



Facing the fear factor

Engaging in behavioral health as we return to the workplace

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It's been nearly a year since the world learned of and began to cope with the effects of COVID-19. Now, perhaps more than ever, mental health has become a critical issue for our employees — so many of us are working through feelings of social isolation, insecurity and fear of the unknown. With extreme demands put on essential employees, the shift to remote work for so many, related caregiving challenges and worry over potential furlough or job loss, it's important we continue to explore methods and resources employers can use to support their workforce through these challenges and keep them engaged.

MOUNTING CONCERNS


As more of our workforce begins to return to offices, shops, businesses and factories, there continue to be a lot of questions — and genuine concern — about how to do it safely. Facilities of all shapes and sizes, in nearly every industry, are reevaluating everything from their air filtration systems to the patterns of their traffic flow. But it's not just about addressing the logistics; it's about validating and alleviating the concern itself.

A recent PricewaterhouseCoopers survey¹ identified those areas employees are most concerned about as they prepare to return to work:

- Fear of getting sick from being at work
- Unwillingness to use public transportation to commute to work
- Managing responsibilities as a parent or caregiver
- Taking care of ill family members

It's a lot to consider, and these topics are weighing heavily on our workforce. Adapting to change and the "new normal" means we all need to look at our policies and practices to see if they work during these times. Along with concrete plans for their safety, employees need and deserve empathy and compassion as they juggle schedules with partners, negotiate office space on the dining room table and support their kids who are learning from home. The good news: COVID-19 seems to be making us more empathetic², and more focused on mental health.

Out Front Ideas, an interactive educational series that explores issues critical to the insurance industry, recently hosted its virtual conference on "The Path Forward." As part of the event, I had the opportunity to speak in depth with Darcy Gruttadaro of the Center for Workplace Mental Health at the American Psychiatric Association Foundation; during the hourlong "fireside chat," we dove into a number of mounting mental health issues in the workplace, and how employers can — and should — be responding.



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EMPLOYER RESPONSES

After months of learning how best to work and interact from a distance, we find ourselves shifting yet again, back out in the world and into old work spaces. That re-entry will come with its own brand of concern, so now is the time to ramp up our mental health efforts and attention.

Even amid the concerns, some employers are seeing workers, despite initial apprehension, eager to get back to work. They are craving a sense of normalcy in their routines and, after seeing the safety measures their employers have put in place, are feeling more confident that risks in the workplace are minimal. As employers work to put the tactical plans in place for a safe return to work, how do we also tend to our employees' mental wellness?

Darcy walked us through the Center's three primary areas of focus: raising awareness and educating the workforce about mental health issues, encouraging employers' interest in creating a mentally healthy culture, and improving access to care. Using these touchstones as the basis of our conversation, we discussed several key ways employers can work to promote their employees' mental health and well-being in the time of COVID-19.

RAISE AWARENESS

For those of us in fields like insurance and human resources, mental health and well-being are often top of mind; that's not always the case for other parts of an organization. We must stay focused, and continue to educate others, on how best to keep our employees, our partners, our families and ourselves safe and well — as we deal with returning to work while the pandemic still looms large in our communities, this is of particular importance when we consider how best to care for our injured workers.

- Encourage supervisors to check in regularly with their staff. Compassion can go a long way in making people feel supported and safe in seeking assistance if needed; equip them to build environments of understanding and to look for signs that someone may need additional support or accommodation. Help them understand the tools and services that can be accessed.
- Provide resources to eliminate mental health stigma. One great starting point is the website stampoutstigma.com³, an initiative from the Association for Behavioral Health and Wellness, offering many educational tools to help your organization recognize, reeducate and reduce workplace stigma surrounding mental illness and the need for support or treatment.
- Go beyond resiliency and coping strategies. In some industries, particularly those with front-line responsibilities, employees are feeling the effects of collective trauma. Express understanding that employees are experiencing something that's not been seen before. Be transparent, and provide timely and consistent communications — especially as things change in your work environment or new resources are available as we work together to navigate the crisis.

CREATE A MENTALLY HEALTHY CULTURE

The news is, let's be honest, a little tough to listen to these days. There's so much fear and uncertainty over how long this will last, and how difficult recovery will be for our businesses and our communities.

- Encourage your employees to work with their leadership team in setting a schedule that works well for them — one that accommodates their job requirements while also allowing them to take care of their families.
- Beyond taking care of others, though, a mentally healthy work culture is one that both encourages and empowers employees to take care of their own basic needs: exercise, adequate sleep and nutrition.
- Stay connected with your workforce — and get creative in how you'll keep them connected to one another. Employee resource groups/affinity groups can help. By communicating openly and regularly about what your organization has planned, you'll keep your employees feeling involved and engaged.



**The current era
demands flexibility
adaptability
willingness to
understand and
more holistic**

environment
flexibility,
safety and a
clear view and
employees
productively.



IMPROVE ACCESS TO CARE

In fact, double down on access.

- For injured workers, help overcome feelings of concern by offering alternative paths toward recovery and return to work. Maybe for those with less severe injuries, clinical consultation or individual nurse guidance can help bridge the gap, offering initial coaching through self-care strategies rather than sending someone to an in-office visit that could create additional stress or exposure worries.
- Remind employees what benefits are available to them. Are people using telemedicine options to stay in contact with their providers? Are they able to access telebehavioral health when they need it? TelePT is another major, positive takeaway that we believe will help in many cases, even beyond the pandemic. Keep in mind, too, that these types of benefits can also be an important retention and attraction tool.
- Explore digital solutions like meditation and sleep/relaxation apps. Apps like Talkspace⁴ and other similar mental health apps are now being integrated as an official piece of corporate benefit plans.

Wherever you are in the world right now, whatever field you're working in, things look different. The current environment demands flexibility, adaptability and a willingness to see and understand employees more holistically. In times like these, authentic leadership will bring teams back together and build employees up — that means considering mental and emotional health just as important as a person's physical well-being.

Let's continue to look out for each other.

RESOURCES

1) PwC COVID-19 Workforce Pulse Survey

<https://www.pwc.com/us/en/library/covid-19/workforce-pulse-survey.html>

2) The Mental Health Index, provided by Morneau Shepell

<https://www.US.morneaushepell.com/mental-health-index>

3) Stamp Out Stigma

<https://www.stampoutstigma.com>

4) Talkspace

<https://www.talkspace.com>