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Are You Prepared to Address the Mental Health Impact of COVID-19 in Your Workplace?

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The COVID-19 pandemic significantly changed the framework for many New Jersey businesses, companies and organizations. More than a year after the pandemic disrupted everyday life, employers and human resource directors continue to work diligently to maintain business operations and implement strategies designed to prevent and reduce transmission of the virus in the workplace. When talking with employers, we frequently hear about the considerable efforts needed to keep employees safe from the physical health effects of COVID-19. As mental health educators, we often ask, "How are you addressing the mental health effects?"

It is important to note that prior to the pandemic there were an estimated 51.5 million adults aged 18 or older in the United States who lived with mental health challenges. This number represented 20.6 percent of all U.S. adults (NIMH, 2019 data). According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), poor mental health and stress can negatively affect employees in several ways including:

- Job performance and productivity
- Engagement with one's work
- Communication with coworkers
- Physical capability and daily functioning

There is not a one-size-fits-all approach to addressing mental and emotional health in the workplace. Nevertheless, it is vital for employers and HR directors to be vigilant in identifying what these challenges may look like and to act towards promoting wellness and resiliency. Some employees are frontline workers, others are working 100 percent remotely and some may be in a hybrid situation. Wellness strategies will need to shift to accommodate these differing scenarios and require flexibility as things change.

The first step is recognizing that mental health challenges are common. Fortunately, more employees are open and willing to discuss issues such as anxiety, depression and substance use, so there is greater opportunity to connect people to support and resources. Individuals who were already struggling have expressed feeling more amenable to seeking help.

“With telehealth and virtual support being covered by insurance and moving into the mainstream, we have seen increased capacity to support people who are trying to access care,” said Robert Kley, Vice President and Chief Operating Officer of the Mental Health Association in New Jersey.

It is important for employers to remember that people can recover, remain productive and add to their resiliency. Employers have or can develop a myriad of strategies to support their employees.

Employers can assume employees are feeling the strain of the pandemic and that no one is untouched by this disaster. Whether employees are working from home, recently returned to the workplace, or never left, the pandemic has changed the way people carry out job responsibilities. Many employees are feeling prolonged stress, fear, and anxiety due to COVID-19.

Employees working remotely have reported some unique challenges and pressures. Prior to March 2020, many believed that a work-from-home lifestyle would be less demanding and less stressful. We have learned through this pandemic that for numerous people this is simply not true, and many employees are not thriving in their new work-from-home environment.

Juggling increased home and work responsibilities and finding a balance has been challenging. It has been particularly complicated for parents. School closures and hybrid schedules have had a substantial impact on working parents’ ability to fulfill their obligations. We have all heard the saying, *“If you try to do everything, you’ll accomplish nothing.”* Many parents feel exhausted, stressed and overwhelmed as they try to fulfill work responsibilities while tending to family.

Employees who live alone have spoken about additional challenges. People talk about their basic need to connect, and we have heard first-hand of the overwhelming emotions of loneliness and isolation some have faced. Employees have shared about extended solitude, with no one around to help structure their day. This can make it difficult to set boundaries, causing increased feelings of burnout and ultimately decreased work performance.

Research suggests that employees who have friends at work are better performers, more engaged, and are overall happier with their jobs. This can be more challenging to accomplish remotely but is key to increasing overall wellness in both environments. Communicating often and effectively in a supportive and inclusive way may reduce some of these challenges.

While workforce reentry will include operational planning and logistics, employers need to look beyond physical well-being. Equally important is how workplaces proactively prepare for and respond to employees’ emotional health. Here are a few potential ways to help employers

recognize and support employees who may be experiencing a mental health or substance use concern and connect them with appropriate organizational and community resources:

Changes an employer/supervisor/co-worker might notice or hear about:

- Feeling irritable, angry or in denial
- Feeling uncertain, nervous or anxious
- Lacking motivation
- Feeling tired, overwhelmed or burned out
- Feeling sad or depressed
- Having trouble sleeping
- Having trouble concentrating
- Increased use of substances

Common work-related factors that can add to stress during the pandemic:

- Concern about the risk of being exposed to the virus at work or in the community
- Fear or uncertainty surrounding the vaccine
- Taking care of personal and family needs while working
- Managing a different workload
- Job security
- Lack of access to the tools and equipment needed to perform the job
- Feelings that they are not contributing enough
- Uncertainty about the future of the workplace
- Learning new communication tools and dealing with technical difficulties
- Adapting to a different workspace and/or work schedule

How can employers and HR directors support their employees?

- Be intentional with wellness and lead by example
- Communicate openly with employees
- Acknowledge that job stress is common
- Create a safe space to talk about the added stress of the pandemic
- Assist in ensuring that people are communicating and connecting with coworkers and supervisors

General recommendations for employers:

- Provide an Employee Assist Program (EAP). An EAP program is a workplace service that helps employees and their families cope with a crisis or other stress-related situation. Most companies outsource this service to a third-party professional.
- Educate employees on employee health insurance benefits that pertain to behavioral health services.
- Maintain a list of free or low-cost community behavioral health services.
- Increase the level of mental health awareness and stigma reduction in the workplace.
- Place educational materials and resources, such as brochures, call lines and factsheets in common areas as well as on the company website.
- Offer workshops that address depression, anxiety and substance use with strategies and resources to help connect employees to care.

Recommended Resources

NJ Mental Health Cares: 866-202-4357

Mental Health Association in New Jersey: www.mhanj.org
NJ Hope and Healing: <https://www.mhanj.org/njhope>
NJ Connect for Recovery: www.njconnectforrecovery.org
NAMI NJ: www.naminj.org
New Jersey Association of Mental Health and Addiction Agencies: <https://www.njamhaa.org>
Center for Workplace Mental Health: <https://workplacementalhealth.org>
Mental Health America's *Bell Seal for Workplace Mental Health*:
<https://www.mhanational.org/bestemployers>

Mental Health Association in New Jersey Community Education and Specialized Offerings

Mental Health First Aid
Question Persuade Refer (QPR) Suicide Gatekeeper Training
Stress First Aid
Education and family sessions on mental health and/or substance use
Topic specific workshops

Online Resources

<http://www.drugfreenj.org/>
www.mhascreening.org
www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/managing-stress-anxiety
www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/mental-health-non-healthcare.html
<https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/>
<https://mhanational.org/research-reports/2021-mind-workplace-report>
<https://mhanational.org/employeesupportguide>
<https://mhanational.org/workplace/mental-health-for-employers>
<https://workplacementalhealth.org/>

About the Authors

Jaime Angelini, MA, DRCC, is the Statewide Director of Disaster Services and Special Projects at the Mental Health Association in NJ (MHANJ). For two decades, she has worked as a mental health advocate and mental health educator. Jaime has extensive experience successfully building capacity for peer-led programs at MHANJ and has assisted the organization's growth in implementing new peer roles, as well as providing training, leadership and mentorship for NJ peers. Jaime is a certified Mental Health First Aid Instructor, QPR Instructor, Parent Educator, and Disaster Response Crisis Counselor. Since March 2020, Jaime has devoted a vast amount of her time to providing crisis counseling to those impacted by COVID-19.

Ruth Kaluski, MS, CRC, LMHC is a Certified Rehabilitation Counselor and a Licensed Mental Health Counselor with over 25 years of working with individuals both youth and adults who live with mental illness, substance use disorders and other co-occurring conditions. Ruth is the Director of MHANJ's Career Connection Employment Resource Institute, where she develops, delivers and coordinates training and technical assistance for Supported Employment and Supported Education programs throughout the state. Ruth is the Project Director for the Mental Health First Aid program at the Mental Health Association in New Jersey (MHANJ). She teaches the adult and youth curriculums as well as the veteran, public safety and higher education modules.

The Mental Health Association in New Jersey is a statewide non-profit organization that strives for children and adults to achieve victory over mental illness and substance use disorders through

advocacy, education, training and support services. For more information, please visit www.mhanj.org

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For Treatment Information, Call 1-844-Reach NJ or visit www.reachnj.gov