

Improving Employee Well-being and Mental Health in the Time of COVID-19

Even before COVID-19, the U.S. mental health system was overburdened and underfunded. Recent job losses, social distancing, and health concerns due to COVID-19 have put additional stress on our fragile healthcare system. But the pandemic also presents all of us—including employers—with a momentous opportunity to reimagine healthcare.

The recent webinar “Improving Employee Well-being and Mental Health in the Time of COVID-19,” sponsored by Accolade and hosted by Employee Benefits Advisor, focused on how employers can accelerate the change toward better mental healthcare in the U.S. Moderator Lynn Gresham, former editor-in-chief and frequent contributor to Employee Benefits Advisor, was joined by Benjamin F. Miller, PsyD, Chief Strategy Officer of Well Being Trust, a national foundation dedicated to advancing the mental, social, and spiritual health of the U.S., and Shantanu Nundy, MD, Chief Medical Officer at Accolade and a practicing primary care physician.



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—Benjamin F. Miller
PsyD, Chief Strategy Officer,
Well Being Trust

In the following excerpt, Dr. Miller and Dr. Nundy share how employers can leverage this moment to better serve employees today and build a better health system for tomorrow.

Deaths of Despair: COVID-19 Puts a Spotlight on Mental Health

While the mental health impact of unemployment combined with large-scale social isolation due to COVID-19 is uncertain, Dr. Miller expressed concern about a rise in deaths from drugs, alcohol, and suicide due to COVID-19.

“COVID-19 has really laid bare the failings of American healthcare and public health policy,” said Dr. Miller. “Pain is more than tissues and nerves, and our nation is hurting. Without immediate action, we will see the impact of these failings for generations.” People must often wait weeks or months for mental healthcare. Insurance—if people are lucky enough to have it—may not pay for mental health services. Economic disparities; declines in social connectivity; fragmented care; discrimination based on race, gender, gender identity, and country of origin; and so much more exacerbate healthcare challenges, noted Dr. Miller.

5 Ways Employers Can Accelerate Change

Ensuring employees have access to mental health services and are comfortable seeking assistance is more than just the right thing for employers to do—it makes business sense as well. Depression and anxiety can lead to lost productivity, absenteeism and two to three times higher medical costs.¹ Mental health is a major reason why employees leave their jobs, which impacts business operations.

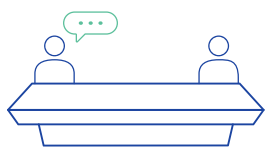
As the mental health crisis grows, however, employers have an opportunity to drive change. Here are five recommendations for addressing the failures and challenges of behavioral healthcare in our country, according to Dr. Nundy and Dr. Miller.

1. Elevate the Importance of Mental Health and Well-being

COVID-19 is an opportunity to elevate the importance of mental health and well-being throughout the workforce. “The positive side of this pandemic is that we’re talking about health almost every day now with our employees,” said Dr. Nundy. “Health is becoming a CEO-level issue.”

But the stigma remains. “Eight out of 10 employees with a mental health condition do not seek mental healthcare due to shame and embarrassment. Let’s take a leadership perspective to elevate the importance of mental health and well-being,” advised Dr. Nundy.

One of the best ways to normalize and show employees that employers prioritize mental health is to talk about it, said Dr. Miller. Employers can do this in a variety of ways, including establishing employee resources groups focused specifically on mental health. Start small and have discussions with one another on mental health.



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Accolade Inc.

But employers need leadership support to change the culture. At Accolade, members of the management team serve as role models for prioritizing well-being, including being honest about taking a mental health day.

Explained Dr. Miller, “If we simply hide and don’t discuss mental health, people become fearful. Instead, encourage employees to talk about mental health and share stories in a supportive way. It’s therapeutic and teaches people new coping skills.”

For instance, Accolade created an internal well-being portal in which employees post different ideas or stories. Dr. Nundy kicked off mental health awareness month by sharing a video of him playing the piano as a way he finds calm. The portal also provides information about self-serve behavioral health services and other resources available to employees.

Before choosing a digital tool, be sure that the evidence supports the use of that tool, advised Dr. Miller. “There are some exciting tools available, but make sure that you’re not buying something that is not ultimately going to bring about a better outcome for the mental health and well-being for your population,” he said.

Siloed tools perpetuate fragmentation so demand something different, said Dr. Miller. “Think twice about purchasing a product that doesn’t provide an integrated solution that includes mental health.”

2. Embrace Digital Behavioral Health Solutions

Patients may have experienced their first telehealth visit due to the pandemic. In Nundy’s D.C. clinic, 85% of visits became virtual. Nundy sees an opportunity to extend digital services to behavioral health.

Digital health makes mental health much more accessible, said Nundy, citing a study that shows 74% of employees would be more likely to use behavioral health if it was accessible from their mobile device.² While some prefer in-person care, a growing number of employees prefer the convenience of online phone chat or video.

For example, an employee feeling stressed can use a self-service tool or connect to a coach digitally rather than waiting weeks or months for an in-person appointment. “Technology allows for us to more seamlessly connect to services,” said Dr. Miller. “COVID-19 proves that technology can augment—and in some cases replace—certain traditional delivery functions.



For instance, an employee experiencing anxiety about his job and his health can call his employer-sponsored advocacy service. The health assistant brings a behavioral health clinician into the call. The clinician assesses the patient and educates the employee about mental health, with the goal of destigmatizing mental health. The clinician electronically sends the employee prep questions for a visit to a therapist and forwards approved resources.

The clinician gives a “warm handoff” to a therapist for a virtual session. Although the employee has attended the virtual sessions, he is still anxious so the therapist escalates his care to a psychiatrist (virtually) who prescribes a common anxiety medication along with continued virtual therapy.

Since the employee does not have a primary care physician and was diagnosed with pre-diabetes three years ago, a nurse from the behavioral care team contacts the employee to help him understand the importance of addressing pre-diabetes and connecting with a PCP. The employee meets virtually with the PCP who prescribes lab tests and creates a comprehensive physical and mental health plan.

Within three months, the employee’s anxiety has improved and he is even exercising regularly for both his physical and mental health. Other than to visit a lab for blood work, the employee did not have to travel or leave his home.

As you prepare to embrace digital behavioral health solutions, evaluate your existing telemedicine or virtual health solutions, including tele-therapy and psychiatry.

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3. Break Down the Silos Between Mental and Physical Healthcare

Mental health is traditionally treated separately from physical health. “Somehow, the mind is treated differently than the heart or the lungs,” said Dr. Nundy. Instead, we need to break the silo between physical and mental health. “It’s critical to tie mental health to primary care services,” he said.

We have to change the hearts and minds of people who have always thought of healthcare structures as separate, explained Dr. Miller. He admits that it’s a frustrating challenge but one that he believes is important to take on. “It begins with stories. It begins by sharing an example of how an integrated approach changed the life of one of your employees, or how it made an impact on you and your family,” said Dr. Miller. With mental health as part of primary care delivery, individuals are twice as likely to improve depression, decrease physical pain, and better their quality of life. Unfortunately, a lot of primary care offices don’t have the ability to serve the diverse needs of people with mental health conditions.

But with COVID-19, some silos are coming down. For instance, human resource professionals are thinking about how they can offer behavioral health services to contract and part-time employees who may not traditionally receive health benefits.

4. Embrace Whole-Person Collaborative Care

Delivering collaborative care requires a broad team with different skillsets that puts the employee at the center. Instead of a physical health team and a mental health team, a combined team screens employees for both and coordinates care. The team includes nurses, primary care doctors, as well as mental health coaches, therapists, and psychiatrists. While not every employee needs the entire team, it’s a model that employers can adapt to meet individual employee needs.

“Collaborative care really is one of the best ways to improve outcomes and decrease healthcare costs,” said Dr. Miller. “When we bring professionals together who can work collectively, we can change that fragmented culture. It’s more efficient and more effective for both the employee, the patient, and the provider. The outcomes are better.”

Dr. Nundy shares what the model looks like in action: A psychiatrist who prescribes a medication to treat depression informs the patient’s primary care doctor. The primary care doctor can track the patient’s overall health to determine if the patient is responding to care. Or a team of clinicians communicate in the hallway outside a patient’s exam room and enter the room to talk to the patient together.



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“Care is comprehensive in that it looks at all facets of your health and not just what you told the nurse you wanted to address that day.” added Dr. Miller. Less than 5% of primary care practices in the United States screen for depression and that is abysmal, he noted.

The collaborative model also decreases reliance on providers that aren't adding as much value. A patient who is in and out of the ER with recurrent abdominal pain may actually be suffering from anxiety. Rather than having the patient only see the gastrointestinal specialist, the team can comprehensively address the patient's needs and actually solve the problem.

5. Prioritize Behavioral Health Outcomes

Constrained budgets, coupled with economic uncertainty, forces employers to increasingly focus on health care return on investment, something that can also be done in behavioral health.

“The science of behavioral health has advanced,” explained Dr. Nundy. “Just as we measure blood sugar, we now have objective measures to understand people's mental health and can evaluate what programs are working and what programs aren't.”

While wide-spread access to mental health services is a critical first step, Dr. Nundy sees an opportunity to push our current partners to focus on outcomes. “We don't want to just know that this many people saw therapists this many times,” he said. “We want to know that this many people actually had their depression treated.”

Some of the best-validated tools to track mental health outcomes are simple, including the PHQ-9 patient health questionnaire. This tool evaluates depression severity and tracks treatment effectiveness by asking the patient to answer nine questions.

Screening alone doesn't improve outcomes; screening must be accompanied by individualized treatment. Some employees may do well with self-service mental health coaching. Others may need help with substance abuse. Others may have multiple diagnosis, such as an individual with uncontrolled diabetes and uncontrolled depression.

The key is to treat the patient holistically. “When we wait longer to address issues that are under the surface or more emotional, social, or cultural in nature, we know that employees' physical health outcomes do not improve. There's a bidirectional relationship with certain chronic disease and mental health issues, like depression and diabetes, said Dr. Miller.■

¹ Milliman Research Report: Potential Economic Impact of Integrated Medical-Behavioral Healthcare, February 2018, retrieved from: <https://www.milliman.com/en/insight/potential-economic-impact-of-integrated-medical-behavioral-healthcare-updated-projections>

² Ginger, 2019 Workforce Attitudes Toward Behavioral Health - Annual Report, retrieved from: <https://go.ginger.io/final-report-workforce-behavioral-health-2019>

About Accolade

To learn more about improving employee emotional well-being and mental health, watch the webinar or contact Accolade at inquiries@accolade.com