Where Policy Meets Culture

Aligning for Mental Health at Work

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Change is hard, and many benefits professionals may not feel empowered or equipped with the resources needed to be on the cutting edge of adopting and implementing innovations. Benefits professionals routinely ask:

> Who else is doing "it"?

> What exactly are others doing?

> What results are those other employers experiencing?

> Is it giving them a competitive advantage and/or is there a positive value proposition?

Basically, they need to know why they should venture into the unknown and assume new risks.

This is especially true when it comes to addressing depression in the workplace. Depression is a sensitive topic and stigma around mental health persists. Many employers have taken steps to educate their employees, provide appropriate supports and normalize mental health as a part of wellness. Nonetheless,

challenges continue to get in the way of achieving a mentally healthy workplace. One of the most pervasive challenges is workplace culture.

When we talk about the impacts of depression, we're not just talking about people feeling down or lacking motivation. Depression often impacts people's ability to concentrate and utilize their cognitive functioning. One organization, Families for Depression Awareness, has provided an acronym, "ROAM," to illustrate the areas of thinking affected by depression: reasoning, organization, attention and memory. In the workplace, depression-related cognitive challenges manifest as trouble concentrating, indecisiveness, forgetfulness and more.

Statistically, depression is associated with reduction in focus and productivity equivalent to 2.3 lost workdays per month (Wang, 2014). The Impact of Depression at Work Audit (IDeA), which evaluated the societal and economic burden of depression in the workplace, revealed that nearly 40 percent of workers diagnosed with depression reported taking time off of work, an average of 10 days per year, as a result of their diagnosis (Ipsos, 2014). To top it off, unsupportive work climates worsen mental health symptoms and job performance (IBI Survey).

On the policy side, employers have broadened their benefit offerings, reviewed or sourced a new Employee Assistance Program (EAP) and behavioral health vendors and adjusted time off policies to better support help-seeking for those who need it. However, it's not enough. When it comes to inspiring a culture of help-seeking, employers are falling short. A positive culture will ultimately yield employees who are both fully present and productive. Absenteeism and presenteeism (i.e., being physically present at work but not fully engaged) are two significant hits to productivity. When employees get the help they need, everyone wins.

It's understandable for employers to believe they've put forth enough effort to address the problem of depression in the workplace through policy and benefit-related matters. But to be effective, they must also take an honest and unbiased look at the culture they drive, inform and affirm. Employers are in an extremely powerful position. This power can be used to positively impact how, when and where employees seek help, and how comfortable they feel in doing so. At the same time, this power and influence can also have a completely negative effect, inhibiting employees from seeking the help that they need. It's no secret: employees don't necessarily know or want to admit that they're depressed, they are afraid it will adversely affect their work status, they feel embarrassed and alone, and the majority don't know where to seek help. A policy that allows time off to seek help, or to take time to refresh and renew is great. But when supervisors or managers complain, make derogatory remarks, or treat individuals unfairly for doing so, it completely defeats the purpose of the policy and renders it moot. The policy's intent is further degraded when other employees openly deride and talk down to colleagues that appear to be struggling with such issues. By aggressively attempting to stop this behavior, employers promote a positive, healthy culture.

Only by coupling strong policies and a positive culture together will employers ultimately move employees to seek help when they need it, resulting in a more healthy, present and productive workforce. There are a number of ways employers can help make this happen:

Adopt policies that support employees' mental health and wellness. Employee handbooks should clearly state the company's resolve to educate supervisors and employees about common mental health concerns and how to talk with someone about their concerns, support employees who face mental health issues, treat those with mental health issues fairly and without retaliation, and to make employees aware of options and benefits that may be available (e.g., short-term medical leave, employee assistance program, flexible hours, work remotely, etc.). Leverage relationships with all vendors to infuse best-in-class tools and resources related to behavioral and mental health into an overall strategy.

Train and/or talk to managers and supervisors. Even the most generous estimates indicate that slightly more than half of employers train managers to recognize mental health problems and help employees get treatment. Employers benefit in the short and long-term by training managers about mental health conditions and ensuring that staff is able to provide support to employees who may be suffering from depression.
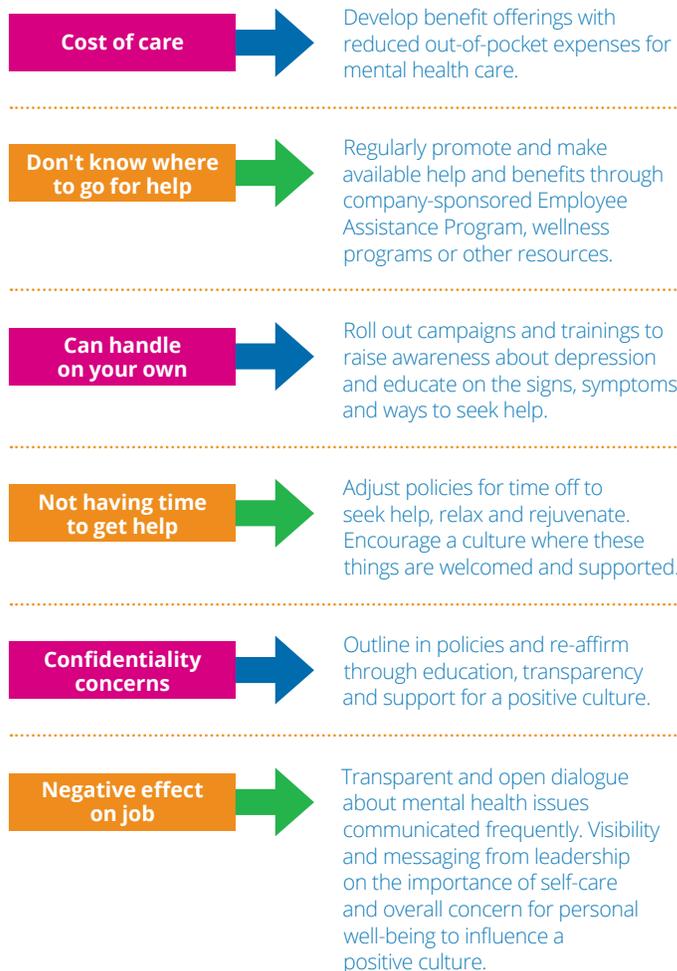
Evaluate – and address – sources of stress in the workplace. Policies or practices that create stress can be counterproductive – uncertain work schedules, punitive practices, inattention to bullying, negative peer pressure, etc. Inattention to these issues in the workplace can add to stress that employees experience in their lives away from work. Rather than making assumptions as to contributors to workplace stress, ask employees – either through surveys or focus groups.

Reduce the stigma. By bringing information about mental health into the open – and sharing similar experiences when possible – employers can implicitly support early identification of symptoms, inspire employees to seek assistance, promote use of the EAP for accessing care and encourage pursuit of symptom management (and wellness). Consult EAP and other vendors for additional support, when needed.

Share resources. Many nonprofit organizations have free or low-cost resources available to help employers improve and support workplace mental health. Capitalize on resources available to help understand, communicate about, address and support those affected by depression. Here are a few:

> Right Direction from Employers Health and the American Psychiatric Association Foundation

> ICU from the American Psychiatric Association Foundation

> Mental Health First Aid at Work from the National Council for Behavioral Health

> Coping with Stress (brochure, workshop, webinar) and More Than Mood from Families for Depression Awareness

Employer roles in managing perceived challenges and concerns

Challenge	Employer role
Cost of care →	Develop benefit offerings with reduced out-of-pocket expenses for mental health care.
Don't know where to go for help →	Regularly promote and make available help and benefits through company-sponsored Employee Assistance Program, wellness programs or other resources.
Can handle on your own →	Roll out campaigns and trainings to raise awareness about depression and educate on the signs, symptoms and ways to seek help.
Not having time to get help →	Adjust policies for time off to seek help, relax and rejuvenate. Encourage a culture where these things are welcomed and supported.
Confidentiality concerns →	Outline in policies and re-affirm through education, transparency and support for a positive culture.
Negative effect on job →	Transparent and open dialogue about mental health issues communicated frequently. Visibility and messaging from leadership on the importance of self-care and overall concern for personal well-being to influence a positive culture.

[1]Wang, P.S., Beck, A.L., Berglund, P., McKenas, D.K., Pronk, N.P., Simon, G.E., and Kessler, R.C. Effects of major depression on moment-in-time work performance. American Journal of Psychiatry, 161, 1885-1981, 2014.

Ispos. Executive Summary, IDeA Survey, Impact of Depression at Work: U.S. Report. July, 2014.

Integrated Benefits Institute. Human Capital investment for better business results connecting work climate, employee health and job-related outcomes. San Francisco: IBI. July, 2015.