

HOW TO HELP EMPLOYEES EXPERIENCING MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES WHILE PRESERVING A SAFE WORK ENVIRONMENT



Numerous studies over the last several months indicate that the coronavirus pandemic has had a significant impact on U.S. workers' mental health. According to Total Brain's Mental Health Index findings, workers have experienced higher-than-normal mental health issues over the last six months. The August Mental Health Index data shows a 54% increase in risk for depression among working Americans since February. When separated by age, 20-39 year-olds showed the highest growth in risk for depressive disorder, measuring 57% higher than in February. A study by the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) echoes these findings, with one in four adults reporting symptoms of depression and thoughts of self-harm since the coronavirus outbreak began.

The data is a wake-up call for employers to make mental health an absolute priority in the workplace. Whether employees are working from home or onsite, this COVID-induced burden of prolonged stress, anxiety, and feelings of depression is directly impacting workers' productivity.

Factors Affecting Employee Mental Health & Wellness

There are quite a few stressors behind the rise in mental health issues among employees, beginning with the threat and fear of becoming sick from the virus. Significant life changes have occurred, which have impacted our daily lives – from a mandatory lockdown that saw an unprecedented number of businesses close and precipitated economic anxiety, job instability, and uncertainty as millions of workers were furloughed. There was also a shift to remote work for professionals and at-home schooling for children and teens, travel bans, restrictions and social-distancing requirements that curtailed socialization and the ability to get together with families and friends outside one's "bubble."

Work-Life Boundaries Blurred

While many initially hailed the various benefits of remote work in the wake of the pandemic, including being off the road and having a more flexible schedule, after months behind a desk at home Zooming all day, the reality is not picture-perfect. A lot of employees are pushing themselves to their limits, working all times of the day and night to be available and responsive. They are working longer hours, having a hard time disconnecting from work, and feel perpetually behind. The lack of in-person collaboration with colleagues is also missing, critical to our inherent nature as social beings. In addition, countless employees are also juggling childcare and eldercare issues and responsibilities.

In addition, because of travel restrictions, many employees have not taken vacation days or PTO. Some feel they can't take any time off due to stress over job security and extra responsibilities that make it hard to take time away from work. With winter coming and the fear of a surge in virus infections, some workers are postponing holiday travel plans, further compounding the feeling of isolation that has set in over the last several months.

Employees who have returned to the workplace are experiencing anxiety and other mental health-related issues. Workers who deal with customers and/or work closely with others are concerned about their safety and contracting COVID-19. They worry about exposing family members to the virus and are anxious about a second round of closures and furloughs should another lockdown be mandated.

Employers Increasing Efforts to Keep Workers Healthy

Whether your employees work at home or are onsite, it's essential to create a safe place for everyone and step up measures to help those coping with mental health issues. This can be accomplished in a number of ways:

- *Be alert for frequent physical complaints, increased anger or irritability, persistent sadness, excessive worrying, or reckless behavior. These changes are not as easy to monitor with remote work as with onsite workers. Be sure to regularly check in with remote workers by phone or video-conference to gauge and respond to these concerns.*
- *It is important that work-life balance is acknowledged and promoted by senior leadership. Help remote workers establish work-life boundaries to avoid burnout and maintain healthy productivity. Establish employment practices that promote employees' turning off email notifications and engaging in personal activities that will help separate and define work-life balance. Recommend and encourage colleagues to sign on and sign off by saying "good morning" and "good night," even virtually. Employees should keep one another posted when they are available and away from work to set necessary boundaries. Nine to five should not become an eight-to-eight workday.*
- *Establish "me-time" or meeting-free afternoons. For example, some companies introduced a monthly mental health and wellness day in the summer, providing employees with the day off. At the same time, other firms hold meeting-free Friday afternoons so that employees have uninterrupted time to get work done before the weekend.*
- *Make sure workers who are experiencing burnout know to reach out to the HR department. It's important managers understand the employee benefits offered and actively communicate and encourage employees to utilize all of the well-being resources available. Prior surveys indicate many workers are apprehensive about taking this step, believing that reaching out about a mental health issue could negatively impact job security. Mental health conditions are covered under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and federal law requires that employers make reasonable accommodations for workers with such disorders.*
- *Increase the number of online counseling sessions workers can access through your Employee Assistance Program (EAP). Offer apps and subscriptions for self-care practice.*
- *Ensure a safe onsite work environment, following CDC and OSHA COVID-19 safety guidelines so that employees feel that your company is doing all it can and more to keep them safe.*

One of the best things you can do for your employees and your business is to be candid and empathetic about the struggles that many are going through. Be open and start the conversation about how this past year has impacted all of us. Communication will help normalize the issues people face, which begins with leadership and extends to management throughout the organization.



About BKS Partners

BKS Partners is an award-winning entrepreneur-led and inspired insurance brokerage firm delivering expertly crafted Commercial Insurance and Risk Management, Private Insurance and Risk Management, Employee Benefits and Benefit Administration, Asset and Income Protection, and Risk Mitigation strategies to clients wherever their passions and businesses take them throughout the U.S. and abroad. BKS Partners has award-winning industry expertise, colleagues, competencies, insurers, and most importantly, a highly differentiated culture that our clients consider an invaluable expansion of their business. Learn more at www.bks-partners.com.

IMPORTANT LEGAL DISCLAIMER

Please read the BRP Group's Resources Legal Disclaimer concerning the contents of this resource. The Resource Legal Disclaimer may affect your rights and applies to you regardless of the manner in which you have received the resource (e.g., from the website, email or otherwise). Your continued use or viewing of this resource constitutes your consent to the terms contained in the Resources Legal Disclaimer. The Resources Legal Disclaimer can be found at: <https://baldwinriskpartners.com/resources-disclaimer/>.

