



The Elephant in the Room: Mental Health and the Workplace

by **Ruth Hunt** | *Buck, a Gallagher company*

If co-workers see a fellow employee with their arm in a sling, many will ask how it happened and offer encouragement. But if a co-worker is feeling the effects of anxiety, depression or other mental health challenges, it's likely they're being quiet about it and that few colleagues will ask how they're doing. For the most part, mental health remains a sensitive subject in workplaces today—the elephant in the room that everyone knows is there but is hesitant or even afraid to confront.

And yet the needs are urgent. A historic low of 31% of people in the United States say their mental/emotional well-being is excellent, according to a December 2022 Gallup survey.¹ Worse yet, while one in five adults has a mental illness, less than half get help, according to the National Institute of Mental Health.²

Despite multiyear public service campaigns in the media, and messaging by many progressive employers to normalize talking about mental health, many workers remain afraid to speak up or seek help.

Mental Health Is Health

The World Health Organization defines *mental health* as “a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community. It is an integral component of health and well-being.”³

Mental ill-health can be viewed on a range from stress, fatigue and burnout from job or family issues; to anxiety, panic

or grief; to depression or various clinical psychoses; to addictions and substance misuse; and even to suicidal ideation or thoughts of harming others. Society's reaction to stress and mental illness is slowly changing due to awareness campaigns, but stigma remains—in large part stemming from a lack of understanding as well as barriers including access to cost-effective treatment. The stigma can create a sense of shame and defeatism. Individuals may feel reluctant to ask for help, fearing social attitudes that could lead to mocking and threaten career opportunities.

It's time to see the elephant that walks in the door to work along with the workforce.

AT A GLANCE

- Progressive employers realize that protecting employees' mental health contributes to increased energy, commitment to work and resilience in facing career and life challenges.
- Creating an inclusive and supportive workplace culture is an important part of addressing employee mental health. Efforts may include conducting a cultural assessment and providing training to managers, senior leaders and others how to recognize mental health issues.
- Holding ongoing mental health awareness events and involving employee resource groups also can help reduce stigma and ensure that employees feel cultural support.

Recent World Events Heightened the Challenges

As the nation continues recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic, Americans increasingly recognize a persistent mental health crisis. The lockdowns, restrictions and work-from-home periods triggered feelings of isolation and contributed to increased struggles with loneliness, anxiety and depression as well as excessive drug or alcohol use, physical illness, and fears of job loss and financial challenges. And worldwide, depression is the leading cause of poor health and disability, according to the World Economic Forum.⁴

The Business Group on Health *2024 Large Employer Health Care Strategy Survey* reported that 44% of employers saw an increase in mental health concerns in 2022, rising to 77% in 2023 with another 16% expecting to see a surge in the future.⁵

There is some good news, as the number of individuals seeking counseling and taking a mental health prescription medication has risen. As a result, many employers are seeing health plan claims rising for mental health treatment and prescriptions. The higher spending underscores the need but also suggests that more people are getting help.

The Employer's Response Matters

Why should employers care? Employees don't leave mental health struggles—whether in their own health or that of family members—at home. Stressed employees are more likely to miss work, be disengaged and leave their jobs.⁶ Chronic stress and worry can have detrimental effects on physical health, such as hypertension, and may exacerbate chronic conditions such as diabetes, heart disease and cancer—not to mention disengagement from one's job and even safety risks.

Employers have learned that the complexity of the challenges and the barriers to health mean that solutions require more than simply pointing to a poster for the employee assistance program (EAP). Many employers are tackling the shortage of access to counseling and cost barriers by adding more counseling support, implementing more digital tools, reducing costs (e.g., increased free visits), and stepping up education and promotion. These steps can help but in themselves don't guarantee needed culture change.

Understanding Mental Health Challenges

Understanding the challenges and barriers must go beyond what sponsors can see in their health care claims data, particularly since claims data doesn't include people who may need help but for many reasons aren't receiving care. Challenges include the following.

- Men are less likely to pursue mental health support and yet much more likely to die by suicide than women.
- Groups marginalized by race or gender status also have higher incidences of challenges yet lower access to and use of care, as do lower income populations.
- Generational differences require different approaches, since older generations often see mental illness as a taboo topic. In contrast, some in younger generations speak as casually about working with a therapist (if they can afford it) as they would about working out at a gym for physical fitness.

Finding the right format and level of treatment, improving care system navigation, handling higher short-term costs and tackling the barriers facing those who need help are all stiff challenges for employers as well as those who need counseling and assistance.

Finding Mental Health Solutions

Conduct Cultural Assessments, Provide Training

A first step may be a cultural assessment to understand how employees are doing and whether they feel supported. A Guardian survey⁷ asked whether the employer provides “excellent” help for mental health and found that while 70% of employers rated their support as excellent, only 47% of employees agreed. It's vital to confirm whether the gap reflects inadequate resources, lack of employee awareness or other barriers, or a cultural failing.

Solutions also require both top-down and grassroots efforts for culture change to take root and thrive. So next, employers should consider senior leaders' vital role in promoting a safe, stigma-free environment that fosters employee resilience and well-being. Breaking the stigma involves promoting an inclusive workplace where the employee can speak authentically and confidentially about mental and emotional

well-being, secure in the knowledge that managers and co-workers are willing to be supportive without judgment. In some organizations, leaders have shared stories about their personal experiences and passion for this topic.

Managers are then vital, taking the cue from their own senior managers. The Workforce Institute at UKG surveyed 3,400 employees in ten countries and found that, for almost 70% of people, their manager has more impact on their mental health than their therapist or their doctor—and it's equal to the impact of their partner. And this was more than the impact of their doctor (51%) or therapist (41%).⁸

Training can be provided to wellness champions, employee resource group members, managers and senior leaders. Many employers provide educational resources and training, sometimes internally built or done in partnership with EAPs, medical providers, and other point solution vendors with expertise and resources. The BGH survey reported that “nearly half (44%) of employers this year are training employees to recognize mental health issues among their peers and help direct them to appropriate services, taking a page from the type of training that many managers receive. In 2024, 52% of employers expect to conduct this employee training.”

Examples of professional organizations that can help include the following.

- **Stamp Out Stigma by the Association for Behavioral Health Awareness**⁹ seeks to transform dialogue on mental health and substance abuse through soliciting pledges to recognize prevalence, get reeducated and reduce stigma.
- **Mental Health First Aid® by the National Council for Mental Wellbeing**¹⁰ offers intensive skills-based training to teach about mental health and substance-use issues.
- **Mindshare Partners**¹¹ is a nonprofit that offers training to help change the “culture of workplace mental health so that both employees and organizations can thrive.”
- **R U OK?**¹² is an Australian-based organization that promotes asking a simple question “for a conversation that could change a life.” Their four steps say to ask, “Are you okay?” and then listen, encourage action and circle back to check in.

Encourage Conversations

Learning to recognize the signs of mental well-being challenges and understanding how to respond appropriately in a conversation can set the tone for enhanced trust, reduce stigma and encourage an employee in need. Sometimes a heartfelt talk is the first step to encourage the individual to get needed care.

Following are a few key dos and don'ts for these conversations.

Dos

- Set a time and place for a confidential conversation.
- Bring your active listening skills and supportive non-verbal affirmation.
- Clarify why you're asking, and use an open-ended question such as, “I noticed you've seemed down lately; is there anything on your mind?”
- If the response is the classic, “I'm fine,” you can add that you're worried on their behalf and can highlight resources from the company that might help.
- Check in again as the time may not have been right, but you can make it clear you care.

Don'ts

- Don't appear to pry; your goal is opening the conversation either now or in the future when the individual's comfort level may be better.
- Don't try to diagnose the individual's experience or give counseling-like advice. Your role is as a listener with empathy who can point to resources.
- Don't presume you have all the answers. If someone is in crisis, it may be time to escalate to HR for more help. Or in worst cases, such as fears of self-harm or harm to others, don't hesitate to turn to emergency support.

Create Awareness

Holding ongoing events during the year—like Mental Health Awareness Month in May, Suicide Awareness Month in September or World Mental Health Day in October or addressing seasonal depression during the holidays or in the winter—can create teachable moments, helping support more natural conversations and directing employees to available resources.

Hosting speakers willing to talk about their own experiences and how they found help can open minds and promote conversations between peers and with managers. People learn best through stories—These testimonials can confirm that there is help, and employees (or their family members) can find hope and take action to use available resources.

Finally, employee resource groups are proving significant in ensuring that employees feel seen and heard, despite stressors and mental health challenges. Many such groups have welcomed learning more about available resources and making them accessible to members, and some organizations have gone so far as to create mental wellness groups as a result of a more open dialogue on the importance of this health topic to the organization and individuals. As one benefits director noted, “I believe many people struggling mentally could do better with the right support group. People need to know they’re not alone and we’re all in this together.”

Solutions require multidiscipline collaboration—from HR to legal to corporate communications. Being too focused on legal concerns about “letting loose” managers to bring up the taboo subject can end up only reinforcing the stigma and disempowering managers and co-workers who often see the pain, who care and who just need support to know how to respond.


Keep Talking

Mental well-being concerns have emerged from the shadows to demand equal prominence alongside supports for physical and financial well-being. Progressive employers realize that protecting employees’ mental health contributes to their being more committed to work as well as feeling more energized and able to respond to career and life challenges more resiliently. These employers recognize that achieving improved individual and organizational mental health re-

AUTHOR



Ruth Hunt is a principal in the engagement practice at Buck, a Gallagher company. A frequent speaker on total rewards and the employee experience, she specializes in helping companies enhance employee well-being to support their business vision and workforce goals.

quires enhancing awareness, acceptance, better and more effective resources, and cultural alignment within the workforce at all levels. 

Endnotes

1. <https://thehill-com.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/thehill.com/changing-america/well-being/mental-health/3783323-americans-self-assessment-of-mental-health-lowest-in-two-decades-gallup/amp>.
2. www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics.
3. www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-strengthening-our-response.
4. A. Jezard. “Depression is the no. 1 cause of ill health and disability worldwide.” World Economic Forum. May 18, 2018. www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/05/depression-prevents-many-of-us-from-leading-healthy-and-productive-lives-being-the-no-1-cause-of-ill-health-and-disability-worldwide. Accessed May 24, 2023.
5. www.businessgrouphealth.org.
6. M. Sanchez-Gomez, G. Giorgi, G. L. Finstad et al. “Economic stress at work: Its impact over absenteeism and innovation.” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. 2021;18(10):5265; Y. Kachi Y, A. Inoue, H. Eguchi, N. Kawakami, A. Shimazu, A. Tsutsumi. “Occupational stress and the risk of turnover: A large prospective cohort study of employees in Japan.” *BMC Public Health*. 2020;20(1):174.
7. https://connect.guardiangroupbenefits.com/l/503851/2022-11-16/6nvzr9/503851/1668612103fnoGG55k/Mind_Body_Wallet_Report.pdf.
8. www.ukg.com/resources/article/mental-health-work-managers-and-money.
9. <https://stampoutstigma.com>.
10. www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org.
11. www.mindsharepartners.org.
12. www.ruok.org.au.

International Society of Certified Employee Benefit Specialists

Reprinted from the First Quarter 2024 issue of *BENEFITS QUARTERLY*, published by the International Society of Certified Employee Benefit Specialists. With the exception of official Society announcements, the opinions given in articles are those of the authors. The International Society of Certified Employee Benefit Specialists disclaims responsibility for views expressed and statements made in articles published. No further transmission or electronic distribution of this material is permitted without permission. Subscription information can be found at iscebs.org.

©2024 International Society of Certified Employee Benefit Specialists



pdf/224