

A Business Approach

Mental Health and the Modern Workplace



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America has a moral and fiscal imperative to give proper focus to mental health. Thankfully, over the last decade or so, mental health parity initiatives and the increased availability of insurance coverage have driven meaningful progress in the ability for those afflicted with mental illness to find treatment and manage their conditions.

A tremendous opportunity exists for workplace cultures to evolve and adapt to help cement the link between mental and physical health, along with a growing body of evidence that doing so is good for business.

Nearly one in five American adults report a mental illness. More than 70% report at least one symptom of stress. Think about those numbers in the context of your employee base and culture.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention tells us that by addressing mental health issues in the workplace, employers can reduce health care costs for their businesses and employees.

The simplest of Google searches will reveal a myriad of eye-popping facts – such as the World Health Organization’s estimate that depression and anxiety cost the global economy an estimated \$1 trillion each year in lost productivity. Or that depression accounts for up to 400 million lost workdays annually. Or that for every \$1 invested in mental health treatment, there’s a return of \$4 in improved health and productivity.

Taking the team approach

Earlier this year, I was offered the opportunity to join the Holcomb administration as the director of the Indiana Division of Mental Health and Addiction. Our team functions as the hub of mental health treatment for the state of Indiana, working alongside a network of community-based providers. I have been impressed by the state’s work in recent years to attack the opioid crisis and expand treatment for substance use disorder – especially the governor’s partnership with the Indiana Chamber of Commerce to establish the Indiana Workforce Recovery initiative.

Through this partnership, hundreds of business leaders across the state are being engaged around the concept of supporting, not shunning, employees recovering from an addiction to opioids or other substances. I believe the same kind of shift in mentality is needed among Hoosier businesses when it comes to embracing the mental health treatment of our workforce.

We need to move beyond the traditional and antiquated notion that employees should “gut it out” when on the job, as if it is possible to leave mental illness in the car or at home when it’s time to clock in for our daily shifts.

We simply cannot afford the costs of continuing to ignore mental health issues or discouraging proper treatment. Depression reduces cognitive performance about 35% of the time and interferes with physical tasks

about 20% of the time. But less than half of people who report moderate depression and only 60% of those severely depressed are being treated.

This is a tremendous and costly disconnect that also illuminates an opportunity for Hoosier businesses to improve workforce health and resiliency – not to mention productivity.

Time to speak up

What can business leaders do about mental health? Start by saying something about it. Anything. One of the most powerful types of stigma that can affect your employees is self-stigma. The hazards of having co-workers suffering silently are real and exacerbated by environments where employees don’t feel comfortable taking time away from work for self-care.

Conversely, it is powerful to have explicit permission from your employer to focus on your mental health. Such encouragement from leadership is a revolutionary step toward reducing self-stigma and seeking life-saving care. Every workplace has a culture. Make yours one of preventative, not reactive, mental health care.

An added benefit is that this culture shift will help build that ever-elusive connection with younger employees. When it comes to mental health, millennials get it, and are drawn toward work environments that support their values.

I couldn’t be more honored and encouraged to kick off the *BizVoice*[®] series focusing on the impacts of mental illness on workplace wellness and what that means to Hoosier businesses. I am confident that a new era of understanding, compassion and action is dawning in Indiana, one that will position Indiana ever further ahead of our peer states when it comes to being a great place to live and work. And I’m excited by the chance we have to work together to fulfill that promise.

This series will dig deeper into some of the challenges and provide advice from mental health practitioners and other business leaders about how to support employees in their journey toward better mental health, as well as how to identify and remove any barriers that your workplace culture may be putting in the way.

As you read these columns, know that our work at the state will continue at full tilt to ensure there is a robust, integrated network of behavioral and mental health providers and supports available to you and your employees.

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