



Behavioral Health and the Globally Mobile

A Guide for Managers

Introduction

With new challenges to face, employers striving to foster a healthier and more productive workforce are turning their attention to the growing mental health crisis. Studies show that one in five adults experience a diagnosable mental health condition in any given year—with more than half going untreated.¹ The result? Over 200 million workdays are lost due to mental health conditions each year, costing employers almost \$17 billion in lost productivity.²

It comes as no surprise that COVID-19 has created an acute period of increased anxiety above and beyond what we would have likely seen without the pandemic. Mental health challenges are affecting more people than ever before. The scale of the issue—and the urgency of the moment—call for a broader, more holistic approach to behavioral health.



Table of Contents

04

Behavioral Health:
What Is It and
What's at Stake?

09

The Impact of
COVID-19 on
Behavioral Health

13

Starting the
Conversation
with Your Team

16

How to Help Your
Employees

20

Managing with
Empathy



BROADENING THE DEFINITION OF BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

There was a time when mental illness was widely associated with serious conditions such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and major depression. Over time a broader definition of behavioral health has emerged that includes a full continuum of conditions, from the most severe to the everyday stressors—financial debt, social media pressure, work/life balance, to name a few.

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

Employee mental health has become a major concern for employers—and for good reason. Poor mental health and stress can negatively affect employee job performance and productivity, engagement with one's work, communication with coworkers, physical capability and daily functioning.



The prevalence of behavioral health conditions continues to be on the rise, from Baby Boomers to Gen Z.

DEFINITIONS



Behavioral health

Behavioral health is the scientific study of the emotions, behaviors and biology relating to a person's mental well-being, their ability to function in everyday life and their concept of self. "Behavioral health" is the preferred term to "mental health." The term behavioral health encompasses all contributions to mental wellness including substance abuse, behavior, habits and other external forces.



Mental health

Many people are more familiar with the term "mental health." Mental health covers many of the same issues as behavioral health, but this term only encompasses the biological component of this aspect of wellness.

Source: [insighttelepsychiatry.com](https://www.insighttelepsychiatry.com)



Global Perspective

Expat depression is a common health challenge associated with the stresses of global relocation. For people who move, data reveal actual biological effects:

19%
suffer from
anxiety

14%
suffer from
**short-term
memory loss**

10%
suffer
hair loss

Some report feeling older and suffering age-related symptoms.³

WORK AS A STRESSOR

In the simplest of terms, employees are stressed. As many as 550 million workdays are lost to stress each year.⁵ A survey showed that about 40 percent of workers reported that their jobs were extremely stressful.⁶ That's been especially true of Millennials, who will soon be the largest segment of the workforce. According to a recent survey from staffing firm Accountemps, 64 percent of Millennials report feeling overwhelmed at work on a daily basis— and that was before the COVID-19 crisis. Addressing their workplace stress—and behavioral health concerns with your entire workforce—may mean creating a culture shift when it comes to work-life balance.

Top 10 Behavioral Health Conditions⁴

Rank	Prevalence rate per 100		Increase in prevalence (2014-2018)
	2014	2018	
Anxiety	11.2	15.5	39%
Tobacco Use Disorder	5.4	8.3	53%
Major Depressive Disorder	3.8	6.2	62%
Hyperactivity	4.1	5.0	22%
Substance Use Disorder	1.3	1.9	51%
Alcohol Use Disorder	1.4	1.8	25%
Bipolar Disorder	0.7	1.1	52%
Cognitive Impairment	0.6	1.0	51%
Psychotic Disorders	1.1	0.8	-26%
Intellectual Disabilities	0.1	0.1	—



Global Perspective

Expats work an average of **13.4 more hours** than people doing similar jobs at home.⁷

“I actually think the biggest thing an employer can do is promote a culture of self-care and work-life balance.”⁸

-Millennial, Age 34

ANXIETY, STRESS AND THE GLOBALLY MOBILE

There are now over 66.2 million expats worldwide and this is expected to reach 87.5 million by 2021. Research has found that expats are 2.5 times more likely to experience anxiety and/or depression than domestic workers.⁹ So why is this?

In 2015, Internations conducted a major international survey which identified the top expat stressors:

52%

said they miss their personal support network

40%

worry about their future finances

26%

struggle with making new friends

26%

struggle with the language barrier

22%

suffer from culture shock

15%

say their loved ones are unhappy with the move





There are many ways to build a balanced and healthy workplace culture. From adjusting work-from-home policies and establishing flexible work schedules to encouraging use of the on-site gym to promoting a “no work on PTO” policy, employers have a lot of options to combat pressure and stress for their employees.



The Impact of COVID-19 on Behavioral Health

INCREASE IN STRESS AND ANXIETY

To comprehend the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on behavioral health, it's important to understand that mental health conditions in America—especially among Millennials—were rising for years before the virus hit. In 2017, 17.3 million adults in the U.S. had at least one major depressive episode.¹⁰ Now, stress and anxiety about the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with financial instability and prolonged self-isolation, are hitting Americans hard. Calls to the federal mental health crisis hotline are 900 percent greater in 2020 than the prior year.¹¹

NEW CHALLENGES

Even beyond immediate health and financial concerns, life as we know it has been overturned. The pandemic is affecting us all, with 93 percent reporting at least one behavior change—from positive ones like more exercise and time spent with family to negative ones like increased alcohol consumption and smoking—since the outbreak began.¹² Millions of people are isolated in their homes—more than a quarter living alone—and studies have linked loneliness to substance use and mood disorders. Additionally, stay-at-home orders and social distancing have made it more difficult for people to visit healthcare providers. As a result, there's been a 1.6 times increase in virtual care since summer 2019, including a continued growth in the use of digital behavioral health platforms.¹³

LONG-TERM IMPACT

As much as we would all like to see the COVID-19 pandemic as a finite event that will eventually recede into memory, there is growing reason to believe the opposite—that “normal” may take new shape—and that this could have long-lasting effects on mental health. Healthcare experts predict that increased levels of stress, anxiety and depression may never drop below pre-pandemic levels.

**900%
INCREASE
IN CALLS FOR HELP**

Calls to the federal mental health crisis hotline are 900 percent greater in 2020 than the prior year





62%

of respondents said having someone in a leadership role speak openly about mental health would make them feel more comfortable talking about it themselves.

DID YOU KNOW?

8 of 10 employees with a mental health condition say shame and stigma prevent them from seeking help.¹⁴

REDUCING THE STIGMA AROUND MENTAL HEALTH

When thinking about behavioral healthcare, it's important to remember that low treatment rates often cause mental health conditions to worsen, further endangering employee health, lowering workplace productivity, increasing turnover, and in many cases, leading to higher treatment costs down the road. Too often when employees are afraid to talk about their behavioral health challenges, they're not getting the treatment they need. In fact, research shows that 90 percent of those with substance use disorder, for example, never seek treatment due to stigma.¹⁴

OPENING UP A DIALOGUE AROUND MENTAL HEALTH

When stigma prevents employees from asking for help, it costs employers money. Depression is the leading cause of disability among people aged 15-44 and mental health disorders, including substance use disorders, are the leading cause of disability worldwide.¹⁵ When someone is dealing with depression, it can be exceptionally difficult to overcome stigma to seek help. Depression costs employers \$9,450 per employee with depression, per year, in absenteeism and lost productivity.¹⁶ Sixty-two percent of missed workdays can be attributed to mental health conditions.¹⁷ Turnover rates are higher for employees suffering from depression who are 20 to 40 percent more likely to become unemployed because of their condition.¹⁸

To overcome mental health stigma, employers need to create an environment where employees feel comfortable speaking up when they need help. Employers themselves need to talk openly about the importance of physical and mental health. They have to be the change they want to see in the workplace. Leading integrated creative agency Berlin Cameron and global data insight and consulting company Kantar conducted a survey of 1,000 employees and found that 62 percent of respondents said having someone in a leadership role speak openly about mental health would make them feel more comfortable talking about it themselves. Fifty-seven percent responded that to help reduce the mental health stigma, it should be openly discussed in the workplace.¹⁹



This guide is designed to open the dialogue about mental health and provide managers with practical tips and ideas for starting the conversation with their teams.

While it's important for senior leaders to be involved and creating dialogue, it's just as essential to give managers throughout organizations the tools and training to do the same. They have to also be setting the example with teams, able to steer employees to resources when they need them and following up to support them along the way. This is critical for reducing stigma and creating culture at the grassroots level.

A group of four diverse young women are gathered around a laptop, looking at the screen. The woman on the far right has dark curly hair and is looking intently at the screen. The woman next to her has long brown hair and is also looking at the screen. The woman in the foreground has dark hair tied back and is looking at the screen. The woman on the far left has long blonde hair and is looking at the screen. They are all smiling and appear to be engaged in a collaborative conversation.

Starting the Mental Health Conversation with Your Team

AS A MANAGER OF A TEAM, YOU CAN IMPROVE WORKING PRACTICES, ENCOURAGE YOUR TEAM TO SPEAK OPENLY AND REASSURE THEM ABOUT THE SUPPORT AVAILABLE TO THEM.

○ Here are just some of the reasons why it's important to think about your employees' mental health.

Work can cause mental health problems or make existing ones worse. Issues like bullying, uncertainty, lack of control and a demanding role are all linked to the development of common mental health problems.

Work plays an important and positive role in helping people with mental health problems, by giving them a sense of identity, purpose and of course income.

○ It's good for everyone else too.

Employees who have high levels of wellbeing are likely to be more creative, loyal and productive.

Stigma is reduced when people can talk openly about mental health. This leads to more understanding and a greater likelihood people will seek support earlier.

○ It's good for business. There is a cost to businesses when employees aren't given the right support.

Mental health problems are the leading cause of long-term sickness absence.

Increased absence and reduced productivity can lead to increased workloads for other colleagues, causing a ripple effect across a team or department.

○ And it helps you as a manager.

It's much easier to support employees at an earlier stage than wait until they reach crisis point.

Effectively supporting employees with mental health problems means you can employ, retain and get the best from them.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Everyone's experience of mental health is different and can change at different times. As a manager, it's important to get to know your team and understand what they need and when.

Understanding some of the signs of poor mental health doesn't mean you should make assumptions about what mental health problems your employees may have. Instead, use them as a way of noticing when you should check in and start a conversation about how your employee is coping right now.



Poor concentration



Being easily distracted



Worrying more



Finding it hard to make decisions



Low mood



Feeling overwhelmed by things



Tiredness and lack of energy



Talking less and avoiding social activities



Talking more or, jumping between topics and ideas



Difficulty managing emotions



Drinking more



Irritability and short temper aggression



Global Perspective

In 2019, research suggests that many expats have struggled with life overseas, with almost nine in ten saying they felt isolated during their time abroad.

87% of expats say they felt isolated

Primary reason

48%
miss friends and family

Other key factors

24%
Language barriers

20%
A lack of a local support network

18%
Getting oriented in a new location

When asked what would make them most likely to move back to their home country, one in four (26%) said that being closer to families and friends would be their biggest motive.²⁰

A photograph of two women in an office setting. One woman, with short blonde hair and wearing a white turtleneck, is seen from the back, facing the other woman. The second woman, with dark hair pulled back and wearing a dark blue polka-dot button-down shirt, is looking towards the first woman with a focused expression. The background is softly blurred, showing office plants and a modern interior.

How to Help Your Employees

IF YOU'RE A PEOPLE MANAGER, YOU PLAY AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN SUPPORTING YOUR TEAM'S MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING. BUT IT CAN BE HARD TO KNOW WHERE TO START. THE SUGGESTIONS IN THIS SECTION SHOULD HELP.

Look after your own mental health

As a manager, your focus is on supporting your team in the workplace but remember, your own wellbeing is just as important. You have a duty to yourself to look after your own mental health at work. Looking after your mental health doesn't always mean you can avoid problems entirely. But we still need to look after our mental health in the same way that we look after our physical health. As a manager, you should also model healthy behaviors, giving your team both inspiration and permission to do the same. Share with them how you decompress and talk openly about what you do to tend to your mental health and wellbeing.

Ask for training

Most companies offer training on mental health and stress management. You should feel confident about dealing with disclosure and managing and supporting an employee with mental health problems. Talk to your own manager about your training needs.

Familiarize yourself with policies

Make sure you understand any policies your organization has relating to mental health and well-being. This may include sickness absence and health and safety. Make sure your team understands where to find these, what they include and what will happen if they ask for support.

Educate yourself

Make sure you have a good knowledge of common mental health problems and signs of poor mental health. Get to know your team so you notice any changes in their behavior. Make sure you're prepared to have a conversation about their mental health. Bear in mind that mental health problems affect different people in different ways. You may have to adapt your approach to suit different individuals. If you feel you need more support and training from your company, talk to your manager.

Show staff that their wellbeing matters to you

Encourage them to work sensible hours, take full lunch breaks and attend wellbeing initiatives in the organization. Looking after their mental health is just as important as their physical health. This will lead to a more productive team in the long term.

○ **Make sure you're available**

Prioritize regular one-to-ones and catch ups with your team. Make sure you use this time to check how they are and talk through any difficulties at home or work. Knowing your team's "normal" outlook and activities will give you a frame of reference to spot changes in these early. This will make conversations easier if problems do arise.

○ **Keep asking questions and encourage open conversations**

It might help to add well-being as a standing item on your agenda at team and/or individual one-to-one meetings. Give staff an opportunity to talk about how they've been doing and anything that might be affecting their wellbeing. Ask your team for feedback about your management and any additional support you could provide.

○ **Help your staff prioritize their workloads and feel confident to work effectively**

While it may not be possible to offer staff complete control over their workload and hours, think together about areas where they could make their own decisions and manage their own time. Make sure your teams are trained to do their jobs. Look for development opportunities and make sure you're available to offer support and suggestions too.





Praise staff and show you appreciate their efforts

Employees who don't feel properly rewarded for their efforts are more at risk of common mental health problems and increased stress. It's also important to distribute praise and benefits fairly and make sure you don't show favoritism within the team.

Make reasonable adjustments in the workplace

A reasonable adjustment is a change to how your employee works to help them overcome any disadvantages they might face. Effective reasonable adjustments can support employees with mental health problems to work to their full capacity. Whether an adjustment is reasonable or not depends on its effectiveness, practicality, cost, your organization's resources, and whether any additional financial help is available.

Prepare for your employees to return to work

There may be times when employees need time off because of their mental health. Supporting return to work is about good people management. You need good communication skills and sensitivity to the individual and the context of their absence. Before they return, consider lighter duties and/or a phased return. It takes time to recover after a period of ill mental health. It may help your employee to come back to work slowly, especially if they've been off work for a long time.



Managing with Empathy

Mindful management is now more important than ever. As a manager, these conversations should build trust with the employee and you should work to convey empathy whenever you can, while setting reasonable objectives and managing expectations.

TURNING EMPATHY INTO ACTIONS

If you have a situation with an employee, before you act on it take a moment to fully understand their personal situation. We are all coping with different stressors, but it can be much different or generally more difficult for others. Ask if there is anything you can do to make their situation more comfortable. Be earnest. Managing is difficult work and managing right now, when we may be struggling ourselves, can feel almost impossible.

Be flexible. If an employee can fix a mistake, make up time/hours or step away from work to pull themselves together, do what you can to let them.

Reach out one-on-one. Find out how each of your reports likes to communicate. Treat each as an individual not always as a group. Use your cameras; facial expressions are important. Use a friendly and compassionate tone, especially if there is a problem. When all else fails, follow the golden rule. Talk to your employees the way you want your manager to speak to you.



“Empathy is communicating that incredible healing message of ‘you’re not alone.’”

- Brené Brown



SYMPATHY

is when you share the feelings of another.



EMPATHY

is when you can understand the feelings of another. It goes deeper than simply commiserating and it can spur you into actions of support and resolution.

CONVERSATION TIPS AND ADVICE

Something as simple as "How are you?" is a good place to begin. However, it's important to go beyond a simple "How are you?" and let the employee know you really want to know how they are. Ask specific questions and listen intently. Choose honest and open questions rather than avoiding the issue completely or referring to it indirectly. This is especially useful if there's a particular issue to address, such as underperformance or absence.

Examples for starting the conversation



You seem a bit down lately.
Is everything OK?



I've noticed you've been late
with a few pieces of work
recently. I wanted to check if
everything is OK and what I
can do to help?



I saw you were quite upset
yesterday [when you were
talking to...], [on the phone].
Is everything OK?



I've noticed that you've had
more days off than usual
recently. I just wanted to check
in to make sure everything is
OK and if there is anything
I can do to help?



KEEPING THE CONVERSATION GOING

The way you listen and respond could affect how much your employee tells you and how comfortable they feel about further disclosure.

These tips could help.

1

Ask simple, open questions. Let them explain in their own words. Give them time and be prepared for some silences.

2

Don't interrupt or impose your opinions or ideas.

3

Show empathy and understanding. Don't make assumptions about what they're experiencing or speculate about how it will affect their work.

4

Remember that lots of people are still able to work effectively, despite managing a mental health problem.

5

It's OK to admit that you don't know much about a condition or diagnosis. Ask questions about how it affects them and what they think the implications are, if any, for their work.



Example phrases and questions



I'm really sorry to hear that things have been so hard.



It sounds like you've been having a difficult time lately.



I'm really pleased you've chosen to speak to me about this.



How do you feel this has been affecting your work?



Is there anything you do at the moment that helps you manage how you feel/your condition?



Have you asked anyone for support or talked to anyone else about this?



What kind of support do you think might help?



What would you like to happen now?



WHAT IF THE EMPLOYEE BECOMES UPSET?

If your employee is very upset, they might prefer to continue the discussion another time. Check what they need and whether they would like to take a break before going back to work.

Example questions



Would you like to talk about how we can help you now, or would you prefer to talk more another time?



Are you feeling OK to return to work or would it help to have a break and a walk or a cup of coffee? Would it help to ask someone to go with you?

Outlining support options

You should check how aware the person is of support options offered by your organization. Make sure your own knowledge is up to date too.

1

Have you had a look at our mental health and wellbeing policy? Would it help to talk it through so you can understand how we can help you?

2

Have you been in touch with our Employee Assistance Program?

3

It's common to feel like you have to handle things on your own but it's always OK to seek help. Have you spoken to your doctor about how you are feeling?



As a manager, it's important to understand any policies your organization has relating to mental health and wellbeing. It's also important to understand any legal obligations on you as an individual, or on your organization, which protect people with a disability – either physical or mental.



HOW WE HELP

Behavioral health goes beyond mental illness, which traditionally has been associated with serious conditions and disorders. Behavioral health includes a full continuum of conditions, from the most severe to the everyday stressors. That's why we take a holistic approach to our members' wellbeing. As part of our BCBS Global Expat and TCN products, we offer emotional, physical, practical and clinical support services. These on-demand resources are available whenever members need them, regardless of their location or language. By making sure the globally mobile have access to the resources they need, we have an excellent opportunity to help simplify their international healthcare experience – allowing them to get the support they need to ensure a successful assignment.

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