UNUM

MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE

May 2020 Update

INTRODUCTION

In 2019, Unum published Strong Minds at Work, a comprehensive guide outlining the state of mental health in today's workplace. A combination of original research from U.S. workers, insight from HR professionals, and expert commentary from thought leaders, this report addresses stigma, lack of proper mental health training, and gaps in availability of resources for employees.

A year later, Unum is looking at some of the same questions and asking a few new ones on a topic that remains top of mind for many HR professionals, business leaders and workers. The new research outlined in this update was fielded among 1,210 working U.S. adults March 18-24, 2020, just as the coronavirus pandemic was taking shape.[1] Now, weeks later, the landscape has even further evolved with more challenges and stressors for workers, HR departments and businesses large and small.

This guide is divided into three sections: Awareness, Education and Early Intervention. These are three important categories to developing a supportive approach to mental health in the workplace. Within each category, we spotlight new research and offer additional insight.

1. AWARENESS

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, mental illness was ranked as one of the top causes of worker disability in the U.S., with 62% of missed work days attributed to mental health conditions.[2] Major life events can trigger a period of being mentally unwell for anyone, causing trouble coping and interfering with normal daily activities. As many workers struggle with personal and professional impacts of the pandemic, the potential for exacerbation of dormant or underlying mental health conditions will likely be significant.

Awareness means being aware of both your own and your colleagues' mental health. Know what signs to look for in others who may be silently struggling. Get to know the resources available in your workplace and how to access them. It is imperative for employers to review their mental health resources during and after the pandemic to ensure that resources align with the potential for increased utilization.

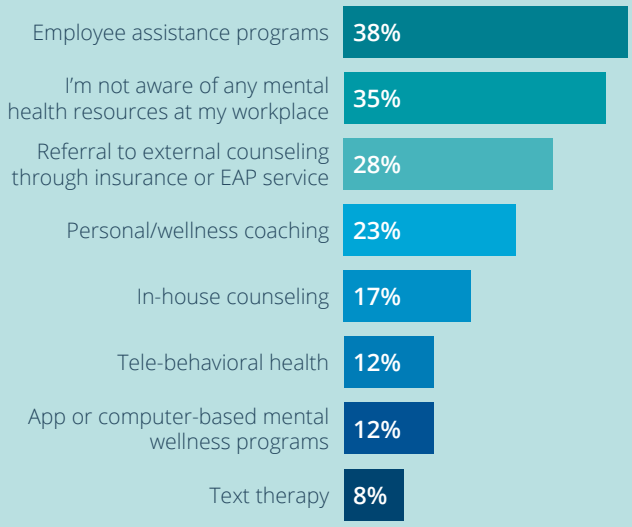
According to new research from Unum among U.S. workers, 46% either have or know someone with a mental health issue. These numbers are even higher among Millennials (59%) and Gen Z (64%).

While mental health issues are prevalent in today's workforce, there is often low awareness of resources available to them in their workplace, making education a key component of the mental health equation.

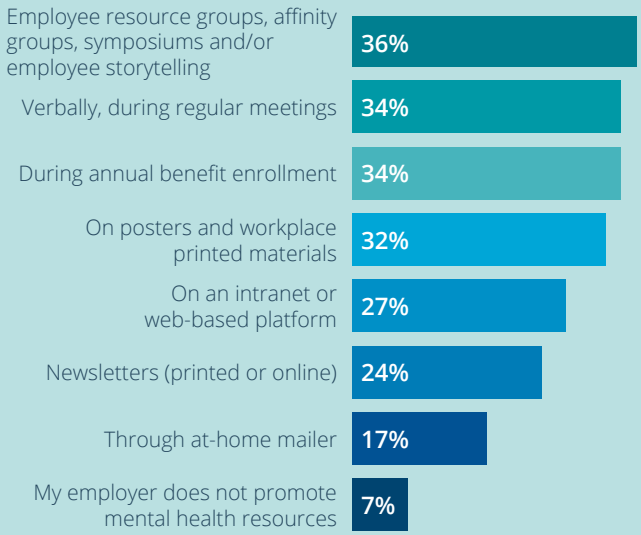
2. EDUCATION

It's important to understand what resources are available in your workplace, including health insurance, employee assistance programs (EAPs), onsite counseling services, and newer technology like tele-health or app-based solutions. Also vital is learning what barriers such as confidentiality, stigma, time or financial constraints may exist to accessing these important services.

What resources does your employer offer to those experiencing a mental health issue?



How does your employer promote mental health resources?



Unum found that while 54% of workers say their employer offers an EAP, an additional 46% say they did not or weren't sure. The fact is, most employers do offer an EAP. In research fielded in 2019 among 500 HR professionals, 93% indicated their organization offers an EAP.[3] Yet, many employees don't realize this benefit exists. Having an EAP is a great first step, but educating and reminding employees of it is also key. Revisiting communication strategies will be important and confirming the availability to access information digitally or virtually will be key in the new post-pandemic environment.

Unum found that 47% of workers have used their company's EAP in the previous five years, with these numbers significantly higher among Millennials (60%) and Gen Z (72%). More men (51%) than women (42%) have used this service.

What EAP services did you use?

3. EARLY INTERVENTION

Mental health resources should be available to employees when and where they need them. Within a health or disability insurance plan, a wide range of services are often available including tele-behavioral health counseling, wellness apps, and online trainings. Particularly as we enter this post-pandemic workplace, the potential for mental health incidence will increase as employees struggle to regain some sense of normal. Offering resources and early intervention immediately upon employees' return to work will be key in providing support and potentially lowering the incidence of mental health issues post-pandemic.

As previously outlined, EAPs are a great first resource for many who may be struggling through a period of feeling mentally unwell. Sixty-nine percent of workers say they'd speak with a counselor on the phone via their company's EAP if they felt mentally unwell.

What would be your biggest deterrent in seeking mental health services?

25% Cost of services

17% Not sure my situation is severe enough

13% Understanding the types of services available and how to access

13% Stigma around getting assistance with my mental health issue

12% Provider appointment availability, access or choosing a provider

7% I don't have enough time

Top reasons employees would speak to a counselor by telephone

35% Overall convenience

27% Confidentiality

18% Logistics

Many EAP providers have reported double-digit increases in use of telephonic mental health services during the COVID-19 pandemic. With so many workers ordered to stay at home for an extended period of time, many utilized these services for the first time. Employers should continue to promote these easily accessible services once employees return to work and beyond.

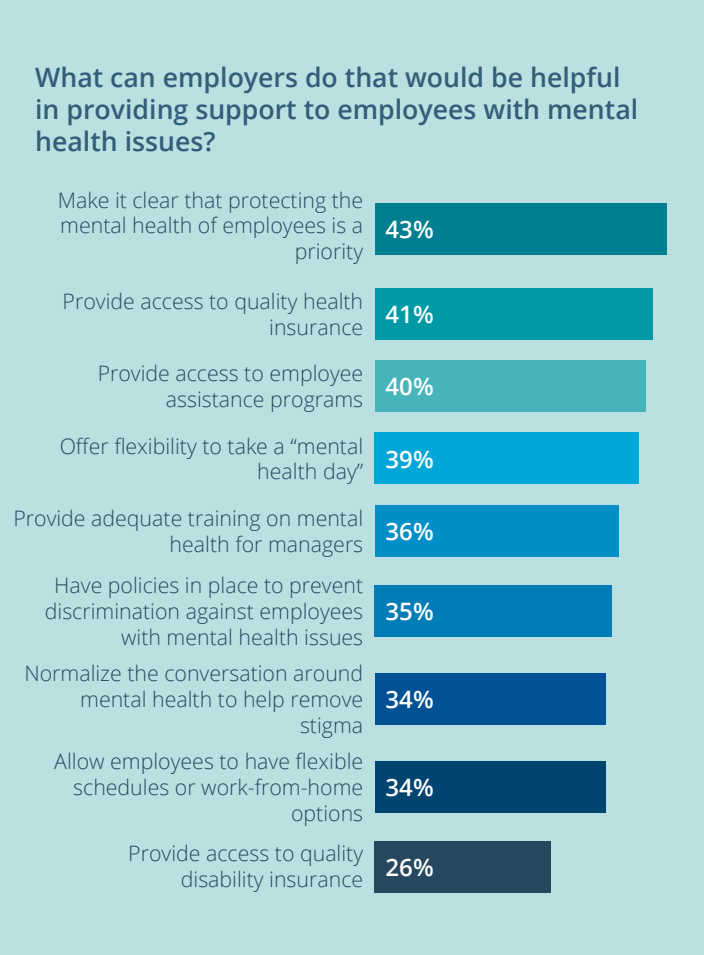
While many employees are willing to speak to a counselor, there are also still many barriers to access — both real and perceived.

"While cost is the top deterrent to seeking mental health services, the majority of EAPs offer a set number of counseling sessions free of charge to those enrolled," said Laurie Mitchell, assistant vice president, global wellbeing and health at Unum. "Telephonic counseling can be a terrific first stop for those who may be experiencing a challenging period in their lives or feeling overwhelmed. If additional treatment is needed, the counselor can often work with the employee's health insurer to arrange for additional visits covered through the medical plan – either virtual or in-person."

Another way to equip employees with valuable mental health resources is through mental health first aid training. This is an in-person classroom training program where participants learn how to identify common mental health issues and support and refer individuals to mental health resources. Thirty-two percent of workers say their employer offers this type of training and 58% would be interested in taking it. Younger generations have an even greater desire, including Millennials (70%) and Gen Z (67%).

The National Council for Behavioral Health facilitates mental health first aid training in classes around the country. For more information, visit MentalHealthFirstAid.org.

As employers grow and adapt their mental health programs, it's important to consider employee feedback.



CONCLUSION

Now more than ever, employees are facing a variety of stressors in their lives. Work and home lives have been upended by the coronavirus pandemic, and many employees are struggling with their finances, while juggling careers and family life. It's important to be vigilant in reminding workers of the mental health resources available, where to find them, and how to take advantage of them.

For more information, please check out Unum's more detailed report published last year, Strong Minds at Work, which outlines a variety of additional topics that impact mental health.

[1]Online research administered March 18–24, 2020 by Dynata on behalf of Unum among 1,210 working U.S. adults
[2]"Bad for Business: The Business Case for Overcoming Stigma in the Workplace," National Alliance for Mental Illness of Massachusetts, 2015.
[3]Online research administered January 2019 by the Disability Management Employer Coalition (DMEC) among 268 members with human resources responsibilities at their employer National Council for Behavioral Health.

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