

MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE

THE EFFECT OF THE MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS IN THE
WORKPLACE AND HOW EMPLOYERS CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE



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FOREWORD

Established by the World Health Organization (WHO), October 10 is World Mental Health Day. The goal of the day is to raise awareness of mental health issues around the world and mobilize efforts in support of mental health. Every year has a unique theme, and this year focuses on Young People and Mental Health in a Changing World. Since mental health is a growing concern for employers, this ebook is dedicated to discussing mental health as it relates to the workplace.

- The Wellable Team



MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE

OVERVIEW

Mental illnesses are widely misunderstood and mistreated, and until relatively recently, mental health was hardly considered a mainstream concern. As an important aspect of overall well-being, mental health in the workplace deserves more attention. Employees with poor mental health need ample support and resources.

The WHO defines mental health as “a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.” Mental health encompasses all aspects of emotional, psychological, and even social well-being, affecting how an individual acts, thinks, and feels. The WHO strongly emphasizes that mental health is not simply the absence of a mental disorder. There are many factors that need to be considered when compiling a comprehensive definition of mental health.

Common Disorders

Anxiety disorders

most common type of mental health disorder, include panic disorders, phobias, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Anxiety disorders are often characterized by fear or anxiety linked to certain objects or situations. Most individuals with anxiety disorders try to avoid exposure to whatever triggers their anxiety.

Mood disorders

also known as affective disorders or depressive disorders, include various forms of depression, bipolar disorder, and seasonal affective disorder (SAD). Individuals with mood disorders have significant changes in mood, generally involving either mania (elation) or depression.

Schizophrenia disorder

a highly complex disorder that is yet to be fully understood. There is still disagreement as to whether or not it is a single disorder or a group of related illnesses. Individuals with schizophrenia disorders have thoughts that appear fragmented and also find it hard to process information.

Impacts Of Mental Illness

Those living with mental illness are at greater risk for lower quality of life, educational difficulties, limited productivity, and social problems. They are also more vulnerable to abuse and additional health problems. These challenges greatly impact an individual's personal and professional life, often creating barriers to thrive in either area.

From an employer's perspective, mental illness in the workplace can significantly impact employees' quality of work and adversely influences the productivity of an entire organization. As such, the problem with workplace mental health is significant and materially impacting employers across the globe.

While many people view the impact of mental illness as being acute to those who have a mental disorder, the effects are much greater. Mental illness also affects families/caregivers and society. Families and caregivers have to balance work requirements as well as other responsibilities associated with caring for a suffering loved one. This results in additional stress, financial costs, and other adverse conditions. For those employees who are caregivers, the impacts are often seen in their work and productivity.

The societal impact of mental illness varies among cultures and nations. The WHO estimated that mental health problems cost developed nations between three and four percent of gross national product (GNP). When mental illness expenditures and loss of productivity are both considered, the WHO estimated that mental disorders cost national economies several billion dollars annually. Many of the costs to society are ones that directly impact employers, including absenteeism due to mental illness or responsibilities as a caregiver.





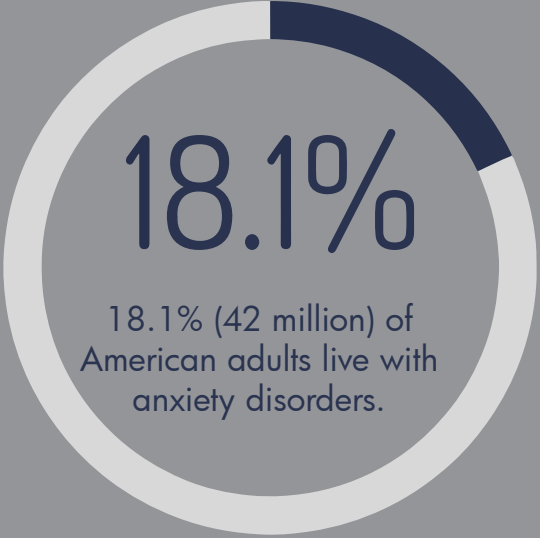
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SCOPE OF THE MENTAL HEALTH EPIDEMIC

The Prevalence Of Common Mental Health Disorders

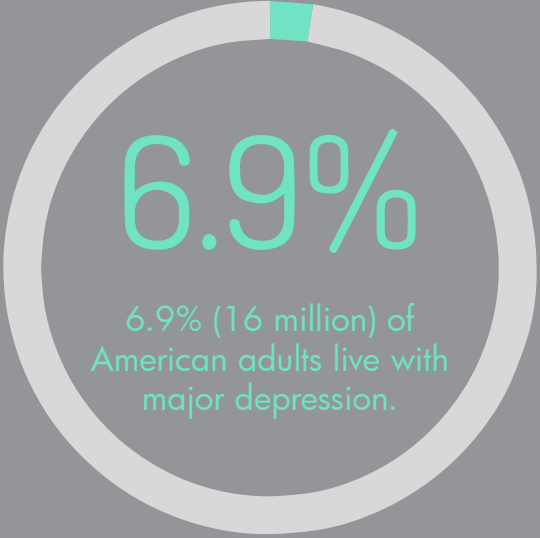
The prevalence of the mental health epidemic is broader than what is widely believed. Virtually everyone is susceptible to mental health issues. Upwards of 44 million U.S. adults (nearly 20%) experience some form of mental health disorders every year. Out of those individuals, ten million are living with a serious mental illness. In addition, a large portion of people who suffer from mental illness also from more than one disorder.

As discussed earlier, the three most common types of mental health disorders fall under the categories of anxiety disorders, mood disorders, and schizophrenia disorders.



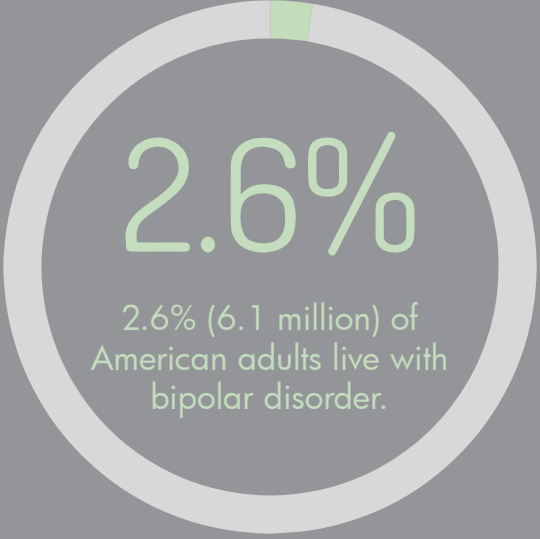
18.1%

18.1% (42 million) of American adults live with anxiety disorders.



6.9%

6.9% (16 million) of American adults live with major depression.



2.6%

2.6% (6.1 million) of American adults live with bipolar disorder.



1.1%

1 in 100 (2.4 million) American adults live with schizophrenia.

1. Anxiety disorders, the most common type of mental illness, affect over 18% of U.S. adults. This represents a total of 42 million individuals. The prevalence of anxiety disorders relative to other major mental illnesses makes it the primary mental health challenge for employers.

2. Mood disorders include various forms of depression. Major depression affects nearly 7% of the U.S. population, and bipolar disorder affects approximately 3% of the U.S. population, equating to 16 million and 6 million people, respectively. Mood disorders are the third most common cause of hospitalization in the U.S. for adults aged 18 to 44.

3. Schizophrenia, a highly complex disorder, affects one in a hundred American adults, approximately 2.4 million people.

“[...] millennials experienced a version of the world characterized by a fast-pace and competitive environment as well as relative comparisons. This has resulted in an entire generation plagued by various issues related to low self-esteem, insecurity, and an unattainable level of perfection.”

Mental Health Trends

Although mental health issues are highly complex and different for each person, there are some common characteristics that individuals with mental illness share. For instance, intelligent people may experience a high susceptibility to mental health problems, according to a recent study. A team of researchers surveyed 3,715 U.S. members of Mensa, a society for individuals with IQ scores exceeding 130. They concluded that intelligent people are generally at a higher risk of mental illness.

The researchers speculate that this is due to their increased awareness levels, or “hyper-brain,” that result in stronger reactions to environmental stimuli. Although an IQ score of 130 or above does not pertain to the average person, it can be reasonably concluded that individuals of above-average intelligence may experience a similar, less intense effect.

The predisposition to mental health issues is likely intensified by the fact that highly intelligent individuals are commonly employed in high-stress work environments. For example, a study from the *Journal of Addiction Medicine* found that lawyers are much more likely to experience mental health problems related to substance abuse and depression when compared to the rest of the population. It seems as though “lawyers are less likely to seek help than others, out of



confidentiality concerns and a fear of telling others they have a problem.” As a result, a staggering 28% of lawyers report symptoms of depression.

Mental illness is also more prevalent in certain generations. Millennials, the largest generation in the workforce, are statistically more prone to anxiety and depression than the general population. They were the first generation to experience a constant and rampant influx of technology and social media influences during their formative years. Because of this, millennials experienced a version of the world characterized by a fast-pace and competitive environment as well as relative comparisons.

This has resulted in an entire generation plagued by various issues related to low self-esteem, insecurity, and an unattainable level of perfection. For companies with a large millennial population, it is critical to understand their specific mental health challenges and implement strategies that tailor to their needs accordingly.





MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE

WHY EMPLOYERS SHOULD CARE ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

Mental Well-being Is Good For Business

The prevalence of mental health disorders in the workplace should pose numerous concerns amongst organizations, as poor mental health negatively impacts employee performance and productivity. Although employers should care about employee mental health because it is the right thing to do, the benefits of mental well-being in a workforce are strong enough on their own to make promoting it a sound business decision. Here are just a few examples of how mental health impacts the bottom line of all businesses.

Productivity

A large portion of the economic cost accumulated by poor mental health is realized in lost productivity. Research has shown that mental health disorders, when unaddressed, result in a notable loss of productivity in the workplace in the form of presenteeism or absenteeism. This is especially the case if employee stress stems from work-related matters. In fact, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates productivity loss to be approximately 200 million workdays (around \$17 to \$44 billion in lost productivity) in the United States every year. The WHO estimates the cost of poor mental health to the global economy is \$1 trillion per year in lost productivity.

Medical Expenses

In addition, poor mental health amongst employees results in high medical costs for the employer. One study sought to quantify the cost burden of depressed employees. Surprisingly, mood disorder was the risk factor predicted to display the greatest cost increase out of all ten risk factors. Employees who reported being depressed, unable to manage stress, or a combination of the two were 70%, 46%, and 147% costlier than employees who did not experience these risk factors, respectively.

Retention

The tightening labor market is increasing the rate of employee turnover and making it harder for employers to retain current employees. This macroeconomic trend is exacerbated by poor mental health, as it is another factor that contributes to high turnover. The major argument in support of prioritizing employee wellness in the workplace is contingent on two ideas: (i) happy, healthy employees are more productive and (ii) employees are more likely to remain loyal to a company that is perceived to care for them. Both of these factors strongly attest to why employers should care about mental health; employees will not stay with an employer who neglects such a vital aspect of their overall well-being.

Morale

When mental health disorders go unaddressed, employee morale in the workplace will decline similar to retention. With the number of employment opportunities available in the current market, employers are under pressure to provide an optimal amount of employee benefits in order to maintain competitive positioning with the talent pool. Employers who ignore aspects of employee health will suffer a decline in reputation and will soon be overshadowed by their more progressive counterparts. In turn, the morale of their current labor force will suffer as well.



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HOW EMPLOYERS CAN IMPROVE EMPLOYEE MENTAL HEALTH

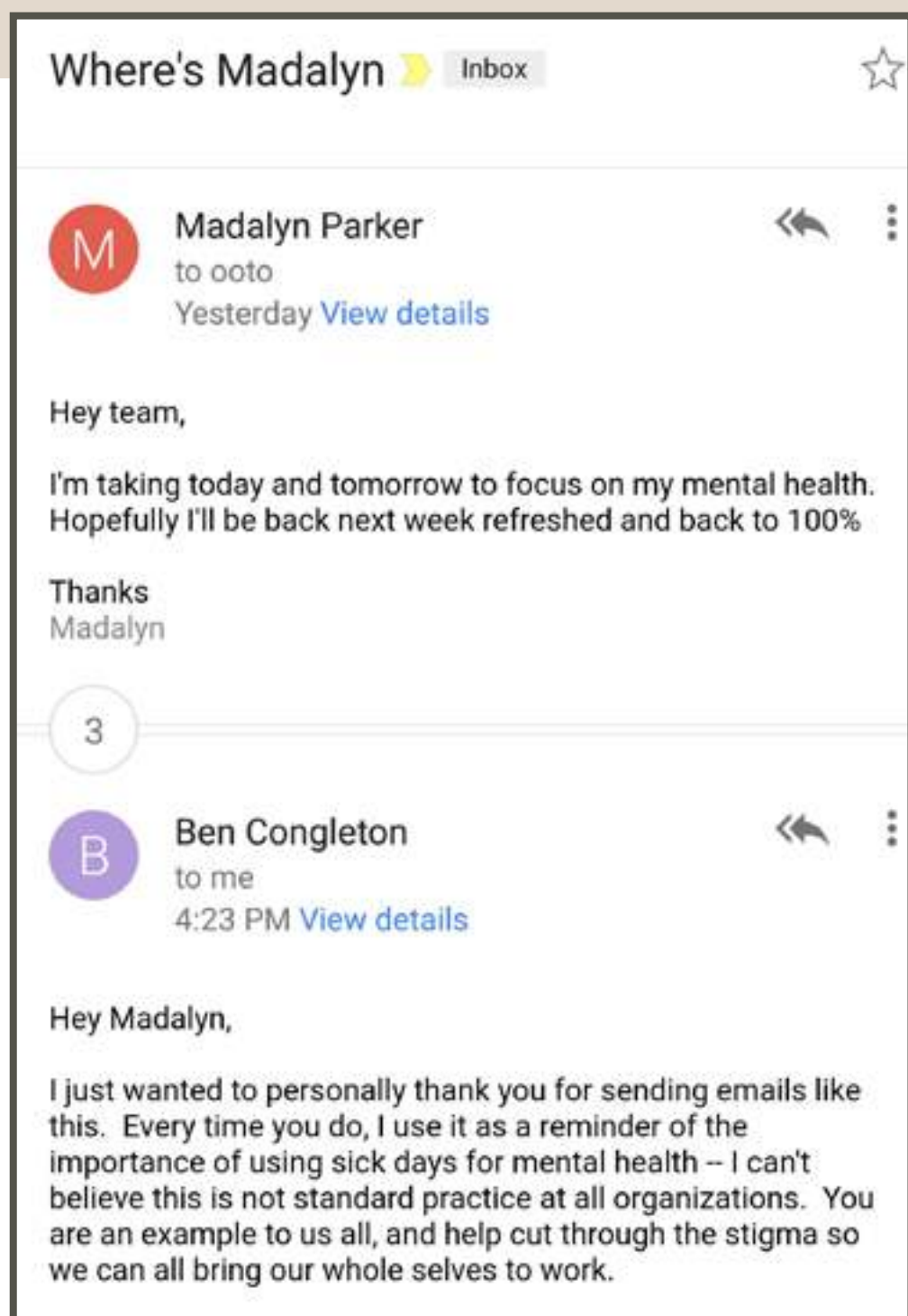
As depicted by this ebook, poor mental health is an epidemic currently plaguing the workplace, and like any workplace issue, companies that proactively mitigate its impact will thrive. Fortunately, there are various means by which mental health can be effectively addressed.

Culture

Relieving the mental health epidemic in the workplace is a comprehensive effort that starts with company culture. Employers can offer innumerable resources and services to improve mental health, but these efforts are virtually ineffective when the negative stigma surrounding mental disorders remains prevalent. If employees feel ashamed of their disorder, they are significantly less likely to utilize resources available to them, so it is extremely important for employers to establish a company culture that is accepting of mental disorders.

A perfect example comes from an email exchange earlier this year between a woman named Madalyn Parker and the CEO of the company for which Madalyn works. The single sentence that Madalyn wrote not only made headlines but also made strides for the normalization of mental health as a topic in the workplace.

“When the CEO responds to your out of the office email about taking sick leave for mental health and reaffirms your decision. pic.twitter.com/6BvJVCJJFq — madalyn (@madalynrose)”



The virtual exchange gained public notice after Parker posted the screenshot on her Twitter account. Many people were eager to offer praise to both Parker and the CEO. The strong response from the media depicts how infrequently employees are willing to talk about mental health in a professional setting. It was even more unexpected that such a disclosure was appreciated by a boss.

This CEO successfully established a company culture where employees feel comfortable reaching out for help with their mental health issues.

“

The most crucial step in creating a culture that supports mental health is to frame mental wellness as a process that requires active engagement for everyone throughout their life span. People who struggle with mental health are not different from us, they are us. We all need to engage with mental/physical well-being efforts throughout our lives.

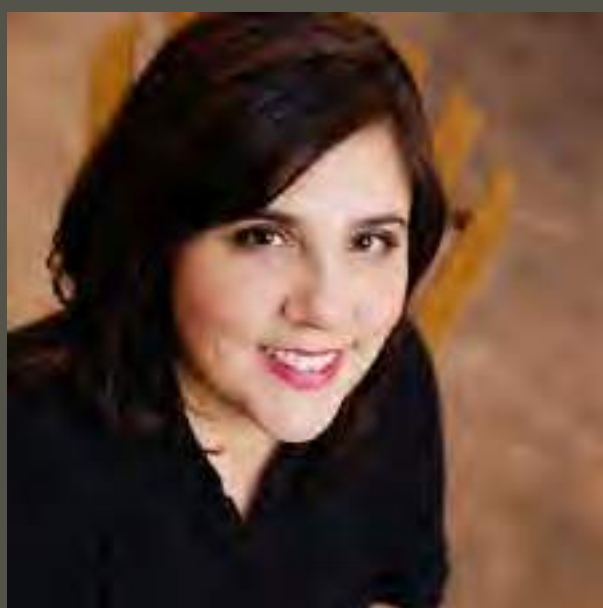
For some of us, mental health comes easily, while physical well-being is more challenging. For others, the opposite is true. This doesn't make anyone better or worse, we are just composed differently, with differing strengths and weaknesses. Ongoing attentiveness to nutrition, movement, rest, and sleep are crucial. Research indicates that we also need to pay attention to social connections at work and in our communities as well as to purpose and meaning to be healthy and productive.

If business leaders model caring for their physical and mental/emotional well-being and have transparency in speaking out about their own challenges, it will have a huge impact on company culture. If they articulate their tools for resilience as well as ask those that report to them how these domains of their life are going and how they can be supportive of employee well-being, they enable others to do the same.

Burnout, stress, anxiety, depression, and coping with trauma are part of the fabric that makes us human. We all have periods of thriving and periods where we are deeply challenged. If we frame cycles of thriving and struggle as normal, we can foster environments that people can express their challenges rather than hide away in shame and social isolation. They can ask for the help that they need. They can offer it to others, which provides purpose and creates strong relationships.

”

— LEAH WEISS, PH.D
SPEAKER. AUTHOR. RESEARCHER.



Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs)

Employee Assistance Programs are usually staffed with social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, and other mental health professionals. These well-trained professionals provide employees with a variety of confidential counseling services to assist them with their mental health needs.

Most EAPs are commonly overlooked and underutilized. However, these programs can be a valuable resource for handling mental health issues in the workplace. Nearly 97% of all companies and organizations with more than 5,000 employees offer some type of EAP. Unfortunately, due to general poor execution, a persisting negative stigma surrounding mental health issues, and confidentiality concerns, less than 5% of employees who have this resource available are actively taking advantage of it.

Employers should work to break the stigma of mental health and encourage employees to utilize these programs more readily. The solution, again, begins with culture.

Onsite Mental Healthcare

Onsite healthcare clinics are commonly offered to employees as a benefit. Research has shown that the availability of this resource decreases medical expenses for the employer, increases workplace productivity, improves longevity amongst employees, and reduces absenteeism. An effective way that employers can address mental health is by integrating mental health services into their pre-existing onsite clinics.

Stress Management Programs

Stress in the workplace is a primary catalyst for employee mental health issues. Its cost has recently emerged as a forefront concern amongst employers. As such, many companies and organizations have started offering stress management programs to support employees.

Although these programs differ in composition, the main goal is consistent: to assist employees in coping with stress through education, group counseling, management techniques, virtual coaching, and mindfulness practices.

For organizations on a budget, there are many free or low-cost mobile app solutions that can be recommended or promoted to employees. A popular app is Headspace, which is known to guide users through meditation and mindfulness sessions with lively animations and helpful information. Additionally, employers may have an existing employee with experience in meditation or mindfulness who could lead a class on the topic. Last but not least, many health plans are starting to provide resources pertaining to mental health. Employers should look into leveraging these (likely free) resources.



CONCLUSION

Mental disorders are unique and can vary greatly between afflicted individuals. As such, different employees will benefit from different workplace initiatives to different extents. The best strategy for employers when tackling mental health is to provide a variety of resources to employees as part of a comprehensive wellness program.



ABOUT WELLABLE

Wellable operates next-generation wellness challenges and health content technology platforms and complements these solutions with on-site services, such as fitness classes, seminars, health coaching, and more.

The technology's flexibility allows organizations to customize and configure a program to meet their needs and objectives while providing a rich experience for end users. Wellable works with employers and health plans of all sizes across the world, with active users in more than 23 different countries.

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