

Benefits Insights

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How to Support Employee Behavioral Health During the Pandemic

Fear, worry and stress are normal responses to perceived or real threats, or when faced with uncertainty. Understandably so, it is normal that people are experiencing worry or stress during the coronavirus pandemic.

The coronavirus pandemic has affected nearly every aspect of daily life. Americans are increasingly suffering from behavioral health issues during the pandemic, including mental health issues and substance abuse. This can have a disastrous impact on workplace productivity.

This article provides tips and considerations to help employers support their employees during this challenging time.

Why It Matters

According to a survey from The Standard, 80% of employees reported feeling moderately or highly distressed due to the pandemic. Out of those respondents, 1 out of 5 U.S. workers turned to prescription drugs to cope with stress—and 1 out of 7 used illicit drugs. The most common form of substance abuse in the United States continues to be alcohol abuse. A further worrisome statistic is that one-third of respondents admitted to drinking while working from home.

It's important to understand what employees may be experiencing or feeling that is causing mental health issues or pushing them to substance abuse. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, stress during a global pandemic can cause the following:

- Fear and worry about your own health and the health of your loved ones
- Fear and worry about your financial situation or job
- Loss of support services you rely on
- Changes in sleep or eating patterns
- Difficulty sleeping or concentrating
- Worsening of chronic health problems
- Worsening of mental health
- Increased use of tobacco, alcohol and other substances

Those are the most common responses, but keep in mind that everyone reacts differently to stressful situations.

How to Support Employees

An employer's role is to support its employees—including their mental health and well-being. That support is even more important during a global pandemic, as employees may be struggling to cope with the uncertainty.

Managers and supervisors should consider these tips for supporting employees:

- **Build a culture of connection.** Intentionally check in with direct reports on a regular basis and simply ask, "Are you OK?" The best way to help employees is to start by asking how they are doing. Employees may choose not to engage, and that's fine too, but it's important to approach that conversation. Additionally, consider asking what kind of support would be helpful to them, and reinforce that the door is open if and when they'd like to talk.
- **Model healthy behaviors.** To be a good example to other employees, prioritize self-care and set boundaries. Be vocal and open about what you're doing to take care of yourself and avoid burnout.
- **Be vulnerable.** To help decrease the stigma of mental health challenges, be human and transparent about personal struggles or experiences. That can help other employees feel comfortable talking about how they truly are doing during the pandemic.
- **Communicate regularly.** Help remove unnecessary stress by setting expectations about workloads and clarifying any modified work hours and norms. Strive for weekly communications from the organization to update employees on company news and updated policies related to the pandemic.
- **Highlight available resources.** Last but not least, it's important to make employees aware of available mental health resources and encourage them to use them. The most commonly desired workplace resources are an open and accepting culture, clearer information about where to go or who to ask for support, and training to help managers have productive behavioral health conversations.

Remember that the behavioral health focus should be on all employees. That means organization leaders should remember to support managers, as they too are living through the pandemic. Support them not only through training, but also on a personal level.

Pandemic or not, supporting employee behavioral health should be a priority. To learn more about advocating for employees during this unprecedented time, contact Boyd Consulting Group today.

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