One in five working adults experiences at least occasional mental health disorders, making mental health a workplace issue. Employers that want to address the issue can start with a mental health culture audit.

Conducting a Mental Health Culture Audit

by | **Phillip A. Ginter**

Here's a sobering statistic that should serve as a wake-up call to every employee benefits manager: More days of work loss and work impairment are caused by mental illness than by any other chronic health condition, including arthritis, asthma, back pain, diabetes, hypertension and heart disease, according to the American Psychiatric Association (APA).[1]

These disorders affect more employees than most human resources managers realize. According to the U.S. *National Comorbidity Survey*, nearly one in five working adults between the ages of 15 and 54 reports experiencing a mental health disorder in the previous month.[2] Close to one out of ten full-time employees depends on or overuses alcohol or illicit drugs, according to the *National Survey on Drug Use and Health*.[3] The indirect cost to employers is high: between $79 billion and $105 billion a year, according to the National Business Group on Health.[4]

Yet very little of the $8 billion that employers spend on wellness programs successfully addresses mental health wellness. Employers have offered employee assistance programs (EAPs) as a resource to employees with emotional concerns. Yet only 5% of people with access to EAPs use them, and nearly 40% of employees don't know their employer has an EAP benefit.[5] This shows there is a wide gap between how and what employers offer in terms of mental health support and what is actually needed.

There's a reason workplace mental health does not get the attention it deserves: The stigma associated with mental health and substance use disorders makes it hard for employees to come forward and ask for help. And employers, fearful of offending people, are afraid to ask employees if they need help.

Defining Stigma

Addressing stigma is the first and biggest challenge in promoting workplace mental health wellness.

The dictionary defines *stigma* as a mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality or person. In the mental health field, it is a set of negative attitudes and beliefs that prompts individuals to fear, reject, avoid and discriminate against people diagnosed with a mental disorder.[6] Negative perceptions are pervasive in society, as evidenced by the common use of demeaning terms such as *lunatic, psycho* and *schizo,* which further marginalize this population.

Other misconceptions exist. People who have been diagnosed with a mental illness are frequently blamed for their conditions. It is believed they could control their conditions if they tried. Moreover, films and television shows stereotype individuals with diagnosable mental health disorders as being dangerous and unstable. News reports about violent crime are often quick to link it to mental illness.

Even so, some employers are trying to overcome that barrier by making mental health wellness an organizational priority.

Creating a Positive Mental Health Culture

There are many ways organizations can reduce mental health stigma in the workplace, including taking the following key steps:

- Give managers access to mental health training resources so that they can appropriately support staff members during a mental health crisis.
- Reduce the use of stigmatizing language in the workplace by distributing handouts to employees and posting signs in break rooms and similar spaces. See the table for examples.
- Promote access to an EAP.
- Encourage employee self-care by reminding staff to take lunch breaks, personal days and vacations. Designate a quiet zone

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TABLE

Watch Your Language

Our language itself can become a barrier to wellness by perpetuating stigma. It is important to understand that a person's mental, physical or other health condition is only one aspect of his or her life, not the defining characteristic.

Say This	Not This
I prefer things to be neat.	I'm so OCD.
He is living with schizophrenia.	He is schizophrenic.
She died by suicide.	She committed suicide.
He has a substance use disorder.	He is a substance abuser.
She is in recovery.	She got clean.
He has been diagnosed with a mental illness.	He suffers from mental illness.

Source: The HealthlinkNY Community Network *Workplace Wellness Mental Health Tool Kit.*

where people can retreat for a few minutes of peace, and discourage late-night work-related e-mails.

• Establish a workplace mental health policy.

Organizations that are already taking these steps should be congratulated. But, as management guru Peter Drucker once said, "If you can't measure it, you can't improve it." Therefore, no matter how far along they are on the journey toward making workplace mental health wellness a priority, employers should conduct a baseline self-audit of their culture and repeat it yearly to measure progress.

The Workplace Mental Health Culture Self-Audit

The audit itself takes minimal time, and the results can be enlightening. It gives employers a clearer picture of how much they are actually doing and how the different pieces fit together (or not).

The sample self-audit provided in the sidebar was developed collaboratively by a team of health care providers, community organizations and mental health advocacy groups. The audit focuses on four main areas:

1. How well the employer promotes and encourages employee participation in mental health wellness activities
2. Employee access to substance use resources and support
3. Stress management help available for employees
4. Support provided to new mothers.

A word about new mothers: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports as many as one in ten new mothers experiences postpartum

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Sample Questions for a Company Mental Health Culture Audit

The first step to reducing mental health stigma in the workplace is to evaluate how much an organization supports employee mental health wellness through a self-audit.

Here is a sample of questions organizations can include on a self-audit.

General

1. Are employees encouraged to participate in mental health wellness activities? (Examples may include information at new employee orientation, e-mail blasts and newsletters.)
2. Does senior management actively participate in workplace wellness program decision making?
3. Are mental health discussions facilitated at the workplace through the provision of training courses and other resources?
4. Does the organization have a flexible approach to time off for personal/family needs?
5. Is there a process in place to communicate workplace wellness activities with employees?
6. Is an employee workplace wellness "needs assessment" conducted each year?

Substance Abuse

7. Is counseling for alcohol- or drug-related issues offered to employees?
8. Do employees have access to an Internet/intranet site that includes educational information on alcohol and drugs?
9. Are resources regarding smoking and tobacco cessation offered to employees?
10. Is the workplace smoke-free?

Stress Management

11. Do employees have access to assistance for addressing issues on stress management?
12. Are peer support groups or mentoring/coaching opportunities available?
13. Do employees get personal days off?
14. Do employees have access to an Internet/intranet site that includes stress-management information?
15. Is counseling for other work/family issues offered to employees?
16. Does the organization promote community resources?

Maternity

17. Do mothers who are expecting or adopting a baby receive information about their options prior to maternity leave?
18. Do employees receive information about peripartum and postpartum distress?
19. Is the current maternity policy/procedure compliant with the Pregnancy Discrimination Act (PDA), as well as the requirements of Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), as they apply to women with pregnancy-related disabilities?
20. Does the EAP offer screenings for postpartum depression?
21. Does the organization have a written policy that states its support of a woman's choice to breastfeed her infant(s) and describes the worksite accommodations and/or benefits available to her?
22. Do employees have access to a private area for nursing or pumping?

Source: The HealthlinkNY Community Network *Workplace Wellness Mental Health Tool Kit.*

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depression.[7] The author's research into workplace wellness revealed that maternity benefits focus on the physical health of a new mother and baby but not the emotional challenges that pregnancy and birth entail. With many mothers experiencing postpartum depression, as well as the stress of ar-

ranging child care, this is an area that should be reviewed.

The Next Step:
A Needs Assessment

The audit is designed to work in conjunction with another important tool: an employee-needs assessment or survey. This tool requires more effort on the part of the employer, but it is the only way to identify the gaps between what the employer perceives it is offering to its employees and what the employees perceive they are receiving. It also identifies the true needs of employees so that wellness programs can direct their resources to what matters most. It also sheds light on possible barriers that discourage employees from participating in wellness programs.

The survey should be used to encourage employees to openly discuss:
- Their level of stress
- Possible mental health and substance use concerns
- Whether the employer's current programs are adequate to support these issues
- What type of support employees would like.

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From the Bookstore
Mental Health and Substance Abuse Benefits: 2016 Survey Results
International Foundation. 2016.
Visit *www.ifebp.org/books.asp?7846E* for more details.
Shared Values—Shared Results
Dee W. Edington, Ph.D., and Jennifer S. Pitts, Ph.D. Edington Associates. 2016.
Visit *www.ifebp.org/books.asp?9085* for more information.

Employees can be surveyed three different ways, and there are pluses and minuses to each method.
- An in-person interview allows for open discussion and followup, but the employee may be afraid of being too honest.
- Focus groups allow employees to hear what their peers are thinking and validate their own opinions, but employees may not want to share private thoughts with others in the room.
- Anonymous surveys allow employees to be honest without hesitation, but the employer cannot follow up if individuals indicate that they are currently experiencing a mental health crisis.

To be effective, the survey should assess not only whether wellness programs match employee needs but also whether the overall workplace culture contributes to employee stress.

Finally, a Mental Health Policy to Solidify It All

To ensure an ongoing commitment to a positive mental health workplace culture as well as buy-in from the leadership team, organizations should consider codifying their goals in a workplace mental health policy. The value of a written policy is that it keeps everyone accountable.

A mental health policy should outline a commitment to promoting and monitoring mental health at work and acknowledge the importance of creating a safe environment for employees, specifically eliminating bullying and harassment. It calls upon leadership to support mental health wellness goals

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takeaways

- The indirect cost of employee mental illness and substance abuse to employers is estimated to be between $79 billion and $105 billion per year.
- Through a workplace mental health culture audit, employers can gain a clearer picture of the mental health wellness activities they already offer and what kind of mental health supports are available for employees.
- A mental health culture audit should work in conjunction with an employee needs assessment to gather insight on employee perception of the supports and programs the employer is providing.
- Employers should consider developing a workplace mental health policy that outlines their commitment to promoting and monitoring mental health.

and gives employees the responsibility of taking reasonable care of their own mental health and well-being to the best of their abilities.

Conclusion

Developing a supportive mental health wellness culture is not easy, but it should not be ignored.

Bottom line: Organizations that take a systematic approach to promoting workplace mental health wellness will have a more effective and productive workforce. ◑

Endnotes

1. See www.americanpsychiatricfoundation.org/priorities/workplace-mental-health.
2. "Mental health problems in the workplace," *Harvard Mental Health Letter,* February 2010, www.health.harvard.edu/newsletter_article/mental-health-problems-in-the-workplace.
3. "Substance Use and Substance Use Disorder by Industry," *The CBHSQ Report,* April 16, 2015, www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/report_1959/ShortReport-1959.pdf.
4. *An Employer's Guide to Behavioral Health Services*, National Business Group on Health, www.businessgrouphealth.org/pub/?id=F31362FE-2354-D714-5115-B0D33A683E23.
5. "Employee Assistance Programs: An Often Overlooked Resource," *APA Blog,* July 22, 2016, www.psychiatry.org/news-room/apa-blogs/apa-blog/2016/07/employee-assistance-programs-an-often-overlooked-resource.

bio

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6. "Public Stigma of Mental Illness in the United States: A Systematic Literature Review," *Administration and Policy in Mental Health Services Research.* September 2013; 40(5): 10.1007/s10488-012-0430-z, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3835659/.
7. See www.cdc.gov/reproductivehealth/depression/index.htm.

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