

How Mental Health Impacts the Workplace

And what employers can do to help

by Doc Elliot

▶ A new year brings new hope as businesses continue to navigate the pandemic. As we head into 2021, we are facing what may be the most severe mental health crisis in recent American history. How business owners handle the next three to six months is pivotal to maintaining a healthy and productive workforce.

The pandemic is taking a physical and mental toll on nearly everyone these days in some form, from mild to severe. Not only do COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations continue to rise, but anxiety and depression have set in and the cases of stress-related symptoms have skyrocketed with it. Businesses large and small are now faced with economic uncertainty and a burned-out workforce, which is less productive now than it was a year ago. Incidences of workplace violence are rising at an astronomical rate, too. We're seeing incidents more and more within the media and the phenomenon seems to be accelerating. Rapidly changing public and corporate mandates that include mask-wearing and inoculation have been cause for violent outbursts in stores, offices, schools, events and public places over the last year. As new rules begin implementation this year, employers are preparing for adverse effects of enforcement.

The world is experiencing an unprecedented level of psychological trauma, and it's affecting the way we live, work, communicate and thrive in every area of our lives — but it's especially affecting people at work.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 60% of employees report losing at least one hour per day in productivity because of COVID-related stress.

The bottom line? Stress is eating away at businesses' bottom line.

Even worse, it could put employees *and* customers at risk.

Employers were already taking important steps to develop workplace mental health and violence prevention programs before COVID-19, but now the urgency is even greater. In truth, we have only begun to scratch the surface of the pandemic's long-term repercussions on business operations where it comes to mental health. Disruptions to the education system, for example, may affect our children for years to come. In turn, parents are juggling unprecedented challenges and limitations with childcare and providing in-home education when schools can't be open. Changes to daily workflow have left millions of employees shaken and scarred.

And that's not all. Poor mental health and excessive stress can affect employee:

- Job performance and productivity,
- Engagement with one's work,
- Communication with coworkers,
- Physical capability and daily functioning, and
- Safety and violence in the workplace.



We are optimistic for a much happier and healthier year, and by prioritizing employee mental health as crisis prevention we get a head start. Social isolation, economic uncertainty and inconsistent routines are tough on workers at every level.

Here are a few ways employers can address mental health concerns in the workplace to start the year on a positive note:

- Create a stigma-free zone: Developing an open-door policy for employees to discuss mental health concerns creates a safe, healthy and more productive working environment for all workers.
- Make mental health self-assessment tools available to all employees.
- Offer free or subsidized clinical screenings for depression from a qualified mental health professional, followed by directed feedback and clinical referral when appropriate.
- Offer health insurance with no or low out-of-pocket costs for depression medications and mental health counseling.
- Provide free or subsidized lifestyle coaching, counseling or self-management programs.
- Distribute materials, such as brochures, fliers and videos, to all employees about the signs and symptoms of poor mental health and opportunities for treatment.
- Host seminars or workshops that address depression and stress management techniques, like mindfulness, breathing exercises and meditation, to help employees reduce anxiety and stress and improve focus and motivation.
- Create and maintain dedicated, quiet spaces for relaxation activities.
- Provide managers with training to help them recognize the signs and symptoms of stress and depression in team members and to encourage team members to seek help from qualified mental health professionals.
- Give employees opportunities to participate in decisions about issues that affect job stress.

The pandemic brought into focus one of the neglected areas of our culture — mental health in the workplace. Despite the circumstances surrounding the pandemic, 2021 can be a happy, healthy, productive and safe year in the workplace when mental health is made a priority with strategies implemented by forward-thinking leadership. ■



A nationally renowned Federal Crisis Negotiation Specialist, Doc Elliot is founder and president of Phoenix Training Group. Since 1976, Phoenix Training Group has been the nation's leader in workplace violence prevention training, customizing effective anti-violence training programs for corporations across all industries.

phoenixtraininggroup.com



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