Is Covid-19 a Mental Health Tipping Point?

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Before COVID (yes, there was a before), we faced a different kind of crisis in the U.S. One, that like COVID, was at times invisible, and also deeply impacted all aspects of our lives. It is our growing national mental health crisis.

In 2018, it was reported that almost one in five, some 50 million adults were experiencing some form of mental illness. Yet, slightly less than half received treatment. Despite such startling numbers, companies had done relatively little to address it in a meaningful way. This left countless people feeling unable to discuss how they felt or share what they needed to be their best at work or at home.

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For many, this was due to overwhelming feelings of stigma in the workplace along with the related concerns about how they might be viewed by supervisors and co-workers. Stigma comes at a high emotional and financial price. The World Health Organization estimated that the total cost of depression and anxiety to the world's economy was $1 trillion per year in lost productivity. To put that in perspective, it's more than the GDP of four of the top 20 economies in the world.

COVID and the growing mental health

crisis

Fast-forward to 2020 and COVID. The pandemic has turned every conceivable stressor in our lives up a notch (or several), causing unprecedented levels of anxiety and isolation. A nationwide survey assessing the effects of the pandemic on the emotional wellbeing of U.S. adults showed that 90 percent of respondents were experiencing related emotional distress.

However, there's a glimmer of hope. Even before COVID, companies were being forced to change and address these growing mental health issues. Encouraged by millennials, the topic had started to be discussed more openly. According to the American Psychiatric Association (APA) almost twice as many Gen Ys (62 percent) said they're comfortable discussing their mental health issues, as compared to 32 percent of Baby Boomers. However, actually addressing these concerns wasn't always easy.

The Center for Workplace Mental Health at the American Psychiatric Association Foundation reports that 77 percent of counties in the U.S. don't have enough psychiatrists. And relatedly, in a survey by Mercer of over 500 companies, they found that 75 percent of them with over 5,000 employees felt adequate access was a concern at all or some of their locations, while only 43 percent of small employers believed it was an issue.

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These differences may be related to the growing cost. In a study conducted by Aetna Behavioral Health, they found that mental health costs jumped by more than 10 percent annually over five years, compared with an annual increase of 5 percent for other medical costs. The price tag for treating depression alone was $110 billion annually, with half of that cost being covered by employers.

Is COVID a mental health tipping point?

With so many people so deeply affected, supporting employee mental health is now a business imperative. The internet is increasingly littered with articles on how companies and managers are addressing their employees' mental health needs. From video wellbeing check-ins to one-on-one counseling to meditation apps, companies have begun to quickly implement initiatives.

As more people remain at home in fear of COVID-19, it's clear that the future of care is becoming increasingly digital. Even private insurers are stepping up, with most expanding their telehealth coverage, sometimes with no co-pay. This has been a windfall for digital behavioral health startups. Venture funding for this technology has reached unprecedented levels, with a record $588M raised during the first half of 2020 spurred by the pandemic.

What can companies do?

It's clear that things will never be the same…and, in some ways, that's a good thing. This shift has forced many companies to have difficult discussions about staff mental health and wellbeing that had previously been avoided. This new openness is helping employees feel more comfortable in acknowledging how they're feeling – making it okay not to feel "okay."

This makes the role of managers more complicated and, more impactful than ever before. Yet, some may feel reticent to share their own feelings and/or be unable to manage what can easily become an emotionally charged discussion. And, at the same time, they may be suffering too. It is essential that companies ensure they have the training and support they need

to, in turn, support their teams.

Four simple steps for better employee wellbeing

Employee mental and physical wellbeing impacts every aspect of their lives. And, with the lines between home and work now so blurred it quite literally means what happens at home can significantly impact our performance at work.

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Here are three simple steps to let your staff know you care about their wellbeing and help you ensure they can be their best, whatever that may currently mean.

1. Create a supportive culture

- Make it okay to not always feel "okay"
- Ensure your managers have the tools they need to be and feel effective
- Create a safe space so staff can share what they're feeling
- Have regular group and individual check-ins to ensure staff needs are being appropriately addressed

2. **Provide a range of low- and no-cost mental health and related services**

- Share a list of different free or low-cost options that your staff can use
- Arrange access to other services impacting their well-being, like financial assistance or child/eldercare

3. Communicate, communicate, communicate

- Shared words and actions can help people put their own feelings and experiences in context. It diminishes uncertainty and can provide much-needed meaning to help

them adjust and cope emotionally.

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