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No Longer Alone: Ending the Stigma of Mental Health Issues

By Brett Christie, WorldatWork



Most people know someone, either directly or indirectly, who has committed suicide. Yet, it's a topic very few people are comfortable discussing. But, [as data suggests](#), it's a problem that isn't going away.

Suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the United States, as 44,965 Americans die by suicide each year. And it costs \$69 billion annually.

So, what can employers do to address the issue? Having a strong employee assistance program (EAP) is an important variable to have in place. WorldatWork's [2017 Inventory of Total Rewards Programs & Practices survey](#) found that 96% of organizations have an EAP in place, which was up from 80% in 2016. In addition, behavioral health programs increased 13% in one year (from 78% to 91%) and stress reduction programs were up from 56% to 65%.

But the buck shouldn't stop there.

Managers and CEOs can be more understanding and accommodating to employees dealing with mental health issues. A telling example is the [story](#) of Olark Live Chat CEO Ben Congleton and his employee Madalyn Parker. Parker sent an email to the organization's internal listserv letting her co-workers know she was taking off a couple days to focus on her mental health. Congleton responded to Parker's email showing his support, which a very appreciative Parker then shared on [Twitter](#). The story went viral.

Despite most organizations offering an EAP, they still are underutilized. Utilization rates in North America are less than 7%, according to Chestnut Global Partners' 2017 EAP trends [report](#).

"Currently in the United States, most employers have an employee assistance program that deals with mental health issues and any employee can go in there for free and it's totally confidential," said Patricia A. Herlihy, Ph.D., RN, and founder of [Rocky Mountain Research](#). "But a lot of people don't go there because of the stigma that other employees will think they are crazy or unfit in some manner."

Most organizations have an EAP as a separate offering from human resources and work-family consultation. Herlihy said consolidating the three departments could be a way to improve an organization's mental health approach.

"They give you three different avenues to pursue, rather than having one overall package, which can be overwhelming to people," Herlihy said. "The research I conducted on [Integration of Benefit Delivery Programs](#) explored which corporate culture would best benefit from a more collaborative approach versus the then very 'silo' approach of many companies. The goal with integration is better, more effective services at less cost for the company."

When addressing the issue of suicide and what employers can do to help, EAPs can and often do include information about how to help a colleague in need during the initial orientation done at most companies, said Herlihy. But, more importantly, the message is that the onus isn't solely on employers. Herlihy said a critical component to improving the mental health crisis and concerns about suicide is fellow employees looking out for each other.

In this sense, there has been a shift concerning how people should approach the topic of suicide. If you notice warning signs from a fellow employee that could point toward depression, rather than skirt the issue, ask them a direct question: "Are you thinking of killing yourself?"

"It's not about playing therapist or anything like that, but simply to be straightforward and ask them if they have thought about suicide," Herlihy said. "They usually don't deny it. There usually is a slight relief, because the person who is suffering all of the sudden realizes they're no longer alone."

Aside from a more accommodating workplace for employees, an ancillary benefit of this kind of openness and community is the positive financial effect it can have.

"The main message is just to be aware and if you see something, say something. Because most people are hesitant when they see somebody who is a little down and out," Herlihy said. "If we

are able to do that as a society or as a company, the bottom line will only increase, because it will make people more collaborative, more aware with what's going on and people will be more productive. The overall culture of the company will be better if people are watching out for each other.”

About the Author

[Brett Christie](#) is a staff writer at WorldatWork.