

Mental Health Beyond COVID-19

Employers recognize their workforce as a highly valuable resource. Over the past few years, employers of all sizes and representing diverse industries began to focus on more effectively addressing workplace mental health. No longer was it an afterthought, but a business imperative.

Now, with the COVID-19 pandemic, our nation is experiencing a surge in people showing signs of depression, anxiety, and other serious mental health distress. Recent data from the U.S. Census Bureau shows nearly a tripling of people experiencing signs of depression and anxiety.

In this unprecedented time, the pandemic continues to cause high levels of stress, anxiety, and uncertainty about job security, health, finances, and the future.

Employees' Concerns about Returning to Work

A recent PwC survey identified these areas of employee concern about returning to work:

- ▲ Fear of getting sick from being at work (51%)
- ▲ Unwillingness to use public transportation to commute to work (24%)
- ▲ Managing responsibilities as a parent or caregiver (21%)
- ▲ Taking care of ill family members (15%)

The PwC survey also identified ways in which employees want their employers to keep them safe:

- ▲ Provide personal protective equipment (56%)
- ▲ Provide assurances that employees will be notified if a colleague gets sick (51%)
- ▲ Require customers to follow prescribed safety and personal hygiene practices (51%)
- ▲ Provide assurances on cleanliness and disinfecting practices (50%)
- ▲ Promote and enforce social distancing (45%)

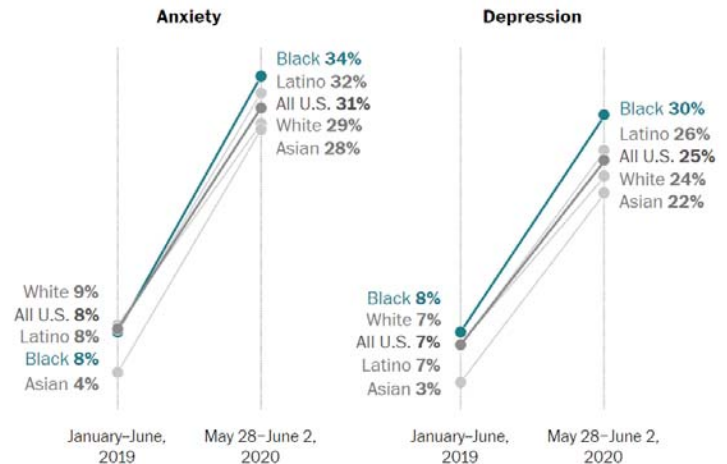
Mental Health Issues Affect Businesses and Their Employees

Poor mental health and stress can negatively affect employee:

- ▲ Job performance and productivity.
- ▲ Engagement with one's work.
- ▲ Communication with coworkers.
- ▲ Physical capability and daily functioning.

Anxiety and depression symptoms have more than tripled since 2019, with black Americans shouldering the heaviest burden

Percent screening positive for anxiety or depression



Mental illnesses such as depression are associated with higher rates of disability and unemployment.

- ▲ Depression interferes with a person's ability to complete physical job tasks about 20% of the time and reduces cognitive performance about 35% of the time.
- ▲ Only 57% of employees who report moderate depression and 40% of those who report severe depression receive treatment to control depression symptoms.

SUPPORTING THE MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING OF EMPLOYEES

L.E.A.D. - Employers can make a positive difference for all employees and their organizations by focusing in four key areas represented by LEAD: Leadership, Effective Communication, Adapt to Change, Double Down on Access to Care.

LEADERSHIP

Whether employees have remained on the job, continue to work remotely or are transitioning back to work, leadership at the highest levels of organizations are well positioned to address key issues on the minds of employees. People are experiencing unprecedented fear, stress, uncertainty, grief, and loss, so increased support and finding new ways to lead are essential. Here are recommendations to consider in supporting employees:

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Reassure - People need reassurance to feel calmer and more in control. Leaders can build key alliances with employees by sharing that management and employees have many of the same concerns and questions.

Even if leaders do not have all the answers, calm reassurance and normalizing how these difficult times are impacting everyone, including leaders, is helpful. Leaders should consider convening employees to reassure in multiple ways including individually – to the extent feasible, in small groups and/or via electronic communications.

Model Good Behavior & Show Empathy - Acknowledge the disruption people and communities are experiencing from the pandemic, and with community protests around the country. Emphasize this is difficult for everyone, including leaders in the organization. Leaders set the tone and culture of organizations. They should remind people to take care of themselves and share what they are doing to stay healthy and well. This may mean leaders must get outside their comfort zone. Employees are likely to be reassured by the willingness of leaders to show vulnerability and share how they are coping. This conveys to employees that they are not alone in what they are feeling and experiencing. Ideally, it communicates we are in this together and you are supported.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Make It Routine - Leaders, HR and supervisors should check in often with employees about life and work. Use these regular, weekly if possible, “check-ins” to remind employees where they can find resources on key topics like self-care, stress management, building resiliency, connecting to mental health care and more. Ask what support is needed.

Listen - Be available to employees through these challenging times. Create reliable feedback loops for employees to share questions, concerns and to seek information on key issues. This might include online and digital options, Q&A during online meetings and via other modes of communication. Create safe spaces for discussions with supervisors and peers and ask employees how they would like those spaces to be structured.

Be A Trusted Source - Although no one currently has all the answers on the pandemic, employers should acknowledge the uncertainty while gathering and sharing reliable updated information from trusted sources.

Make this information easily accessible online and routinely remind employees where they can find it and

when it is updated. Being transparent and communicating timely updates builds trust with the workforce and shows the organization’s commitment to a culture of caring.

ADAPT TO CHANGE

Position your organization or company to deftly adapt to change with the following tips.

Realign Organizational Policies and Practices - People are distracted, stressed, and taking on additional personal responsibilities. Yes, jobs must get done, but in these uncertain times setting reasonable expectations sends a message of support for employees. This includes, to the extent possible, addressing flexibility with deadlines, options for working remotely, flexible work schedules, and leave policies, among others.

Be Willing to Modify Leadership Style - Depending on the size of the organization, there are likely managers and supervisors with multiple leadership styles. Now is the time to work with supervisors on the importance of empathy, support, and open communication with their teams. Ideally this message comes from the top and reinforces the need to lead with compassion and empathy, supporting employees, while working together to achieve the goals of the organization.

DOUBLE DOWN ON ACCESS TO CARE

With the surge in mental health and substance use conditions associated with the pandemic, addressing employee mental health and well-being has never been more important. Before the pandemic, navigating mental health and substance use care was extremely challenging. It is likely to get even harder with more seeking care.

Share mental health and well-being resources with employees.

This can be done through emails, on Intranets, in newsletters and through other modes of communication.

- ▲ Share signs of common mental health conditions like anxiety, depression, substance misuse and more. (<https://www.cdc.gov/workplacehealthpromotion/tools-resources/workplace-health/mental-health/index.html>)
- ▲ Encourage employees to NOTICE changes in themselves and/or others, TALK by checking in and letting a person know that you care, and ACT by offering to connect the person with services.

Increase employee engagement with an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) - Promote information about the EAP and the resources provided to employees and families through multiple communication channels like emails, newsletters, and weekly check-ins.