

COVID-19'S IMPACT ON MENTAL HEALTH – AND HOW EMPLOYERS CAN HELP

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You can't talk about employee benefits without discussing mental health, and that's even truer as the United States continues to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic which has created a period of self-isolation and anxiety caused by persisting through the unknown.

Before the pandemic began, the U.S. was already facing a mental health crisis. According to the 2018 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), [23.2% of the adult American population experienced a diagnosable mental health or substance use condition in the prior year.](#)

Even though the problem is widespread, there is still stigma attached to mental health issues. 33% of employees worry that they'll be treated differently due to mental health issues, and 36% worry that they'll be treated differently due to addiction or substance abuse issues according to [The Standard's 2020 Behavioral Health Impact study.](#)

As the country returns to the office, to schools, and to public places it's important for employers to understand the impact the pandemic has on their employees' mental health, and to look for opportunities to support them through proactive action and comprehensive benefits.

COVID-19's Impact on Mental Health

The pandemic forced many individuals to remain isolated for long periods of time, caused many to experience financial and emotional stress, and triggered many pre-existing mental health issues. The total impact of the pandemic remains unknown as we continue to navigate this unprecedented time. The Federal Disaster Distress Helpline reported an increase of 891% in calls in March 2020 compared to March 2019. [Alcohol sales increased 55% in March 2020,](#) and hospitals reported [increased alcohol-related problems.](#)

Similarly, prescriptions to treat anxiety, depression, and insomnia [increased 21% from February to March 2020](#) with over 25% of scripts filled in these three categories being new prescriptions.

Strategies for Employers

The good news is, recovery from behavioral health conditions is expected in nearly all cases with proper care and support. Here's what you can do as an employer.

- Create and support a culture of health. Align population health with the values and mission of your organization. A healthy staff leads to healthy communities!
- Solicit employee feedback to create buy-in from staff and leadership. Utilize that feedback to enact programming to support specific needs of the population to impact the desired culture of health.
- Make behavioral health benefits visible and accessible. Communicate with employees about your Employee Assistance Program and wellness services frequently through a variety of formats.
- Maintain connection with your team. Check in on staff and offer your support. You've worked hard to build a strong, caring culture within your organization – make sure that it remains a focus during this time.
- Offer programs or incentives to encourage employee participation in [holistic wellness initiatives](#), not just those that address physical health.
- Address mental health stigma through leadership training, ground rules, expectations, or campaigns to dispel myths and foster positive culture.
- Offer training to employees within your organization to provide strategies and tools for supporting colleagues, family members and oneself. Resiliency training, care for the caregiver, and mental health first aid are often readily available through local healthcare systems or public health departments.
- Determine how you can be flexible with staff to support their mental wellbeing. COVID-19 has shown us that we can be flexible in ways we never anticipated.
- Communicate that accommodations are available just as for other serious or debilitating health conditions. Inform staff of the process within your organization for requesting accommodations.
- Engage experts! Your team at M3 is ready to assist you in all of your wellness needs, including mental health, as you return to the workplace. From our on-staff wellness advisor to skilled employee benefits consultants and relationships with insurance carriers, EAP vendors, and health care providers, we are ready to assist you.

Mental health is a key issue for employers across the country, particularly as the COVID-19 pandemic continues. Reach out to your [Account Executive](#) for more information on strategies to promote mental health solutions and awareness of programs and initiatives within your organization.