

HR Insights

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Supporting Employees During Mental Health Awareness Month and Beyond

Employee mental health has become a workplace topic of increased focus and awareness in recent years. An employee's mental health includes how they think, feel and act, and their emotional and social well-being. While mental health includes mental illness, these two concepts aren't interchangeable. For example, an employee can go through a period of poor mental health but not necessarily have a diagnosable mental illness. Additionally, an employee's mental health can change over time, depending on factors such as their workload, stress and work-life balance.

Established in 1949, Mental Health Awareness Month is a national movement in May that aims to increase awareness about mental health, fight stigma, celebrate recovery, and support Americans with mental illness and their families. This article explores mental health in the workplace and ways employers can support employee mental health.

Mental Health and the Workplace

Millions of people in the United States are affected by mental illness each year. In fact, mental illnesses are some of the most common health conditions in the country. While more than 1 in 5 U.S. adults (22.8%) experience mental illness annually, only nearly half (47.2%) of people with mental illness receive treatment, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI). Furthermore, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that depression alone causes an estimated 200 million lost workdays each year, costing employers \$17 billion to \$44 billion.

Depression directly impacts an organization by increasing absenteeism, triggering disability insurance and lowering productivity in the workplace.

Employer Considerations

Workplace conversations about mental health aren't an annual event. Mental Health Awareness Month can be leveraged to kick off conversations, but keeping the momentum and support going year-round is important. Consider the following ways employers can support employee mental health during this month and beyond:

- **Launch a companywide Mental Health Awareness Month campaign.** Initiatives will vary by organization, but employers can share articles, posters or other materials from organizations like Mental Health America, NAMI and the CDC. Employers can also host lunch-and-learn events, promote available company resources and benefits, and encourage employees to take a confidential mental health screening. Additionally, green is the official awareness color for mental health, so employers could ask workers to wear green on a predetermined day in May.
- **Create a supportive culture.** An organization dedicated to preserving employee mental health and fostering a stigma-free environment will succeed in its efforts to



support employee mental health. Make sure that any mental health initiatives are aligned with core values, goals and ethics.

- **Evaluate benefits offerings.** Reviewing an organization's offerings to ensure coverage for mental health services is essential to creating a culture that supports employee mental health. An employee assistance program (or EAP) can help employees get the mental health support they need, including telemedicine options.
- **Offer flexible scheduling.** A lack of work-life balance can negatively affect an employee's mental health. Employers across the country are embracing workplace flexibility to help employees better balance their work and personal lives.
- **Encourage employees to prioritize their mental health.** Companies that spread awareness about prioritizing mental health tend to have happier and healthier employees. Distributing information about recognizing the signs of mental illness, stress and burnout and improving overall wellness will keep mental health a top-of-mind concern. Moreover, to create a culture that supports employee mental health, employers can build mental health days into their paid time off programs and encourage employees to take a mental health day if they need one.
- **Focus on reducing the stigma.** An organization that focuses its efforts on normalizing mental health discussions will see improvements in employee mental health. Consistently communicate to employees that getting help is a sign of strength—not weakness—and that the company supports them.
- **Train managers.** To ensure that no stigma surrounding mental health exists at an organization, it's important that employers properly train management and supervisors to recognize the signs of mental illness,

excessive workplace stress, workplace bullying and fatigue. Consider standardizing a procedure for managers to follow when mental health situations present themselves so employees have a consistent experience as they are directed to the resources.

- **Promote your support.** An organization that promotes its support for employees' mental health will see a change in its workforce. Employees who know their employers are there to support them are more likely to be transparent when they experience mental health struggles, which may help them get back on their feet as quickly as possible.
- **Check in with employees.** Employers who regularly check in with their employees to see how they are doing and whether they need additional resources are better equipped to change their benefits offerings to support employee mental health. For example, employers can address this properly if an annual or biannual employee engagement survey reveals that most employees feel extremely stressed out at work. Conversely, suppose employers only check in after a problem has been brought to their attention. In that case, it's more difficult to properly manage and develop a strategy that works for all parties involved.

Summary

When organizational leadership talks openly about mental health, employees are more likely to feel comfortable about the concept and reach out to managers or co-workers if they're struggling. Workplace conversations about mental health aren't just an annual observance. In fact, developing a company culture that supports employees by openly discussing and addressing mental health—without its associated stigma—takes time. However, Mental Health Awareness Month can be a good time to kick off conversations and keep the momentum and support going year-round.

Contact DMJ Insurance Services, Inc. for additional workplace mental health resources.