistance.

- Increased absenteeism—A bullied employee may go to great lengths to avoid a high-stress situation at work. Calling in sick or using a large amount of paid time off at once are common tactics used to avoid a bully. Other employees may have to make up the extra work, possibly resulting in overtime, complaints or even more bullying behavior. An excessive number of lost working days benefits no one.

- Tarnished reputation—Victims of bullying are likely to talk to friends or family about what is going on and how they feel about it. This information can spread quickly and sour your company's public image. A poor public image is especially destructive to a company that depends on the public for patronage, such as a restaurant or a landscaping company. A negative image can also deter job-seekers from applying to your company, making it more difficult to recruit new employees.

Workplace bullying is a common occurrence, and it's up to your organization to develop strategies and policies to deter it from occurring.

You can control the risk of bullying in your workplace by following these tips:

- Develop a workplace bullying policy and follow it. Use clear language to define what

behavior your company considers to be bullying:

- – Include information on how to report bullying.

- – Document, investigate and follow up on every report of bullying.

- – Make it clear that employees will not be retaliated against for reporting bullying.

- Establish expectations of appropriate behavior and the consequences for employees who fail to comply with those expectations.

- Provide training, education, information and awareness on workplace bullying for all employees.

- Provide clear job descriptions that include an outline of the specific roles and responsibilities for each position within the workplace.

## Address Fatigue in the Workplace

Workers who are fatigued in the workplace are less productive, less focused, experience more health problems and are more likely to be involved in a job-related safety incident. In addition, fatigue causes more absences from

According to a study published in the Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, **38% of American workers** surveyed experienced "low levels of energy, poor sleep or a feeling of fatigue" during their past two weeks at work.

work, both from the tiredness itself and also from accompanying medical problems.

Fatigue in the workplace is a serious problem. Fatigue management can be a relatively easy and inexpensive wellness initiative to help alleviate this problem among your employees. Here are some simple ideas to consider:

- Offer employee educational materials to address the general issue of fatigue, including why getting adequate sleep is so important and tips for getting better sleep.

- Cultivating certain habits can contribute to a better night's sleep. Encourage employees to eat nutritiously, exercise regularly and limit their consumption of alcohol, tobacco and caffeine.

- If sleep disorders are an issue for your workforce, consider offering counseling or referrals for treatment.

These general changes in the workplace can also effectively address fatigue and its accompanying risks:

- Install proper lighting, designate quiet break areas and offer healthy food options in break rooms.

- Consider adjusting policies to allow for more frequent and restful breaks.

- Use machinery and equipment that eliminates or reduces any excessive physical demands of your employees. This can include ergonomic furniture and anti-fatigue matting.

- Ask employees what time(s) of the day they are most tired, and think of ways to address those times (e.g., offering a short extra break, providing a healthy snack option or allowing them to listen to music). This is especially important for employees who work in safety-sensitive jobs, where fatigue is a major hazard.

Take a look at your individual job descriptions and workloads as well to see if there may be a reason why a certain person or department may be struggling with fatigue. If you see that a job description is unbalanced or has had responsibilities added to it over the years,

consider the following:

- Redesign the job to include a variety of mental and physical tasks instead of all physical or all mental.

- Eliminate any excessive demands from a job either by deeming them unnecessary or sharing those responsibilities with another employee.

- Introduce job rotation in an effort to limit both mental and physical boredom and fatigue.

## Provide Care-giving Support

As the baby-boom generation continues to age, it is likely that younger employees will take on caregiver responsibilities. Of the 129 U.S. benefits managers surveyed by the Northeast Business Group on Health (NEBGH) and AARP, 66% agree that care-giving is a growing concern for their workers. Forty-five percent of these managers say that care-giving benefits are one of their top 10 priorities for health and benefits issues.

According to a survey by the National Alliance for Care-giving and United Healthcare, a large number of employees may be "closet caregivers" who fear that their boss or organization will think they're not committed to their job if they also provide care for a loved one. This stressor, in addition to the

stressors of working while taking care of an ill, elderly or disabled loved one, can lead to employees experiencing chronic stress. Chronic stress is not only bad for your employees and their well-being, but also for your organization and its bottom line.

Implementing care-giving benefits has been a step taken by many employers across the country to help alleviate some of the stressors care-giving employees face. By offering care-giving benefits at your organization, you will not only establish a culture that is supportive of caregivers, but you will also be giving your employees the tools they need to effectively manage their dual responsibilities.

## Evaluate Your Benefits Offerings

In addition to rolling out new initiatives to support mental well-being at your organization, you should look to the benefits you offer to ensure that they support mental well-being, too. Evaluate your current health plan designs. Do they cover mental health services? Evaluate your programs and policies. Do you have an EAP? Do you have a policy regarding workplace bullying or flexible scheduling? What about a paid time off policy that includes mental health days. Reviewing the offerings that your organization provides

is essential to creating a culture that supports employee mental well-being.

In similar fashion, look to see what voluntary benefits you can offer to support mental well-being. Consider offering simple perks like financial planning assistance (as financial stress often contributes to poor mental health), employee discount programs (where employees can receive gym memberships or stress-reducing massages or acupuncture at a lower cost) and EAPs to support your employees.

## Expand Telemental Health Offerings

Telemental health involves providing mental health services using live, interactive video conferencing. In other words, a patient doesn't need to drive to a doctor's office to receive mental health treatment—he or she simply needs to log on to a computer. Telemental health is a cost-effective way to improve access to specialty mental health services and also bridges the gap between the social stigma and mistrust of mental health providers that exists in many communities.

Numerous studies have shown the effectiveness of telemental health services. For example:

The provision of telemental health services to patients living in rural and under-served areas has significantly reduced psychiatric hospitalization rates.

Low-income, homebound seniors experienced longer lasting effects of telemental health than those who received in-person mental health services.

Mental health providers rarely have to perform any physical services on their patients, so telemental health is more plausible than other types of telehealth services.

There is little or no difference in patient satisfaction with telemental health when compared with face-to-face mental health consultations.

The availability of mobile devices makes it easier for people to access mental health professionals who would otherwise be inaccessible.

Expanding your health benefits to include coverage of telemental health services can help employees who are struggling with mental health issues while also helping you keep overall health care costs down.

## Don't Underestimate Management Training

One of the most significant problems hindering mental well-being at work is the stigma that surrounds mental health. Despite the recent moves in society toward destigmatizing mental health, issues still persist. To ensure that no stigma surrounding mental health exists at your organization, it's important that you properly train management in recognizing the signs of mental illness, excessive workplace stress, workplace bullying and fatigue. Moreover, managers should be trained to handle potentially difficult conversations with employees surrounding their mental health. Ultimately, they should be prepared to speak openly about mental well-being rather than avoiding the topic. Visit the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's "Workforce" webpage to learn more.

# MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE SCORECARD

**A study from the Mental Health in the Workplace Summit** found that the mental illness is the leading cause of disability or U.S. adults ages 15 to 44 and that more workdays are lost to mental health-related absenteeism than any other injury or illness. That's why it's so important that your organization creates a culture that supports employees' mental health. Use this scorecard to evaluate how supportive of employee mental health

**INSTRUCTIONS** Begin by answering the questions below. Each response will be given a numerical value depending on the answer. After completing the questions, total your score using the scale.

**YES** 0 pts | **NO** 2 pts | **UNSURE** 2 pts

| | Question | Yes | No | Unsure | PTS |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Does your organization offer benefits that include coverage for mental health services? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | |
| 2 | Does your organization have a standardized procedure for addressing mental health concerns? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | |
| 3 | Are your managers trained in recognizing the signs and symptoms of mental health issues? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | |
| 4 | Does your organization provide resources for employees to learn about mental health? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | |
| 5 | Does your organization encourage employees to speak up if they're struggling? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | |
| 6 | Do you offer an employee assistance program? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | |
| 7 | Does your organization promote the importance of mental health? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | |
| 8 | Do you offer general workplace stress mitigation tips? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | |
| 9 | Do you regularly check in with employees about the mental health resources your provide? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | |
| 10 | Do you regularly communicate the mental health initiatives you provide to employees? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | |

**TOTAL SCORE**

■ **0-6 pts** Low risk   ■ **7-13 pts** Moderate risk   ■ **14-20 pts** High risk

**WOODRUFF SAWYER**

# WORKPLACE WELLNESS **SCORECARD**

**A healthy workforce is demonstrably more productive,** engaged, and cost-efficient. Unhealthy employees cost employers billions of dollars each year from things like lost productivity and emergency room visits. However, simple wellness initiatives can help lower expenses and establish a more secure bottom line. Are you take the appropriate steps to save money at your organization?

**INSTRUCTIONS** Begin by answering the questions below. Each response will be given a numerical value depending on the answer. After completing the questions, total your score using the scale.

**YES** 0 pts | **NO** 2 pts | **UNSURE** 2 pts

| | Question | Yes | No | Unsure | PTS |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Are educational wellness posters featured visibly around the office? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | |
| 2 | Do employees have ready-access to health care education materials? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | |
| 3 | Does your organization utilize wellness programs or initiatives focused on employee health? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | |
| 4 | Does your organization offer any disease management programs? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | |
| 5 | Does your organization offer any nutritional education programs? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | |
| 6 | Is your organization doing enough to lower employee stress? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | |
| 7 | Is your organization actively promoting smoking cessation practices? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | |
| 8 | Has your organization recently benchmarked its wellness programs against industry competitors? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | |
| 9 | Has your organization ever conducted a health fair? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | |
| 10 | Do you communicate regularly with employees about ways to stay healthy? | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | |

**TOTAL SCORE**

■ **0-6 pts** Low risk    ■ **7-13 pts** Moderate risk    ■ **14-20 pts** High risk

**WS** WOODRUFF SAWYER

# CONCLUSION

In today's times, it's essential that employers prioritize their employees' mental health by destigmatizing mental health at the workplace, learning more about mental health and offering programs that are designed to support employee mental health. How a workplace is structured can either help or exacerbate an employee's mental health. By developing helpful programs and communicating with your employees, your business should be able to minimize the impact of poor mental health, which will result in happier, healthier employees.

For more information about promoting employee mental health, please contact Woodruff Sawyer today.

**WS**

# ABOUT WOODRUFF SAWYER

**As one of the largest insurance brokerage and consulting firms in the US,** Woodruff Sawyer protects the people and assets of more than 4,000 companies. We provide expert counsel and fierce advocacy to protect clients against their most critical risks in property & casualty, management liability, cyber liability, employee benefits, and personal wealth management. An active partner of Assurex Global and International Benefits Network, we provide expertise and customized solutions to insure innovation where clients need it, with headquarters in San Francisco, offices throughout the US, and global reach on six continents.

### For more information
Call 844.972.6326, or visit woodruffsawyer.com

Find out why clients choose to work with Woodruff Sawyer

### Subscribe for Expert Advice and Insights
Sign up to receive expert advice, industry updates and event invitations related to Employee Benefits and/or Business Risks.