

Restoring Resilience in the Age of COVID-19

EAPS, VIRTUAL VISITS, DIGITAL APPS AND FLEXIBLE HOURS TAKE ON GREATER IMPORTANCE AS EMPLOYEE ANXIETY MOUNTS

C COVID-19's brutal path of death and destruction extends beyond the physical realm. Behavioral health is also in the pandemic's crosshairs, but organizations are mobilizing resources to address this crisis and restore resilience across their workplaces.

"There's a very palpable concern that people might not just be able to absorb all the levels of change in the economy, lifestyle, how work is done and interactions," notes Paula Allen, SVP of research, analytics and innovation for LifeWorks.

Behavioral health experts say COVID-19's impact on the U.S. economy has created high anxiety among employees who've been furloughed or laid off and facing financial peril, as well as those juggling dependent care responsibilities while working at home. As such, the need for both physical and financial wellness programs may be at an all-time high.

Written By Bruce Shutan



The novel coronavirus has caused a ripple effect beyond severe economic damage as confinement from sheltering-in-place orders has taken a heavy toll. For example, the National Domestic Violence Hotline expects an unprecedented number of survivors of such crimes to report abuse and seek support in the coming months.

Minorities also have expressed safety concerns in the wake of massive and steady protests nationwide over George Floyd's death in police custody in Minneapolis, Minn. The latter has triggered a significant increase in requests for training around racial sensitivity, reports Bob Mines, Ph.D., chairman and chief psychology officer of MINES and Associates.

About half of all the behavioral health cases he has seen are related to COVID anxiety, a phenomenon detailed in the "The Psychology of Pandemics" by Steven Taylor, a recently published book that has shown significantly increased anxiety levels. Mines also has noted an increase in substance use disorder diagnoses as well as suicides.



Darcy Gruttadaro

"We've had employers who've asked us to do trainings on leadership and the psychology of pandemics for their executive and managerial supervisor groups to help them recognize the symptoms in their own employees," he reports. Requests also were made regarding suicide training for leadership.

CRISIS PROPORTIONS

The number of people experiencing both anxiety and depression has tripled during the past year, hitting African-Americans and Asians hardest, according to Darcy Gruttadaro, director of the Center for Workplace Mental Health under the auspices of the American Psychiatric Association Foundation. She says computer modeling is anticipating a surge in these conditions, along with substance use, relapses and suicide.

"People are feeling very anxious at all levels of organization, so we know they recognize the need to take action,"

Gruttadaro says, noting an uptick in medical claims. "What we're seeing is employers partnering with their TPAs, health plans and EAPs, asking what innovative approaches they have to address concerns around people getting help if they need it."

Some employees are afraid to go return to work, worried about exposing themselves or frail family members to COVID-19, Mines explains, while employers are wondering how to manage a post-pandemic workplace.

Chief among their concerns are compliance with the Americans With Disabilities Act, Family and Medical Leave Act and Occupational Safety and Health Administration requirements to ensure the health and safety of workers. He says these issues are top of mind in overburdened and highly stressed first-responder communities where lives are on the line and municipalities dealing with blue-flu protests in the face of growing hostility over police brutality.

Employers are paying closer attention to promoting employee assistance programs (EAPs) much more than before, training managers to understand the signs that an employee isn't doing quite right and referring them to company resources, Allen says.

A recent poll of LifeWorks clients showed that mental health issues were a top concern in terms of any lasting impact the pandemic may have on the workplace. In fact, the company has seen a massive decline in mental health across all major indicators since the start of COVID-19, including increased levels of anxiety, depressive symptoms and a sense of isolation. Optimism and productivity also have been on the wane.

Many organizations are adding questions to engagement surveys to gauge whether any individuals or groups are having a more difficult time than others in these uncertain times, according to

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Bob Mines

Allen. She says smart leaders also are ensuring that employees stay connected with their teams through more frequent touchpoints and social time, even if it's only videoconferencing, so that there's still a sense of belonging.

"More employers could take that as a call to action and follow the path of the leaders," Allen suggests, noting the growing importance of resilience as a desired outcome.

COVID-19 has been a double-edged sword for behavioral health service providers. For example, MINES and Associates has seen clients cut headcounts amid sharp revenue decreases. "We've actually had more businesses go out of business this time than we did in 2009, so those are all off the books completely," Mines reports.

At the same time, clinical demand to service clients through an EAP or managed care product has swelled. Dani Kimlinger, the firm's CEO, installed a call center software system so that the firm's associates could work remote within a week of pandemic shutdowns.

'ZOOM FATIGUE'

With virtual visits replacing in-person behavioral health sessions for the first few months of state lockdowns, the public has cottoned to this model. Once they had a taste of telehealth, many MINES and Associates clients rhetorically quipped: "You mean I don't have to drive for an hour or two hours to see my therapist each way in heavy traffic? I can just have a phone session or a videoconference?"

Mines predicts more creativity and flexibility in delivery systems between all the virtual modalities from clinical, consulting and meeting points of

view. "We're also dealing with Zoom fatigue on the part of our clients, and stay-at-home problems involving certain employees who are not going to be able to send their kids back to daycare and maybe not to school," he says.



Paula Allen

Apart from a continuation of telehealth in video and telephonic forms, Mines would like to see self-insured employers consider adding to that mix text-based counseling for reimbursement. There's a high consumer satisfaction with this service, which he says many EAPs are already providing because texting has become so popular.

LifeWorks began a transformation of the traditional EAP model well before COVID-19 hit in acknowledgment that workforces are becoming more

dispersed. "What we didn't want to do is to stay in the box of just addressing 5% to 10% of the population," Allen explains.

Her company offers a mobile app that provides ongoing support to help employees find relevant articles, podcasts, online self-directed cognitive behavioral health programs and habit-changing tools. It has been paired with a total wellbeing assessment that recommends specific resources and provides employers with confidential insight on an aggregate basis into how their employees are faring to help make strategic intervention decisions.

Indeed, more employers are offering free digital apps that provide navigation services for mental health care, medication and mindfulness to help their employees and families feel calmer, Gruttadaro notes. "There's a high interest in things like building resiliency and stress management to help people understand how to really engage in self-care," she says.

Restoring Resilience

Many people who are still gainfully employed aren't taking vacations, which Gruttadaro says means that employers need to be modeling good behavior around work-life balance and working reasonable hours. She notes that some employers are offering a shortened workday on Fridays in summer closing and closing down offices to force proverbial recharging of batteries.

In an effort to rebuild morale, the Center for Workplace Mental Health has created a framework for organizations called LEAD, which stands for leadership, effective communication, adapt to change and doubling down on access to care.

The objective is to share resources that help managers spot warning signs for common conditions like depression, anxiety, substance use and trauma. Gruttadaro says early intervention leads to the best results. It's also a matter of reminding new hires about the EAP when they're onboarded and telling employees who to contact when they're feeling down, lonely or isolated.

One issue that needs to be addressed moving forward is payment parity for mental health professionals who aren't paid the same as primary care providers to provide nearly identical care.

"Tele-psychiatry and tele-behavioral health have not always been reimbursed at the same level as office visits, which is of course quite problematic for people who live in very underserved areas," Gruttadaro explains. ■

Bruce Shutan is a Portland, Oregon-based freelance writer who has closely covered the employee benefits industry for more than 30 years.

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