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Creating Mindfulness of Mental Health in Business

By: Mandy Paulsen

You break a bone at work. Does your employer force you to keep working? No! So, what about those ailments that can't be seen via x-ray machines?

Businesses often have a gap in understanding mental health in the workplace. According to USA Mental Health and First Aid, 46.4% of adults will experience a mental illness in their lifetime.¹ With close to half the U.S. population facing mental challenges, companies must become informed on top mental challenges, their influence on business profitability, and how to accommodate them.

Understanding Psychological Issues and Their Growth

The two most prevalent mental health challenges in the workplace are anxiety and depression. Chronic anxiety is different from stress. Though stress is temporary, anxiety lasts for indefinite periods of time. A recent report showing an increase from 7% of UK workers having chronic anxiety in 2013 to 10% in 2017.²

As worrisome as the increase in anxiety levels have been, depression is much more serious. As Blue Cross put it in 2018, “major depression is the second most impactful condition on overall health for commercially insured Americans.”³ Among American adults, depression diagnoses rose 33% from 2013 to 2016; among American millennials specifically, that rate was 47%.⁴ The future generation of employees will demand for more psychological understanding in the office.

Mental Health Effects on Business Profitability

Depression and anxiety have large impacts on business productivity and subsequent profits. These mental conditions have led to cutbacks, unemployment and more job turnovers in the Canadian workforce.⁵

Why? One cause comes from depression and anxiety's role in absenteeism and presenteeism. When someone continually misses work due to illness, that's absenteeism. When someone comes to work, but is ill and unproductive, that's presenteeism. Absenteeism and presenteeism cost American companies \$227 billion in 2012.⁶

Think those losses are just from physical illnesses? The UK prime minister's office estimated an annual cost in £33-£42 billion in losses from illness overall, with “over half of the cost coming from [mental health] presenteeism.”⁷

Accommodating Mental Health in the Workplace

How to Best Integrate

The management of companies around the world must be committed to improving mental health awareness in the workplace. As one study on mental health for Canadian workers said, “If we don't have the support of leadership, it doesn't move... Leadership has to be a critical component of the process.”⁸ Senior leaders should interact with their employees and encourage them to improve mental health.

That said, management isn't enough. Individual employees must do their part. First, employees must assess their work life balance, and see what they need to do to craft a better quality of life. Second, employees must set boundaries on work times. Clearly demarcating when the mind is focused on "work" or on "pleasure" can help reduce employees' anxiety and depression.⁹

When those with mental illnesses feel included, safe, and valued in a company, they (and their coworkers) are boosted in morale. This in turn improves employee performance, brand loyalty, and even recruitment and retention. Employers can see that, in time, coworkers improve in approachability, safety, and lack of conflict.

Conclusion

As a recent *Lancet* article explained, "At the fulcrum of improving mental health for workers is the recognition that a workplace can be both a source of stress and a formidable support system."¹⁰

Both businesses and employees benefit when the proper action is taken to make the office a more suitable environment for individuals with mental issues. When an employee has a broken bone, we don't force them to work it off. They get the proper resources they need. Today many people face psychological pain that isn't as easily seen as a broken bone on an x-ray, but it is still important to accommodate them. Perceive the discrepancy of mental health in your own business and mind the gap: the only way progress can be made is through mindfully understanding the effects that mental health has on the workplace. 🏠

Notes

1 Rubina Kapil, "5 Surprising Mental Health Statistics," *Mental Health First Aid*, last modified February 6, 2019, <https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/2019/02/5-surprising-mental-health-statistics/>.

2 "UKCP: New Figures Workers Reporting Anxiety and Depression Have Risen by Nearly a Third in the Last Four Years," *UK Council for Psychotherapy*, last modified October 10, 2017, <https://www.psychotherapy.org.uk/news/new-figures-workers-reporting-anxiety-depression-risen-nearly-third-last-four-years/>.

3 "Major Depression: The Impact on Overall Health," *BlueCross BlueShield*, May 10, 2018, https://www.bcbs.com/sites/default/files/file-attachments/health-of-america-report/HoA_Major_Depression_Report.pdf.

4 "Major Depression."

5 Diane Kunyk et al., "Employers' Perceptions and Attitudes toward the Canadian National Standard on Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace: A Qualitative Study," *International Journal of Law & Psychiatry* 44 (January 2016): 41–47, doi:10.1016/j.ijlp.2015.08.030.

6 "Poor Health Costs U.S. Economy \$576 Billion According to the Integrated Benefits Institute," *PR Newswire*, last modified September 12, 2012, <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/poor-health-costs-us-economy-576-billion-according-to-the-integrated-benefits-institute-169460116.html>.

7 Paul Fore and Denim Stevenson, "Thriving at work: The Stevenson / Farmer review of mental health and employers," October 2017, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/658145/thriving-at-work-stevenson-farmer-review.pdf.

8 Kunyk et al., "Employers," 41–47.

9 Sophie Meunier et al., "Feeling Better at Work! Mental Health Self-Management Strategies for Workers with Depressive and Anxiety Symptoms," *Journal of Affective Disorders* 254, (July 2019): 7–14, doi:10.1016/j.jad.2019.05.011.

10 "Improving Mental Health in the Workplace," *The Lancet* 390, no. 10107 (November 2017): 2015, doi:10.1016/S0140-6736(17)32807-6.

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