

Knowing Well, Being Well

well-being born of understanding

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Supporting Workforce Mental Health During the Pandemic

Rachel Mosher Henke, PhD¹

Since 2020, more than 1 million lives in the U.S. have been lost due to the COVID 19 pandemic.¹ In addition to the physical harm caused by virus infection, living through the pandemic has exacted an undeniable emotional toll. Americans have experienced new stressors that have increased mental health issues as well as risk of substance use disorders.²

Employers in the U.S. have reason to be concerned about the impact of these stressors on the mental health of their workforce.³ Employee mental health is associated with increased health care costs and sick time.^{4,5} Many employers in the U.S. pay for health care⁶ and an increasing number of states require employers to provide paid sick leave.⁷ Employee mental health has also been linked to reduced at-work productivity.⁸

Employers are uniquely situated to respond to employees' need for mental health supports. Full-time employees spend more of their waking hours at work than any other primary activity.⁹ A conceptual framework proposed by Sorensen et al.¹⁰ illustrates this central role that work plays in determining health. The framework shows how workplace policies, programs and practices can influence worker outcomes including worker health and wellbeing. An updated version of the framework¹¹ places these workplace-factors in a broader context, illustrating how higher level influences including the socio-political-economic environment and employment patterns shape the conditions of work, which then influence organizational policies, work conditions and employee health outcomes. Employers can benefit from understanding these key drivers of employee health as it can help them to identify key levers to improving employee wellbeing.

Even prior to the pandemic, many businesses had already developed and deployed programs to support employee mental health within the workplace setting, such as employee assistance programs.¹² Despite an accumulated knowledge base about what works, there is no clear playbook for employers to use as a guide for what to do during this unprecedented time. For example, employee assistance programs and health plans can be effective to link people to services but may not be sufficient to fully support employees, particularly those who do not recognize an issue or who are hesitant or unwilling to seek help. Most program evaluations were designed and tested prior to the pandemic, in in-person settings, which are no longer the norm for all employers. Today, many more employees work from home full-time or come into the workplace only occasionally. Even in industries and companies where in-person settings are still required,

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¹IBM

Corresponding Author:

Rachel Mosher Henke, 75 Binney St Cambridge, MA 02142.

Email: Rachel.henke@us.ibm.com

office space and workplace policies may have been modified to limit virus transmission.

Implementing programs is also more challenging during the pandemic. The pandemic has led to labor shortages and higher than usual levels of turnover. Such labor strains may make new programs and interventions more difficult to implement due to inability to identify external staff, increased work pressures and lack of leadership continuity.

Information on how small employers can support employee mental health during the pandemic is particularly scarce. Small businesses do not have the same access to resources to invest in programs and generous benefits and may not be able to reach efficiencies of scale. Second, small businesses may be particularly strained by pandemic-related increases in staff turnover, given fewer staff to absorb increased work responsibilities and onboarding.

Small businesses do have some advantages when it comes to taking action to support employee mental health. Because of their smaller size, leadership can maintain closer connections to their employees so they may have better understanding about what specifically is needed without costly data collection efforts. Small business leadership may have an easier time communicating and championing new programs because of their more intimate connections with employees.

In contrast to small businesses, larger organizations may have greater access to resources to invest and implement new programs to support employees. However, even well-resourced programs can fail at their goals if employees do not know about them or do not feel able to take advantage of them. Employees have been burdened by increased workload from labor shortages, turnover, and new role responsibilities as a consequence of the virus and, thus, may not feel the program is accessible even if it is available.

In this month's Knowing Well Being Well, we explore how businesses, both large and small, are supporting employee mental health during the pandemic. Zhang and colleagues describe 3 categories of stressors—psychological, organizational, and environmental—and outline strategies employers can use to address each type of stressor along with examples of interventions.¹³ Bennett and colleagues provide the results of a survey of organizational stakeholder perceptions related to the burden of mental health problems on their businesses and their economic consequences, specifically contrasting experiences between small and large organizations.¹⁴ Attridge's article defines small businesses and discusses how small employers can take advantage of employee assistance programs that are traditionally targeted toward larger organizations.¹⁵ Mulvaney-Day and colleagues provide real-world evidence about the increase in use of telehealth for behavioral health and discuss the potential importance of employers maintaining reimbursement of telemedicine after the public health emergency ends.¹⁶ Lastly, Daley provides 5 case examples to illustrate a variety of approaches businesses have taken to address the specific needs of their employees.¹⁷ Examples provided include large and small employers, in both virtual and in person settings.

This series of invited contributions makes it clear that supporting employee mental health is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Both large and small employers have options that can be tailored to the needs of their workforce and available resources. There are several areas where more research is needed. First, if work from home arrangements extend to the long term, new or modified interventions need to be designed and tested for effectiveness in employees who work from home. Related, the effectiveness of telehealth for behavioral health services needs to be evaluated to help inform employers of the value of this new modality of care. Second, work-life conflict has emerged

as a long-term stressor given the lasting shift to work from home, thus, new programs may be needed to assist employees with boundary management. Finally, as the pandemic enters its fourth year, pandemic related stressors are changing from acute to chronic. Regrettably, current events are adding to employees' mental load including tragedies related to gun violence, hate crimes, political unrest, international conflict, and climate events. Employers will benefit from creating an environment and programs that recognize these stressors instead of ignoring them and enable employees to seek and receive the supports they need to maintain their health.

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Addressing Workplace Stressors Emerging from the Pandemic



Ying Zhang, MsPH¹, Elizabeth H. Woods, MsPH¹, Enid Chung Roemer, PhD², Karen B. Kent, MPH², and Ron Z. Goetzel, PhD²

Keywords

workplace, wellbeing, mental health, Corona Virus-2019, stressors

Introduction

Faced with new and exacerbated stressors on workers due to COVID-19, employers are asking what they can do to support employees' mental health and wellbeing and rebuild a resilient workforce. To serve as a guide, this paper reviews workplace interventions aimed at improving workers' mental health and wellbeing. The review was developed with support from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) Total Worker Health[®] Centers of Excellence as part of a broader program to design, implement, and evaluate large-scale initiatives focused on mental health in the workplace.¹

Background

In March 2020, the World Health Organization² (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic, the effects of which would create immense and long-lasting damage to societies and their economies. COVID-19 negatively affected employee mental and physical health, and consequently workforce productivity.³ Specifically, since the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, employees have reported increased stress and anxiety levels precipitated by new circumstances affecting work-life balance, employment status, and financial insecurity.⁴ Organizations have endured forced shutdowns, revenue instability, absenteeism, vacancies, and low productivity, all of which have exerted a profound impact on business climate and the global economy.⁵⁻⁷

Factors affecting workplace mental health and wellbeing during the pandemic were organized into 3 stressor categories: Psychosocial, Organizational, and Environmental (POE factors).

Psychosocial Stressors

A worker's personal characteristics and psychological state influence their workplace behaviors and interface with psychosocial stress at work, eg, job demand-support and effort-reward imbalance. One of the most prominent psychosocial stressors is work-life conflict, which the pandemic aggravated through increased workload and irregular work schedules.^{8,9} Additionally, school and daycare closures blurred

home-life boundaries, especially for women who are often expected to take on a larger share of family and childcare responsibilities in addition to their paying jobs.^{10,11}

Fear of COVID-19 exposure and infection was another psychosocial stressor. For months, the novel nature of the virus and limited treatment options fostered intense anxiety among workers who were unable to limit contact to infected individuals. Some workers were faced with the dilemma of protecting the health of members of their household or keeping a job that provided needed income. For workers who were able to limit physical contact with others, social isolation took a heavy toll on their sense of connectedness and social engagement.^{12,13}

Organizational Stressors

Organizational conditions include the set of programs, policies and environmental supports that foster a healthy and safe workplace. During the pandemic, organizations had to modify processes and policies to address emergent supply chain shortages, requirements for technological adaptation, staffing limitations, and uneven demand for products and services. Unprepared human resource management led to increased anxiety and uncertainty among staff, which intensified workplace conflicts.^{14,15}

Wages and salaries did not increase in proportion to workload and work demands, causing increased financial stress on employees. For workers in industries whose earnings included tips from in-person interactions, the pandemic reduced take-home pay. Over half of restaurant workers reported they would not

¹Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

²Institute for Health and Productivity Studies, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Baltimore, MD, USA

Corresponding Author:

Enid Chung Roemer, Institute for Health and Productivity Studies, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, 624 N Broadway, Baltimore, MD 21205, USA.

Email: eroemer1@jhu.edu