A Medical Director's view: Help your workers address mental health issues caused by COVID-19

COVID-19 has had a profound impact on organisations of all sorts, and their employees are struggling. One recent study found that 25% of U.S. workers reported moderate to severe anxiety and depressive symptoms — far above normal levels — while more than 30% were concerned about their financial situation going forward.[30]

By helping your workers focus on their mental health and overall well-being, you can help them feel better and become more productive. Here are 10 suggestions from Dr Nairah Rasul-Syed, vHealth Medical Director and Family Medicine consultant:

1. Communicate policy cover and benefits clearly. Workers who've never needed to use their employee assistance program (EAP), well-being benefit or other mental health support may be only dimly aware of how they work (or that they even exist). Common questions: Where do I go for help/information? Can I meet with a counsellor virtually? Who will know that I've sought help for depression? Who can I contact at work if I have questions about my benefits and cover? Studies show that the lower the degree of engagement in the workplace, the higher the levels of employee stress (77.9%), so a safe assumption is that the higher the degree of engagement, the lower the degree of stress.[31]

2. Ask workers how they're doing — and listen to their answers. One survey early in the pandemic found that nearly 40% of workers said their organisations hadn't asked how they were doing. And those overlooked workers were 38% more likely to say their mental health had worsened during the pandemic.[32]

3. Create connections. When people are working remotely, it can be harder to check in with them, so you have to be more intentional. At the same time, video conferences can let you build closer connections because you see into each others' homes. Don't just stick to business; ask about that interesting picture on the wall or the child who wanders into view.

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4. Calm uncertainty. Be as open and honest as you can about the impact of COVID-19 on business operations and employment. In the absence of facts, people often assume the worst. And if you have to share bad news, deliver it clearly and directly without sugar-coating.[33]

5. Be flexible and forgiving. Your organisation is not the only thing the pandemic has upended. Many workers now are sharing a home office with their partner, juggling uncertain child-care arrangements and/or unexpectedly home-schooling their children.

6. Help workers set guardrails. If your organisation has shifted to remote work during the pandemic, encourage employees to leave work at the office after hours — even if the "office" is their spare bedroom. When Aetna International interviewed workers in March 2020, more than 60% said pressure to answer calls and emails outside of work increased their stress level.[34]

7. Encourage employees to use their annual leave entitlement — to keep themselves physically and mentally rested and healthy. Remind workers that they don't have to be ill to take a paid personal day (assuming your organisation offers that benefit).

8. Positively affirm workers who take care of their mental health. A few years ago, a U.S. software developer announced that she would be taking two days off to focus on her mental health. Her boss's response — which the worker later tweeted — offers a great model: "I just wanted to personally thank you for sending emails like this. … You are an example to us all, and help cut through the stigma so we can all bring our whole selves to work."[35]

9. Lead by example. Take advantage of available mental health services and be open about how you take care of yourself. For example, Verizon Media CEO Guru Gowrappan keeps a yoga mat on hand and has tweeted about how he practices the "3 E's": exposure to sunlight/air, emotional well-being and exercise.[36,37]

10. Educate your employees. Use employee newsletters, worksite screens, bulletin boards and other channels to highlight the importance of mental health. Search Aetna International's 'COVID-19 resources' for flyers and posters that you can share with your employees.

As COVID-19 increases people's levels of stress, burnout, depression and anxiety, focusing on mental health is more important than ever. You can make a difference in keeping your employees and their loved ones healthy, and Aetna International is here to help. We offer remote access to primary care via vHealth* as well as self-help tools and professional services, such as coaching and counselling, via our Employee Assistance Program and additional Aetna Well-being resources. Members in the U.S.? Get free access to Teladoc. Members can login to the Health Hub to find out more or access support. Contact your account manager or one of our sales experts for more information.

You're not alone. Getting help today makes for a better tomorrow.

Mental health resources: https://www.aetnainternational.com/en/about-us/explore/workplace-mental-health-support-resource.html

Health Hub: https://www.aetnainternational.com/members/login.do

*For those eligible for vHealth | All vHealth apps (vHealth by Aetna, vHealth (Dubai) and vHealth (Thailand)) can be downloaded from the App Store and Google Play.

30 https://journals.lww.com/joem/Fulltext/2020/09000/Job_Insecurity_and_Financial_Concern_During_the.4.aspx
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