

Should Employees “Check Their Baggage at the Door?”

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World Mental Health Day 2020 is October 10, and many workplaces are re-thinking the old notion of “checking baggage at the door.” This practice came from a belief that work was work, home was home, and the only thing separating them was the commute. It was also centered on the belief that mental health issues were shameful and should be hidden from view at the workplace. This fear relates to the stigma associated with mental illness and the belief that vulnerabilities may impact career mobility.

Now enter the land of COVID-19 and workplaces are re-thinking this position. The line between work and home has been turned upside down by the pandemic, making it challenging on a number of fronts. In a Kaiser Family Foundation poll¹, more than half of Americans report that the coronavirus crisis is harming their mental health. While at least one in five employees typically suffers from a behavioral health condition, many more now feel down or anxious about the pandemic. With so many people suffering in this way, does it make sense to just ignore it? What are the benefits and risks of acknowledging mental health issues and embracing them?

Here are a few factoids about this.

1. We know that when people have to hide their distress, mental health problems usually get worse.
2. When mental health problems get worse, they may lead to exacerbated physical issues and become an underlying driver of disease.
3. As mental health problems worsen, productivity is often affected.
4. When mental and/or physical health issues worsen, suicide risk increases.
5. If employees have the perception that mental health issues are unacceptable, they will most likely hide their suicidal inclinations until it's too late to help them.

The only way to interrupt this pattern is to end the cycle of silence and allows employees to “uncheck” their baggage at the door. This doesn't mean that each workplace, virtual or otherwise, will start to resemble whatever image we have of being out of control. It simply means that employees will feel a sense of belonging, regardless of their mental health status. By acknowledging that anxiety and depression are normal reactions to abnormal times, (like in pandemics,) it will allow employees to be fully present and feel like they belong to a solid community. Reducing stigma will improve productivity and help create a healthier culture. It will reduce suffering, improve wellbeing and allow people to bring their full selves to work.

In light of these objectives, bringing mental health awareness to an organization is both timely and essential in helping an organization succeed. As the key mental health resource in the organization, engage your EAP to help with these critical issues.

World Mental Health Day is October 10, 2020

Every 40 seconds someone dies by suicide². World Mental Health Day is focusing on suicide prevention and awareness as a way to end the stigma associated with it. Everyone is encouraged to reach out to those affected by suicide, raise awareness and connect individuals with suicidal ideation to treatment services. It is up to all of us to ensure that individuals, friends and families have access to the resources they need to discuss suicide prevention.

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¹<https://www.kff.org/report-section/the-implications-of-covid-19-for-mental-health-and-substance-use-issue-brief/>

² World Health Organization (WHO)