



Supporting employees' mental health

Best practices to help those living with depression and other conditions

The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) estimates that nearly 1 in 5 people live with some sort of mental illness, ranging from mild to severe.¹

Many companies offer mental health coverage as part of their group medical and disability benefits packages. While mental health claims are handled similarly to most other health claims, long-term disability claims caused or contributed to by mental illness are often subject to a limited maximum benefit period.

Due to the complexity of these types of claims and the increased stigma associated with mental illness, extra sensitivity can help employees who are diagnosed with mental illnesses manage their everyday work or return to work after a leave of absence.

The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) estimates that nearly 1 in 5 people live with some sort of mental illness, ranging from mild to severe.¹ Major depression is one of the most common mental disorders in the United States. In 2020, an estimated 21 million adults in the U.S. (representing 8.4% of all U.S. adults) had at least one “major depressive episode,” which NIMH describes as:

“A period of at least two weeks when a person experienced a depressed mood or loss of interest or pleasure in daily activities, and had a majority of specified symptoms, such as problems with sleep, eating, energy, concentration or self-worth.”²

Mental health conditions like depression can have a significant effect on employee productivity and absenteeism. By providing education and resources to help employees manage mental illnesses, employers can help reduce or eliminate their effects on the individual and the workplace.

Here are some tips to help companies reduce the stigma of mental illness, encourage treatment, and provide a welcoming space for employees.

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Being aware of sudden changes to an employee's behavior can help you identify opportunities to help ensure they have the support they need.

Identifying mental health concerns

Mental health conditions affect how people feel, think and handle everyday activities. Depression, for example, is a mood disorder that can impact sleep and eating patterns, but it may be treatable through medication and various types of therapy. Depression's symptoms may not be readily apparent to an observer, but understanding its effects on an employee can be helpful. Depressed employees may:

- Appear sad, withdrawn, irritable or angry.
- Isolate themselves from their coworkers.
- Show indifference to their work.
- Seem scattered, absentminded, forgetful or unfocused.
- Lack confidence in their skills and abilities.
- Show up late for work or become easily fatigued.
- Fluctuate in weight or appearance.

These are just some of the signs of depression, but these symptoms are not exclusive to the condition—an official diagnosis can only be determined by a physician. Being aware of sudden changes to an employee's behavior can help you identify opportunities to help ensure they have the support they need.

Best practices

Mental illness is a difficult enough challenge for people who live with it. Maintaining a career at the same time adds additional pressures that can affect the individuals themselves, as well as their coworkers, managers and others. Here are some steps you can take to raise awareness and lessen the impact of mental illness in the workplace:

- **Include mental health awareness** and educational materials in health fairs and during annual enrollment. Remind employees of the availability of these resources throughout the year.
- **Educate leaders and managers** on early detection and how to reduce stigmas and discrimination.
- **Provide and promote employee assistance programs (EAPs)** that offer confidential counseling and other benefits that support employees' mental health.
- **Proactively research potential barriers and solutions** to help employees return to work after a leave of absence.

These and other steps can help those dealing with mental illness to feel accepted and welcome in the workplace, whether they've been actively at work or returning from a leave of absence.

Providing resources upfront and having a plan in place to help those dealing with challenges can help employees living with mental illnesses.

Returning to work

Like any other medical condition, employees coming back to work after a mental illness-related leave of absence may need time and accommodations to resume their daily responsibilities. The following steps can help employees gain the confidence needed to be successful:

- **Stay engaged with the employee** throughout their leave of absence to ensure they are using all available benefits and feel reassured of their ability to do their job.
- **Allow flexible scheduling** and/or work-from-home options to accommodate medical or counseling appointments.
- **Provide a graduated return** to full-time status if necessary, and allow time for the employee to catch up on any outstanding items.
- **Check in regularly** through one-on-one meetings.

In addition to these steps you can take as an employer, make sure you have a robust group disability plan in place. This can include return-to-work and vocational rehabilitation benefits and incentives that provide additional support to your employees returning to work. Providing resources upfront and having a plan in place to help those dealing with challenges can help employees living with mental illnesses like depression feel more assured about their ability to contribute to the company and seek the treatment they need.

Visit the following resources for more information on mental health.

- > www.mentalhealth.gov
- > www.workplacentalhealth.org
- > www.psychiatry.org
- > www.cdc.gov/mentalhealth

For more information about benefits packages that include mental health treatment and support, talk to your group benefits representative.



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¹ "Mental Illness," Statistics, National Institute of Mental Health, last modified January 2022, <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/mental-illness>.

² "Major Depression," Statistics, National Institute of Mental Health, last modified January 2022, <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/major-depression>.