

How employers can ease the strain of COVID-19 isolation

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How employers manage employee mental health could be the most important strategy companies devise now, and workplace experts say doubling down those efforts may be the key to successful return-to-work plans for 2021.

While employers are increasingly eager to figure out a “new normal” after more than half a year of disruptions from COVID-19, the prolonged traumas sustained from extended isolation mean many employees are struggling with cognitive and mental health decline.

“Oftentimes when people talk about trauma, it’s usually a specific group of people who went through something in childhood or something else. But this year, we have all been traumatized in some way, shape or form,” says Mike Veny, a mental health speaker and author of “Transforming Stigma.” “People are caught up in their own head, and that can be a prison when you don’t have your regular social structure in place.”

Mental health has deteriorated since the start of the pandemic, and August marked six consecutive months of higher than normal mental health issues for workers in the U.S., according to the Mental Health Index by Total Brain and the National Alliance of Healthcare Purchaser Coalitions. Feelings of anxiety were 23% higher than pre-COVID levels, and feelings of depression were 30% higher, the index found.

These prolonged stressors have an impact on physical and mental well-being. Employees reported a 31% decrease in cognitive abilities, like an ability to focus, and a 7% decline in work performance, according to the index.

“Physically, our body reacts to stress by creating a hormone called cortisol and under chronic stress, high levels of cortisol for long periods of time derail key brain, heart and digestive system functions,” says Louis Gagnon, CEO of Total Brain. “Mentally, stress contracts our mind and reduces the cognitive flexibility that is necessary to put things in perspective, create and collaborate.”

Mental health costs the U.S. \$1 trillion in lost productivity costs per year, according to the World Health Organization. While mental wellness has been an increasingly important part of employee benefits packages, 2020 has blindsided even the most progressive employers, says Richard Parke, senior vice president of Avetta, a workplace safety and sustainability software provider.

“Nobody was prepared for all the stress that 2020 has brought, and so in a lot of ways we're learning as we go,” Parke says. “What is most unfortunate is that this was a more tangential concept in people’s minds and a challenge I don’t think we were prepared for.”

While the pandemic has brought employee mental health awareness to the forefront, fear over the consequences of sharing these challenges hold many employers and employees from speaking up, Veny says.

Mental health speaker Mike Veny



“In the workplace, we want to be at our professional best. So there's this belief that any kind of personal information that will demonstrate weakness will potentially harm me down the road or in the near future,” Veny says. “It's not just about stigma. People can't let down their guard and just be themselves, because mental health is a sign of weakness in their minds.”

At Avetta, Parke says the pandemic has changed the way he interacts with his own employees. He encourages other people at the management level to become more attuned to the overall well-being of their workplace.

“My engagement has changed because it weighs on my mind more of how people are doing,” he says. “I found that I’m a lot more attentive to the signs — if we see people's work changing or if they aren’t connecting or stop turning their camera on in meetings, it’s made me more aware to reach out to that person and check in.”

Managers have had a direct impact on an employee’s mental wellness during coronavirus. According to a report by Mindshare and Qualtrics, less than half of employees feel that their manager has been attuned to their well-being during the pandemic. Those employers are 69% more likely to say their mental health has declined, and 61% more likely to report that they have been less productive.

The Mindshare report found that almost 60% of workers are comfortable with their manager asking them about their mental health. Creating an open dialogue can be very straightforward, Veny says.

“Employees may just say they’re going through a difficult time, and that’s all they need to say because everyone knows what that means on some level,” Veny says.

If managers want to dig deeper, they should ask permission to continue the conversation, he says.

“If a manager or supervisor is meeting with someone on their team who they think is struggling with a mental health challenge, one way to navigate that conversation is to simply ask permission,” Veny says. “So say ‘Can I talk about something with you? And if you don't want to talk about it, it's OK. But I've noticed some things in your performance, and I was wondering if you're OK and what we can do to support you.’”

Parke says Avetta has increased the frequency of employee surveys and how they communicate about their employee resources, like an EAP program.

“As we go back to the office and what we used to consider normal, if we're not looking at things differently and being better prepared for the next type of situation that comes up, then this has all been a complete waste and a harsh human toll,” Parke says. “Make a commitment to knowing that mental health is part of health and safety and create a culture around that.”