

Mental health and work: What you should know and how Capital Blue Cross can help

Mental health issues are inching from the shadows to the sunlight, but the progress is painfully slow.

Employers can play a big part in hastening that pace. With workplace programs, discussions, encouragement, and compassion, companies can help mental health issues gain acceptance as mainstream chronic conditions.

“There’s a lot of role modeling that businesses can do,” said Karie Batzler, director of behavioral health at Capital Blue Cross. “Bringing the behavioral health issue into the workplace as a thread that travels throughout company communications, normalizing it, reminding employees that we all need support, emphasizing whatever benefits the company has to cope with behavioral health – all of that is important.”

While the stigma attached to mental health issues is gradually decreasing, the prevalence of these issues is increasing.

According to a recent [Blue Cross Blue Shield Health of America Report](#), 6 of millennials’ top 10 health conditions are connected to behavioral health. Given [Gallup’s finding](#) that millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) comprised roughly half the work force in 2020 and are expected to account for 75% of it by 2025, that’s a big deal for employers.

So is the fact that about a fifth of the workforce has a diagnosable behavioral health condition, according to the [National Institute of Mental Health](#). That means a company with 100 people might have 20 suffering from depression, anxiety, or other mental health challenges.

More than a Mental Issue

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that depression leads to 200 million lost workdays a year, costing U.S. employers a whopping \$17 billion to \$44 billion.

Most employers are aware of the problem, according to a January 2022 [Willis Towers Watson survey](#), in which 86% of polled companies said they would put a focus on mental health needs in 2022. But only a quarter of those businesses have planned and implemented a wellness strategy.

No single action can remove all workplace behavioral health risk, but companies can consider several things when formulating a mental wellness plan.

First, explore allowing paid time off or sick days for burnout, stress, or diagnosed chronic anxiety or depression.

Second, after consultation with the human resources department, encourage and engage in frank mental health discussions – through meetings, educational resources, and/or updates with emails or articles on your company’s intranet.

“The old saying is ‘open-door policy,’ ” Batzler said. “Well, swing that door open for mental health issues. Have one-on-ones. Proactively check in with people.”

Third, offer Employee Assistance Programs. Many companies, including Capital Blue Cross, have such programs to help people cope with financial or family stress, addiction, grieving, and other mental health challenges.

Finally, put a plan in place to form a full, formal strategy for maximizing employees’ mental health.

We Can Help

Capital Blue Cross invests in its members’ mental health, and is continually adding innovative resources to help. Specifically for employers, we have a [behavioral health toolkit](#) companies can use to promote open dialogue and help address behavioral health challenges affecting their workforce. Our toolkit includes dozens of resources that can help business leaders confront stigma, everyday stressors, burn out, and the challenges faced by caregivers.

However your company moves forward with mental health issues, Batzler said it’s critical to make one thing crystal clear: Show your employees you care.

“Don’t just reach in,” Batzler said. “Reach out, deliberately. Ask them how they’re doing, and what you can do to support them. Create open pathways for accommodations.”

This article was adapted from [THINK](#) (Trusted Health Information, News, and Knowledge), Capital Blue Cross’ community publication that provides education, resources, and news on the latest health and insurance issues.