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MENTAL HEALTH AND HUMAN RESOURCES

Helping Employees Through the 4 A's:

Awareness • Accommodations • Assistance • Access

The U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy funded a publication issued by the Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion (EARN) in 2021. That EARN publication, titled "Checklist for Mentally Healthy Workplaces," begins with some statistics:

*"An estimated **1 in 5 adults experience a mental illness each year**, including nearly 20 million adults who also receive treatment for substance use disorders. Research suggests that employees experience an average of 3.46 'poor mental health days' per month each year in the U.S., which negatively affects productivity and earnings."*[1]

The free-market case for employers to take actions to help improve the mental well-being of their workforce is that a mentally healthy employee will be more productive, have fewer absences, incur fewer medical costs, and experience greater longevity on the job, which will benefit the U.S. economy. Each business also has an ethical imperative to protect the dignity of its employees.

There are different but often interconnected stressors that affect employee mental wellness in 2024. Social stressors include the "return to normal" expectation following a worldwide pandemic-related shutdown; tensions associated with racial, gender, and religious issues;
and polarization brought about by international events and national politics. Personal stressors for employees include regular monthly bills and unexpected household expenses; illness and death; child and parental care; and a host of other family events and crises. Work stressors include workload, compensation, the nature of the employees' jobs, poor management, and understaffing.

An online survey of about 1,400 employees conducted earlier in 2024 by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) revealed that almost **one-third of employees said that their jobs often cause stress, and nearly 45% of workers said they feel burned out from their jobs.** On the other hand, nearly **70% of U.S. employees also said they are unaware or are only somewhat aware of available benefits and resources,** and **50% said they do not feel comfortable using or asking about mental health benefits.**[2]

What can human resources do to address this serious problem? The 2021 EARN publication distilled leading mental wellness practices into four categories, known as the "4 A's": **Awareness, Accommodations, Assistance, and Access.** Here are some strategies under each category:[1]

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Awareness

- Offer employees stress management training to develop relaxation, mindfulness, and resiliency skills
- Create a work environment that uses natural light, plants, etc., and provides a versatile, flexible range of spaces
- Foster communication skills and emotional intelligence among managers and supervisors
- Train managers and supervisors to recognize and respond to warning signs
- Inform employees of available resources such as free relaxation apps or the company Employee Assistance Program (EAP)
- Develop and implement anti-bullying policies
- Sponsor awareness-building and anti-stigma campaigns

Accommodations

- Allow sick leave for reasons related to mental health, and flexible use of vacation time
- Offer additional paid or unpaid leave for treatment or recovery and leaves of absence
- Allow use of brief, flexible time for therapy and other related appointments
- Provide breaks according to individual needs rather than a fixed schedule, more frequent breaks, and/or greater flexibility in scheduling breaks
- Permit beverages and/or food at workstations, if necessary, to mitigate the side effects of medication

Assistance

- Provide mentoring, coaching, and peer support to your employees
- Make flexible work arrangements such as telecommuting available to all employees, as a form of proactive accommodation
- Provide access to mental wellness screening and treatment options
- Offer fitness programs to improve employees' physical health, which in turn promotes positive mental health

Access

- Assess your health plan's coverage for mental health treatment, including inpatient treatment options and medication coverage
- Provide case management services to facilitate timely return to work for those who have experienced absences due to mental health concerns
- Comply with the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act of 2008, which prohibits group health plans and health insurance issuers from imposing certain limits on mental health benefits, including substance use disorder treatment, and from imposing limitations on out-of-network behavioral health benefits that are less favorable than limits on medical/surgical benefits[2]

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1. Retrieved on July 29, 2024, from production-askearn-org.s3.amazonaws.com/EARN_2020_Checklist_Mentally_Healthy_Workplaces_f8f453fbb7.pdf
2. Retrieved on July 29, 2024, from cms.gov/marketplace/private-health-insurance/mental-health-parity-addiction-equity