

Educating and Inspiring the World at Work

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# WORKSPAN



An elephant is positioned on the left side of the frame, its head and trunk extending into a modern office space. The elephant's trunk is resting on a white office chair. The office features large windows overlooking a city skyline, a round white table, and several other office chairs. The lighting is bright and natural, suggesting a high-rise building with a view.

# The Workforce Challenge Nobody Wants to Talk About

BY ANN CLARK, PH.D., ACI SPECIALTY BENEFITS

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When most people hear the names Michael Phelps, Lady Gaga, J.K. Rowling and Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson, words like champion, visionary and success come to mind. What may surprise people, however, is that each of these highly accomplished individuals has revealed very personal battles with depression.

After finding himself holed up in his room for days, contemplating suicide at the height of his Olympic career, Michael Phelps found the strength to admit he needed help with depression. Now a major advocate for mental health awareness, Phelps is working to break down the stigma and encourage others to seek help.

Even as a growing number of celebrities come forward to show a new face of depression, and popular hashtags such as #stopthestigma and #whatyoudontsee flood social media, the stigma persists — particularly in the American work-

place. Underlying associations of weakness, failure and shame continue to dominate the misinformation surrounding mental health issues. Remarks like “snap out of it” or “it’s just a phase” are all too common. It is hard to articulate the intangible, to put words to emotional pain, leaving many to suffer in silence.

Depression is one major issue that nobody wants to talk about. Discussing an increase in suicide rates and a national opioid and overdose crisis — even more taboo. So, what can employers do to combat the stigma of mental health illness? After becoming informed about the facts, employers can offer employee assistant programs (EAPs), a policy of open communication, mental wellness perks, and strategic partnerships with other benefits to minimize the effects of depression at work.

## Getting Real About Mental Health at Work

While difficult to discuss, the issues of depression, suicide and addiction are very real and reach far beyond celebrity stories. An estimated 322 million people worldwide live with depression, including more than 40 million Americans. Up to 56% do not

seek treatment. The suicide rate in the United States alone rose 24% between 1999 and 2014 and is now the 10th-leading cause of death in the country, and the second-leading cause of death for people ages 15 to 24.

Unfortunately, depression often coincides with substance abuse. Those suffering from depressive symptoms may attempt to self-medicate with alcohol or opioids. However, alcohol and other drugs can be central nervous system depressants, and the two conditions can feed each other in a downward spiral. Overdoses are now the No. 1 killer of Americans younger than 50. In 2017 alone,

64,000 people died from drug overdoses, including opioids and illegal drugs.

In a story about losing his best friend and how the opioid crisis has overtaken his hometown in Delaware, Paul Blest writes at The Outline, “It is perhaps the defining feature of someone my age and from my state to have a friend, sibling or cousin who has died from opioid addiction.” Individuals are in pain. Families are suffering. Communities nationwide are struggling to respond to these crises. But these challenges are not limited to the personal sphere.

Ohio Attorney General Mike DeWine tweeted, “We can’t talk about jobs without talking about the opioid crisis. Business leaders in every part of the state can’t hire enough people to work because almost 40% of applicants can’t pass a drug test.”

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And Ohio is not alone in this battle. A 2015 national survey conducted by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration revealed that 75% of adults ages 18 to 64 with substance abuse disorders are in the workforce.

Every organization is only as healthy as its employees. Increasing rates of addiction coupled with widespread mental health issues are affecting everything from hiring and retention to workforce health and claims costs. With nearly one in five adults experiencing some form of mental illness in a given year, it should be no surprise that depression is the leading cause of disability in the United States. Depression is also estimated to cost around 200 million lost workdays in the United States each year according to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), costing up to \$44 billion in lost productivity.

These startling statistics are a wake-up call for organizations to make mental health a priority at the workplace. The first step is opening up the conversation with mental health benefits — namely the employee assistance program.

### Maximizing EAP Benefits for Mental Wellness

Seventy percent of all U.S. companies and 90% of Fortune 500 companies have partnered with EAPs to provide employees with support for mental health and substance abuse issues, in a widely cited survey by the National Safety Council. Through an EAP, employees can speak to a professional clinician about virtually any mental health concern, including but not limited to depression, anxiety, stress, grief and loss, substance abuse, and addiction, as well as relationship and family issues. Employees typically have access to three to six clinical sessions per

issue, during which the clinician offers assessment, short-term problem resolution and referrals to additional resources as needed.

Modern EAPs work to break down barriers to program access, offering numerous avenues to support, including Health Insurance Portability

and Accountability Act (HIPAA)-compliant video chat sessions and standard in-person clinical visits. Absolutely no identifying information is shared with the employer, as confidentiality is often a major concern for any employee seeking assistance. Offering an EAP to employees opens the dialogue around mental health benefits while improving lives and productivity at work.

Not all EAPs are the same though. When taking stock of mental health benefits, it is important to review benefits offerings and examine any potential gaps in coverage. Does the EAP increase digital access to services by offering video chat sessions with

clinicians? Are benefits limited? How does the EAP manage crisis calls? It's important that the EAP has a process in place for immediate action if employees demonstrate suicidal ideation or indicate threats of harm to self or others.

Having a strong EAP in place typically is the first step in addressing mental health issues at the workplace. But to stop the stigma and encourage usage of EAP benefits, organizational leaders need to go further. Even if mental health benefits and services are available, they often are buried deep in the pages of an employee handbook or included in a tri-fold leaflet with images of extremely sad, head-down individuals. These images reinforce negative stigmas and stereotypes: that depression means sadness all the time, that it's a sign of weakness, and that people are desperate and suffering alone.

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## Words Matter: Reducing the Stigma in Communications

It's time for more nuanced, authentic, and relatable imaging and messaging around mental health benefits. ACI Specialty Benefits, a global EAP provider based in San Diego, took a new approach to EAP promotion in creating a custom campaign with the tagline, "Freedom from Depression."

Instead of somber, head-in-hands images, ACI's marketing team showcased images of vibrant, diverse, everyday people. During the month of the campaign, ACI experienced a 25% increase in users accessing EAP benefits. Words and images are an important component in benefits communications to further break down the stigma and help employees overcome personal reservations around asking for help.

One of the most important things employers can do is encourage an open, direct approach to addressing mental health and demonstrating flexibility. When Madalyn Parker, a web developer at Olark, needed a mental health day from work, she emailed her colleagues: "Hey team, I'm taking today and tomorrow off to focus on my mental health. Hopefully, I'll be back next week refreshed and back to 100%." CEO of Olark Ben Congleton's response went viral:

"Hey Madalyn,

I just wanted to personally thank you for sending emails like this. Every time you do, I use it as a reminder of the importance of using sick days for mental health — I can't believe this is not standard practice at all organizations. You are an example to us all and help cut through the stigma, so we can all bring our whole selves to work."

This encouraging exchange went viral because people admired Madalyn's honesty and were blown

away by her boss' sincere reply. To have a CEO send a message of unwavering support is exactly the kind of example that needs to be set in breaking down the stigma of mental health issues at work. Organizations can double down on support for employees by offering creative mental wellness perks, such as onsite yoga and participating in walk-a-thons for causes employees care about.

Offering an EAP and practicing nonjudgmental communication are only first steps. They do little good if employees don't know all the benefits available.

## Partnership and Integration in Mental Health Benefits

To further promote mental health benefits, leaders should look at strategic partnerships across providers. Oftentimes, a wide range of support services already exist through the employee assistance program, wellness providers, health insurance and other benefits, but those services are often siloed and not effectively integrated. Employers and

benefits partners need to work better together in communicating services, cross-promoting the various solutions available and providing more seamless access to quality care.

Employers can magnify the impact of existing services by connecting multiple benefits under a unified mental health campaign. At a wellness summit for a major nationwide client, ACI Specialty Benefits participated in a strategy session to partner with the wellness provider in boosting employee well-being and cross-promoting the full spectrum of emotional, mental and physical wellness benefits available to employees. Using the wellness provider's online platform, ACI shared customized content during Mental Health Awareness Month in May to remind employees

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of EAP benefits available. An incentive of 20 wellness points was awarded to anyone who watched a fun two-minute EAP orientation video. Within 42 minutes of the communication going out, more than 100 employees had watched the EAP video and began learning more about mental health benefits available.

Beyond increasing awareness for mental health benefits, many organizations are taking a stronger step in proactively addressing substance abuse and addiction, specifically surrounding opioid use. Human resources leaders are beginning to re-examine zero-tolerance policies surrounding failed drug screenings and focusing efforts on rehabilitation support. Other organizations are looking at implementing prescription

pill disposal sites, as well as strengthening return-to-work programs. Such steps can result in increased loyalty and lower turnover rates as side benefits to overall employee wellness.

Positive change always begins with productive discourse to acknowledge challenges. Mental health, depression, suicide and addiction can no longer be the elephants in the room. With data-driven research, strategic partnerships and an open approach to communication, organizations can not only begin to reduce the stigma around mental health, but they literally can save lives. **ws**

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