Virgin pulse

Guide

Mental health in the workplace:

Are you equipped for today's challenges?

Mental Health in the Workplace: Are you equipped for Today's Challenges?

The world has experienced extraordinary changes over the past few years, and the workplace is no exception. Workers are tired, stressed, and feeling overwhelmed.

Organizational leaders have seen the growing mental health crisis and responded to the urgent need for employers to support the wellbeing of their employees. Yet, of the 50 million Americans currently suffering from a mental health issue, 55% of adults (more than 28 million people) with mental illness receive no treatment, according to Mental Health America – indicating blind spots or missed opportunities on the part of employers.

This issue has gained so much steam that the World Health Organization (WHO) and United States Surgeon General recently issued guidelines on workplace mental health.

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We have the power to make workplaces engines for mental health and wellbeing. Doing so will require organizations to rethink how they protect workers from harm, foster a sense of connection among workers, show them that they matter, make space for their lives outside work, and support their long-term professional growth, said US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy in his recently released **Framework for Mental Health and Wellbeing in the workplace.** This may not be easy. But it will be worth it because the benefits will accrue to both workers and organizations.
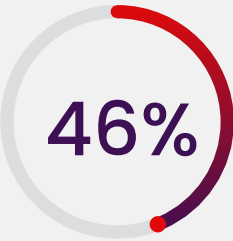
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United States Surgeon General
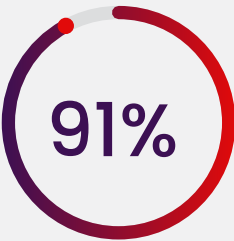
The current state of employee mental health

Some workers have struggled with their mental or behavioral health for years – and it's costing employers more than they might realize
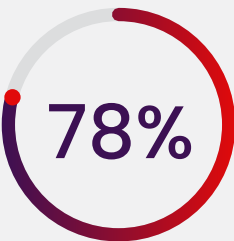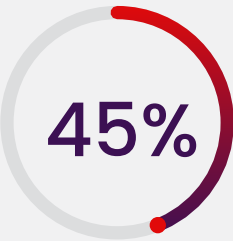
78% have struggled for at least 1 year

46% have struggled for over 3 years

91% said they're less productive at work due to these issues

45% said they're less productive for more than 5 hours a week

An estimated 12 billion working days are lost every year to depression and anxiety at a cost of US $1 trillion per year in lost productivity, according to WHO.

The good news is that employer mental health benefits really do work.

A analysis by the National Safety Council and NORC at the University of Chicago demonstrates that organizations that support mental health see a return of $4 for every dollar invested.

For employees to thrive, employers must build benefits relevant to today's challenges.

Thriving organizations recognize the link between workforce mental health and business outcomes, and many are adapting by adding high-quality mental health benefits that support their employees' wellbeing.

This year's Workplace Health and Wellbeing Priorities survey – along with insights from our clients, consultants, experts, and clinicians – shows that employers are taking notice of this changing landscape, but are they building mental health benefits relevant to today's challenges?

1

Align benefits and values

As an employer, you can reinforce your company's values by offering benefits that support the wellbeing of your employees.

By normalizing mental health in the workplace, you can create an environment where your employees feel safe discussing their challenges. This is becoming increasingly important to potential talent and investors who value a company's alignment between its mission and actions.

Benefits not only back up a company's external statement but also improve support within the workforce, including individuals with neurodiverse employees and caregivers.

By providing better employment options and improving their physical, mental, and financial health, employees are more likely to be productive and engaged. This also gives employers access to a wider range of talents.

What employers can do...

- Understand Your company Values by clearly define your company's core values, mission, and culture. Understand what makes your organization unique and the principles it stands for.

- Identify Key Employee Needs by conducting surveys, interviews, and focus groups to understand your employees' needs and preferences when it comes to benefits. This will help you tailor your offerings to meet their expectations.

- Clearly communicate how each benefit aligns with the company's values. Explain how the benefit contributes to the overall mission and culture of the organization.

- Ensure that your benefits cater to a diverse workforce. Consider different demographics and life stages when designing benefits to create an inclusive environment offering flexible options.

2 Design mental health benefits for inclusivity and accessibility

Insights from Amwell's newest survey on mental health showed that an alarming number – more than 50% - of respondents either don't have mental health benefits included in their workplace benefits package or are not sure if they do.

Building benefits strategies that work for everyone requires insight into your workforce's broad range of needs and preferences.

Everyone goes through times when they are physically or emotionally unwell. Scouring the internet for solutions when facing a crisis isn't an optimal employee experience, and research shows that just 1 in 5 who receive therapy through a traditional health plan or EAP see reliable symptom improvement.

This begs the question, are your benefits genuinely inclusive and accessible to everyone that could benefit from preventive and mental health management support?

Historically, HR and benefits leaders have had a challenging task – engaging employees and their families across an increasingly complex mental health journey. Typically, this journey is dotted with cost concerns, siloed benefits, and limited access to benefits without a workplace-connected device.

According to Mercer's Health on Demand 2023 survey, there is a striking difference between low and high earners' access to benefits. Predictably, income level also strongly influences whether employees believe their employer cares about their health and wellbeing.

Inclusive design doesn't mean you're designing one thing for all people; instead, you are developing multiple ways for people to access, participate, and utilize their benefits so everyone has a sense of belonging. It's common to think about this as including diverse groups, but it pays to consider what groups are typically excluded.

What employers can do…

- Help decision-makers understand that low-cost options like EAPs can be valuable but have their limitations. An EAPs primary function is to provide short-term support. Working with partners that can offer sustainable, accessible, and evidence-based support like condition management and coaching provides a trusted employee experience while still remaining cost-effective.

- Recognize that 'build it and they will come' is not a reliable strategy. People are reluctant to ask for help; but thrive when benefits are delivered in the context of their daily routine during their moments of need through digital and human touch.

- Consider as part of your benefits philosophy whether premium contributions and support should focus on equity rather than equality. Recognizing that each person has their own individual circumstances.

- Extend mental health support to families, including children, teenagers, and parents.

3 Focus on behavior change and removing barriers

Understanding the science of behavior change involves a systematic approach that recognizes three factors affecting human behavior: motivation, ability, and triggers.

Behavorial change helps reduce the symptoms of mild anxiety and stress. One effective way to implement these changes is through habit formation and routines.

Small actions you take throughout the day, such as eating at a specific time, waking up early, or taking the dog for a walk, are part of a larger pattern. While these actions may not seem significant on their own, collectively, they form a routine. Habits tend to be automatic and subconscious, but building a habit requires conscious effort and determination.

To build a habit, you must have a clear goal, objective, or desired end result. Predictable situations can have a calming effect, particularly for individuals with anxiety disorders, as they can alleviate the constant worry of the unknown.

Additionally, making support easily accessible by removing barriers of cost, time, and effort can help employees build healthy habits that become part of healthy routines.

What employers can do...

- Focus on adding mental health benefits that leverage the science of behavior change and aid habit formation.

- Develop evidence-based practices to support the entire continuum of mental health.

- Address gaps in mental health benefits. Consider a health, wellbeing, and care navigation solution that can remove barriers.

- Ensure the employee does not need to be on your insurance to leverage mental health benefits -providing access to all.

4 Incentivize actions to create loyalty

70% of people believe their manager has a greater impact on their mental health than their therapist or doctor. And surprisingly, their influence on mental wellbeing is just as significant as that of a partner.

Last year, the Surgeon General's office asked leadership to take more accountability for employee wellbeing, indicating a growing awareness of how toxic work environments damage staffers' health.

And now we are learning that 1 in 5 employees lost sleep over a newly minted manager with inadequate leadership skills. More than a third cited anxiety, lack of motivation, sleeplessness, and other effects of unprepared rookie managers as a reason for wanting to quit.

If you are a leader, you're right to find this data sobering.

Being a manager has become an incredibly daunting task due to the challenges of layoffs, increased workloads, deteriorating mental health, and the chaotic transition back to the office.

Alarmingly, nearly half of all leaders admit that they are overwhelmed with pressure to alleviate burnout among their teams. As a result, many managers take on extra work themselves to shield their team members from stress and challenges.

This self-sacrifice often leads to long hours, disregarding personal boundaries, and ultimately hindering their effectiveness as managers by not managing themselves or their network.

This vicious cycle shows up in stress, burnout, and mental health issues across your entire population. Unhealthy habits, routines, and behaviors are learned and a toxic culture is formed. That's why it is vital that your managers get the support they need to thrive – and, by extension, to help the people they manage thrive.

What employers can do...

- Assess the psychological safety of workplace culture, providing access to mental health and resiliency support.

- Provide training to managers to equip them with the soft skills needed to help their direct reports – including what policies, procedures, and benefits are available.

- Explore how you can support managers to form good, positive relationships that can help them. This could be via wellbeing challenges, forming social networks, or creating a regular mentorship program.

- Normalize conversations around workload and mental health. While it is important to show ease and confidence to their direct reports, it's also equally important to show that the expectation isn't to be superhuman.

About the survey

For our Global Survey: Workplace Health and Wellbeing Priorities, we surveyed more than 600 global HR and benefits leaders at organizations with more than 1,000 employees about their workplace health and wellbeing experiences and plans for 2024. The surveys were fielded between April and May, 2023.

Our goal was to better understand the challenges, priorities, and trends shaping employee wellbeing in the workplace. Learn more about the survey here.

About Virgin Pulse

Virgin Pulse is the leading digital-first health and wellbeing company that empowers organizations across the globe to activate populations, improve health outcomes, and reduce spending in an era of accelerating cost and complexity. Virgin Pulse's Homebase for Health® connects data, people and technology to deliver hightech, human-touch experiences that engage and reward individual journeys.

Virgin Pulse impacts over 100 million people across 190 countries by helping Fortune 500, national health plans and many other organizations change lives – and businesses – for good.

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