Prioritizing mental well-being in the workplace

4 steps to better employee mental health — and how it benefits your business

The toll of untreated mental health conditions affects more than your bottom line

We are in a serious mental health crisis. In fact, it's currently one of the country's most pressing health issues, due in no small part to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Not to mention, untreated mental health conditions cost American companies billions of dollars every year.[1]

As an HR leader, how you handle the exponential demand for support from your employees is more important than ever. After all, a healthy workforce is more present, productive, and engaged which benefits the overall health of your business.

But before we dive into steps to help you prioritize the mental health and wellness of your employees, here are some pertinent facts you'll want to keep top of mind.

Mental health conditions are more common than you think

Especially if COVID variants continue to surprise us

Today, it's more important than ever to provide mental health and wellness support for your employees, their families, and their communities. Stress, uncertainty, fear, and anxiety around the COVID-19 pandemic have only intensified the mental health crisis.

Staggeringly, there was a 40% increase in US employees who reported depression or anxiety during the pandemic.[2] What's more, untreated depression costs employers $9,450 per employee, per year in absenteeism and lost productivity."[3] However, when people get treatment, they usually get better – and that benefits employees and businesses alike.

As we adjust to the new normal, your role as an HR professional has fundamentally changed - putting the human back in Human Resources.
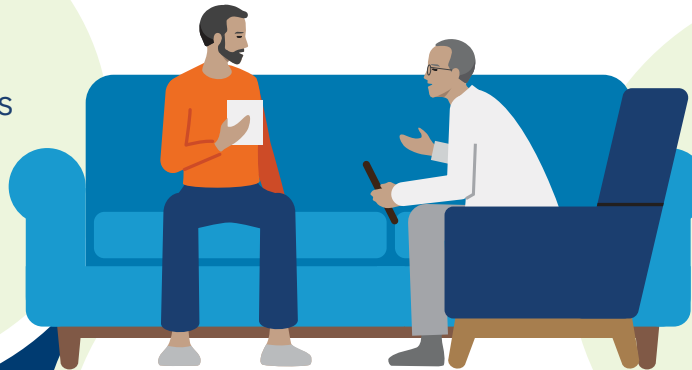
The time is now — start a conversation around mental health in the workplace

Even before the pandemic, mental health issues were on the rise. Here's a quick look at the pre-pandemic numbers:

1 in 7 people
will develop a
**substance
use disorder**
at some point in their lives[5]

1 in 5
American adults
is currently living with a
**mental health
condition**[4]

3 in 4
people living with
**a substance
use disorder**
are in the workforce[6]

3 in 4 employees
**have struggled
with an issue**
that affected their mental health[3]

Employees are facing unprecedented pressures amid the pandemic

Add the new threats to employees posed by COVID-19 variants and you can see that the stress and uncertainty are intensifying the mental health crisis:

There is a
4 times increase in **depression**[7]

81% of employees report experiencing **mental health issues** due to the coronavirus pandemic[2]

12% of U.S. adults have considered **suicide** in the past month according to a September 2020 poll[8]

There is a
**3 times** increase in **anxiety**[7]

Mental health problems are health problems *first* and *foremost*

The truth is that many employees are struggling to meet basic social needs. They are stressed and trying to adjust to the new normal, often facing multiple crises at once.

All of this can, in turn, put stress on your business. In fact, mental health conditions are not only the single greatest cause of worker disability claims, but 62% of missed work days can be attributed to mental health conditions.[9]

Additionally, employees with untreated mental health conditions have a higher heart attack and stroke risk[10] — and employees with severe mental distress are two times more likely to develop Type 2 diabetes.[11]

From productivity loss due to home-life concerns to long-term increased health, disability, and workers' compensation costs,[12] it makes a great deal of sense to lean into this issue from an HR perspective. But how?
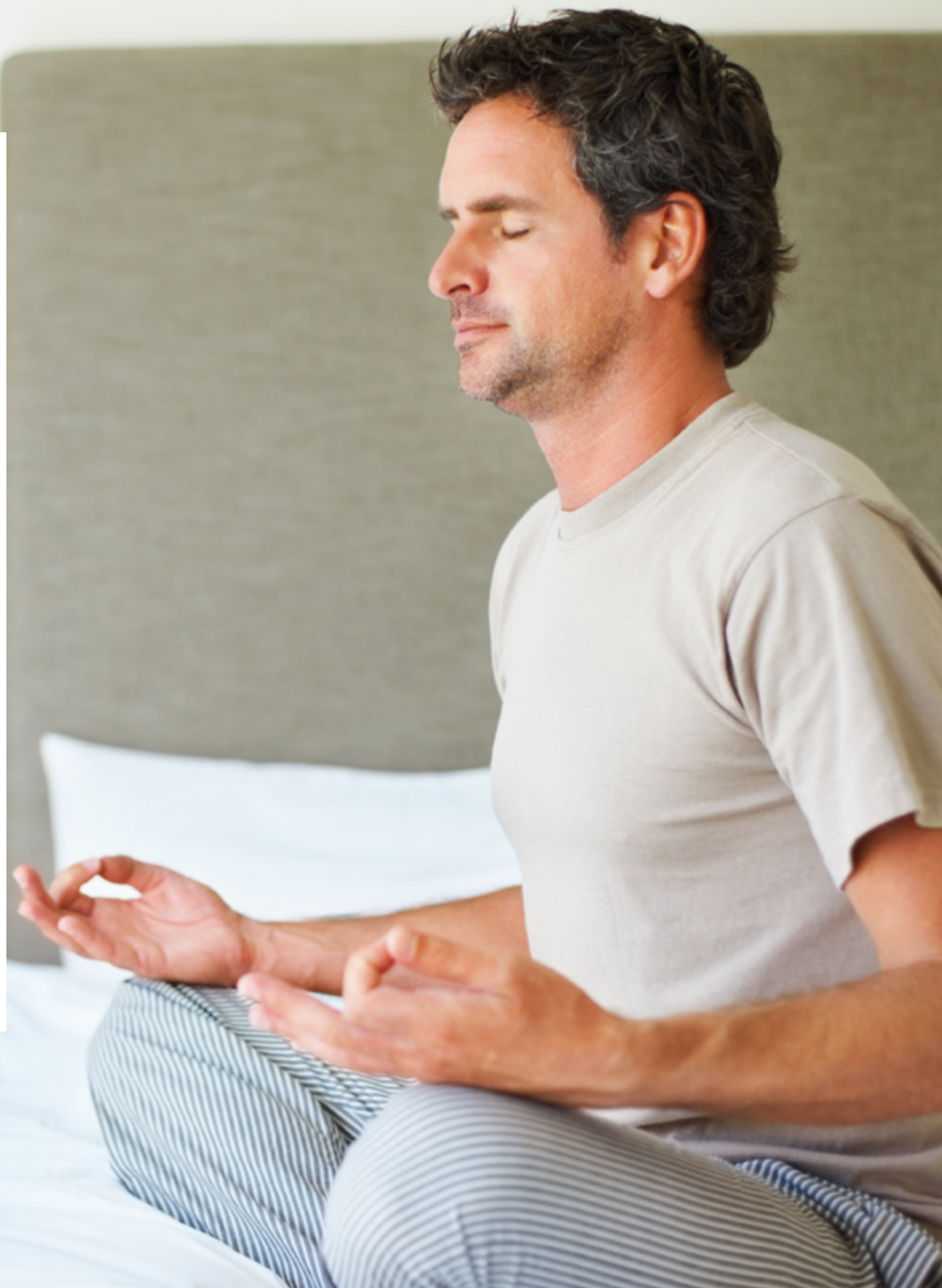
STEP #1:
Prioritize a psychologically healthy workforce

This means maintaining a supportive work environment. You can do this by being there for employees and coaching supervisors to do the same. Empathy and flexibility help to create a psychologically healthy workforce where employees feel safe, respected, and empowered.

Here are a few suggestions:

• Show empathy, be vulnerable, and check in

• Validate what people are feeling

• Allow for flexible scheduling

• Evaluate and adjust workloads as necessary

• Make support services available

• Reduce stigma

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STEP #2:
Be aware of mental health stigma

Four out of 5 workers with a mental health condition say shame and stigma have prevented them from seeking mental health care.[13] Perhaps that's why the average time between the onset of symptoms and access to treatment is 8 to 10 years.[14]

What's even more alarming, 2 in 3 employees who need help for a mental health condition,[9] and 9 in 10 employees who need help for addiction, never get it.[15]

Beyond awareness of stigma, there are some things that HR professionals can do to normalize conversations around mental health, and in turn, reduce it.

Try providing employees with:

- Helpful mental wellness resources in one place

- Wellness tools that are easy to access
  (i.e., digital self-help tools)

- Company-wide mental health support training

- Mandated breaks to reduce burnout

- Mental health coverage in your organization's
  health insurance policy

STEP #3:
Let your employees know it's OK to ask for help

Accessing mental health community resources or public benefits can feel uncomfortable for some people. However, in the workplace, when additional resources and awareness of them are made available to employees, they are better able to maintain a level of privacy in seeking out assistance.

Consider offering:

• Employee assistance programs

• Wellness champions

• Employee resource groups

• Training for managers

• Helping them address needs and guide employees to the right resources as well as advising them where to get additional help

57%
of employees

say they feel **more loyal and productive**

and take less time off work if their employer proactively supported workforce mental health.[16]

80%
of employees

who receive treatment for a mental health condition report improved job satisfaction.[17]

There are other factors that come into play when considering the total health and wellness of employees, however. Beyond mental and physical health, social health is also a key component.

STEP #4:
Go deeper into social health

You are most likely following some of the recommendations below. However, depending on how your organization is structured, you can:

- Help employees understand the resources offered by your Employee Assistance Program

- Offer robust caregiver benefits

- Leverage financial services

- Help employees navigate leave-of-absence policies

- Provide support for terminated employees

Yes, there is a great deal to consider, and as an HR leader, from attracting and retaining talent to managing holistic employee health care, you are more than likely faced with limited time and resources to address it *all*. That's why having a health care partner that can provide you with complete support in one holistic ecosystem can help.

The impact of social health

When we talk about "social health," we're talking about the combination of social drivers — such as access to food, housing, and economic opportunity — that can impact total health.

To break it down further, there are four areas that contribute to overall good health:

10%   **Physical environment** — access to a place of safety and security

20%   **Health care** — access to personal health care solutions and providers

30%   **Health behaviors** — alcohol and tobacco use, sexual activity, and diet and exercise

40%   **Socioeconomic factors** — education, job security, and income, as well as family/social support and community safety[20]

When it comes to people of color, there is an additional layer – social injustice and racism – two important drivers of social and mental health that can lead to racial trauma, such as:

- Anxiety
- Chronic stress

- Depression
- Suicidal ideation

Moreover, African Americans face social injustice in unique ways:

- Workplace discrimination[19]
- Historical and current racism[20]
- Hate crimes and violence[19]

- Excessive force and surveillance from law enforcement[18]
- Barriers to upward mobility[21]

All of the above, plus knowing that about 25% of African Americans seek mental health care, compared to 40% of whites[22] – makes your work as an HR Professional even more challenging.

Underserved communities and COVID-19

When adding COVID-19 to the mix, communities of color become even more disproportionately affected, as do communities with:

- Lower incomes

- Limited grocery stores and medical facilities

- Many high-density or multigenerational housing units

- High rates of essential workers who can't work remotely[23]

All of this can affect employee productivity and as an executive decision-maker, you can help to improve that – and employee satisfaction — all while lowering medical costs that can positively impact your bottom line.

49%
of people with **unmet social needs** reported a negative mental health impact from COVID-19.[24]

What to look for in a mental health care partner:

Digital self-help tools

Healthy lifestyle programs

Inpatient services

Wellness apps

Wellness coaching

Outpatient and intensive outpatient services

Recovery and social support

Preventative care

Educational classes

Healthy lifestyle programs - Online health guidance to help build and reach goals

Wellness coaching - Convenient, ongoing support from specially-trained mental health professionals

Wellness apps - Digital mental health support via apps such as Calm and myStrength™

Digital self-help tools - An online, on-demand collection of tools, resources, and information

Educational classes - An array of classes on topics relevant to and in support of what your employees may be facing

Recovery and social support - Specialty care that helps employees set recovery goals and build back relationships

Preventive care - Proactive tests and screenings help catch mental health problems early — when they're easier to treat

Outpatient and intensive outpatient services - Specialized, confidential care in a variety of settings to help treat depression, addiction, substance abuse, and more

Inpatient services - Mental health care provided to your employees during a hospital stay

Treatment is a valuable investment

Mental health isn't a new topic when it comes to workforce wellness. However, with the growing demand for mental health supports and added pressures of the pandemic, it is more important than ever to prioritize the holistic wellness of your employees.

Plus, 93% of employees agree that the companies that stay in business through the pandemic will be the ones that actively support employee mental health.[25] But 40% don't think their employers care about employee mental health.[2] Better support now – in the throes of the ongoing pandemic – can mean a competitive advantage when the pandemic finally ends.

Providing truly integrated health care and support for your employees will help your company strike the right balance between mental health and wellness and physical needs.

For more resources on how to better support your employees, please visit https://business.kaiserpermanente.org/kp-difference/mental-health-addiction-care

Interested in learning more? Let's talk!

> Contact us

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