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Recognizing Stress and Anxiety at Work: Reintegrating the Workforce

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It's back to the job for many New Jersey workers. But other than those employers in a state of denial, most understand reintegrating the workforce is not a flip of a switch. Attention to physical and mental health and safety, so closely tied to productivity and morale, will forever be part of the workplace. Nevertheless, before the coronavirus pandemic, many employers reported their businesses suffering from the malaise of low morale and low employee engagement. They cited a lack of meaningful strategies to address these issues even as their bottom lines were being negatively impacted, according to a survey by the [Employers Association of New Jersey](#) (EANJ).

What is the state of mind?

Prior to the pandemic,

- One in five Americans were diagnosed annually with a mental health condition
- Nearly 60 percent of Americans reported experiencing symptoms of a mental health condition in 2018 – anxiety, depression, eating disorders, worry, fear, general manic behavior were the most prevalent conditions
- Half of this group reported that symptoms lasted for more than one month
- About 25 percent received a formal diagnosis

- 38 percent stated that they would not be open to treatment.

Moreover,

- About 40 percent of this group stated that work contributed to their symptoms
- 60 percent said that productivity was affected
- 60 percent said they never talked to anyone at work
- Of those that discussed an issue at work, most felt uncomfortable speaking with HR or senior managers
- Over a third had left previous jobs due to mental health conditions

The pandemic exacerbated these troubling outcomes. Roughly one-quarter of American workers feel that COVID-19 had threatened their job security and opportunities, according to a survey of 1,099 workers from the Society for Human Resource Management. While being asked back to work is certainly a good sign for workers feeling insecure about their employment, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has advised both employers and employees that fear and anxiety about COVID-19 and other strong emotions can be overwhelming, and workplace stress can lead to burnout and related health conditions.

Workplace stress is real

Before the pandemic, the World Health Organization reported that high levels of stress at work were causing unprecedented occupational illnesses. One in three employees stated that they had left a job because of mental health-related issues, and 89 percent believed that the work culture should support employee mental health.

More than one-third of Americans (36 percent) say COVID-19 has had a serious impact on their mental health and most (59 percent) feel COVID-19 is having a serious impact on their day-to-day lives.

Parents, especially moms, were experiencing negative health impacts due to the stress and worry sparked by COVID-19, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation. With uncertainties about health and safety conditions at school, the monthly tracking poll shows that at least one-fourth of parents with children who normally attend school say that worry and stress related to the coronavirus has had a “major” negative impact on their mental health (35 percent of mothers versus 26 percent of fathers).

Furthermore, when asked whether they have experienced specific adverse effects due to worry and stress related to the coronavirus, mothers in particular reported struggling with signs of anxiety and stress. Mothers reported sleep disturbances (53 percent), poor appetite or overeating (46 percent), headaches or stomach aches (32 percent), difficulty controlling their temper (25 percent), worsening chronic conditions (18 percent) and increasing alcohol or drug use (14 percent). All told, 69 percent of moms and 51 percent of dads reported experiencing one or more of these conditions.

Insecurity is real

Many suddenly unemployed workers in one of the nation's wealthiest states have been pushed to the edge of hunger, forced to ask for help for the first time in their lives. Our food banks are working overtime.

And many returning workers will have depleted their savings or increased their debt burden, which we know has a negative impact on productivity and well-being. Prior to the pandemic, the average working family in New Jersey had only \$3,000 in retirement savings; 40 percent of households headed by a 45- to 54-year-old have no savings at all. Several studies have reported that one in five workers lost substantial hours worked because of poor financial planning and limited savings. Many employers were beginning to incorporate financial planning and debt counseling within their wellness programs.

Chronic stress and substance abuse

There is a substantial literature on the significant association between acute and chronic stress and the use of addictive substances. Stress is a key risk factor in addiction initiation, maintenance, relapse and thus treatment failure. Stressful life events combined with poor coping skills [may impact the risk of addiction](#) by increasing impulsive responding and self-medication. People in jobs where they don't perceive themselves to have a lot of control are susceptible to developing clinical anxiety and depression, as well as stress-related medical conditions like ulcers and diabetes.

Low morale is real

In interviews, EANJ member-employers described experiencing challenges related to maintaining employee morale. Telecommuting has had a negative impact on morale in some cases. It has also hindered many employers' capacity for training and business development. Participants also were concerned about handling employee requests to continue working remotely after it is no longer required for the purpose of social distancing.

Furthermore, we know that some workers had decided that they were financially better off receiving emergency unemployment compensation than getting a paycheck. Acting in the short term, employees actually asked to be laid off because many make more money getting an unemployment check than they do working a low-wage job. However, we know what prolonged unemployment does to the mind, body and spirit. And we also know that once business and industry adapt to new efficiencies, getting more with less, there will be no going back from lean staffing.

It is likely that telework arrangements will be left in place for some time and, in some cases, may permanently alter how and where work is performed. It has been pointed out that working from home is a privilege for those higher-paid employees who can perform work remotely while "essential workers" such as production workers, administrative clerks and others who make less money bear the costs of commuting. How these inherent

inequities are reconciled will be important in setting the overall business culture and whether some employees feel less valued than others.

Can employers step up?

COVID-19 has not changed the workplace as much as it has laid bare the lack of worker support by employers and the lack of information and insight into employee psychology. Our interviews demonstrate that telecommuting presents new mental health issues — stress, anxiety, anger and sadness.

Many EANJ employer-members have reported taking steps to foster morale but many more are not capable of dealing with employee issues that are perceived as unrelated to the physical workplace, whether that workplace is remote or on-site. But with some imaginative prompting, employees can be engaged to exercise more, drink less and to use telemedicine for behavioral health. Indeed, many employees do not even know their health plan offers telemedicine for behavioral health.

Our interviews have shown that the challenge of resolving a crisis can provide some of the most important opportunities to deepen trust and commitment with employees in ways that not only ensure greater well-being for employees, but also position greater business success when the crisis is over. Good employers will always step up.

What can a good employer do?

- Raise Awareness
- Treat workplace stress and burnout as a bottom line issue – a problem to be solved rather than to be avoided or denied
- Open up the culture with dialogue and safe reporting procedures
- Establish an Employee Assistance Program
- Know what is in the healthcare plan and use it as a tool
- Engage in organizational training – supervision and referral
- Utilize HR as part of the solution and not the problem

About the Author: *John Sarno is president of Employers Association of New Jersey. He specializes in employment and labor law. He has litigated cases in state and federal courts, including wrongful termination and retaliatory discharge. He regularly counsels management on proactive policies and practices to maintain positive employee relations and advises member companies in many areas of employment law, including ADA, sexual harassment, wrongful discharge, drug and alcohol testing and employment discrimination. He publishes extensively on labor and employment law and regularly teaches HR law. As president of EANJ, John provides executive, strategic and thought leadership. For case studies and webinars on how good employers are stepping up, visit: <https://www.eanj.org/return-work-resourcesemployers>*

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