

Post-Pandemic, Employee Mental Health More Critical Than Ever

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Employee Mental Health is Suffering

Since March 2020, when the pandemic began, people around the world have suffered greatly. Isolation, illness, and job loss has led to increased stress and anxiety. Now, as employers prepare to return to offices, they need to consider: how will they bring their workforce back (remote, hybrid, in-person)? what will office spaces look like (reconfigured, downsized, shared space)? what will vaccine protocols be (required or not, proof or no proof)? and, most importantly, what will employees' mental health and wellness be?

According to the Mental Health Index, May 2021, "Workers' risk of PTSD is now 55% higher than it was before the pandemic ... and there has been a 59% decline in workers' sustained attention vs. before the pandemic." Further, according to Managing the People Side of Risk Survey, conducted among 1,380 Human Resource and Risk Managers across the globe, in early 2021 by Mercer Marsh Benefits, among the greatest perceived risks are deteriorating mental health and workplace exhaustion.

Employees Are Not Feeling Supported

A U.S. Gallup study conducted in March 2021 found only 35% of employees strongly agree that their company cares about their wellbeing; and that is compared to 48% in May 2020. This significant decline is a strong signal to those organizations willing to pay attention; it is time to develop strategies, create plans, and invest in employees' wellbeing.

Employers Need to Make Mental Health a Priority

Employers need to recognize that planning for mental health issues must be a priority. Encouraging an environment of empathy and understanding makes a difference to employees. And, companies that focus on mental health often experience growth in engagement and productivity.

Lead From the Top

C-Suite leadership is essential. CEOs need to create work environments that demonstrate a real commitment and a culture of wellness supported by employee programs that encourage care. Clearly access to healthy food and opportunity to exercise are part of healthy living or wellness. But wellbeing goes beyond wellness. According to Gallup's Global Research, the five elements of wellbeing essential to thriving extend beyond physical to include career, social, financial, and community.

C-Suite leaders also need to model good behavior. From the middle management leaders they empower, to the initiatives they promote, to the individual choices they make, C-leaders must recognize the cues they send. Creating a company charity run or encouraging employees to run home to their families for family events are both ways leaders can play a role. And, think about how to bring families into company events which promotes the wellbeing of your employees and their families, building a positive cycle of inspiration.

Listen to Your Employees and Respond to Their Concerns

Give people the opportunity to share their state-of-mind and pay attention to what they are saying. Utilize an anonymous survey to explore concerns and perceptions and be sure that findings are not attributed to specific people or departments.

After you understand employees concerns, outline your companies offerings. Mercer Marsh categorizes benefits into the following areas:

- access treatment and coverage (i.e., health plan networks);
- prevention (i.e., digital mindfulness tools);
- support at work (i.e., return to work programs);
- support away from work (i.e., remote working options).

Assess Benefits, Adjust Offerings, Communicate

Start with a review of the mental health benefits you provide and identify need gaps. Remember that the benefits you offered before the pandemic may no longer align with post-pandemic needs.

Importantly, think about programs that need to be added – from Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) and benefits provided specifically to help employees handle mental and emotional health issues to improved telehealth offerings.

After you consider and adjust your benefits, remind employees about programs that are available. Particularly this year when employees have been working from home and may be less connected to the physical office space, consider sending out regular communications about all your wellness and wellbeing offerings. Empower employees to be champions of programs, coaches for learning pickleball or leaders for a late afternoon yoga. Provide recognition by blogging about successes and incentives for volunteers to step up.

Be Flexible and Compassionate

Review your return-to-work policies. Be flexible, be creative, be compassionate, and be generous. Be sure people know where to go when they have anxieties or concerns. Consider pilot programs, trial initiatives, and experiments. "Many of our clients are recognizing that employees may be anxious about returning to the office and in response, they are exploring new programs and creating defined spaces that help reinforce healthy practices," says IMSA Search Global Partners President Monika Ciesielska.

As the world moves beyond the pandemic, the state of your employees' mental health is critical. The way your company responds **today** will have a great impact on your culture, employee engagement and turnover, and your productivity **tomorrow**.