Employers turn to virtual care to help employees cope during pandemic

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Without question, your organization's employees have experienced dramatic and lingering changes to their lives caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. From healthcare providers working on the front lines[1] to essential workers reporting to work each day and employees working from home—the virus has taken a toll, especially on mental health. In a new study commissioned by Teladoc Health (conducted by Leger), 47% of respondents said their mental health was negatively impacted by COVID-19 (49% of those aged 18-34).

COVID-19 has drastically amplified mental health concerns

Teladoc Health commissioned a study (conducted by Leger) of 2,505 employees across the U.S. and Canada and found that:

47%
of U.S. survey respondents said their mental health has been negatively impacted by COVID-19

49%
of those survey respondents between the ages of 18-34 reported being negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic

9%
of survey respondents have reached out to their manager about mental health concerns

27%
of U.S. survey respondents indicate their employers are proactively responding with mental health resources and support

8/10
of those employed/recently employed think employee benefit plans should offer virtual care benefits as an option

Fears of contracting the virus, social disruption, personal financial issues, juggling family and home-life pressures, and, in some cases, coping with the loss of a loved one, are just some of the issues people have faced since the pandemic began.[2] Among parents with children under 18, 46% rated their average stress level related to the pandemic as 8, 9, or 10 on a 10-point scale, according to a May 2020 survey released by the American Psychological Association.

While so many employees in the U.S. and beyond have struggled during the pandemic, just 9% have reached out to their managers with their mental health concerns.

Most employers want to ensure employees have access to the healthcare they need when they need it. Recognizing that employees may require more help to get mental healthcare support is a separate challenge. Because of mental health stigmas, employees are usually reluctant to broach the topic with employers. However, they will appreciate their employers if they feel they can freely speak up and access the tools needed to manage day-to-day mental health needs.

Employers can assist in removing barriers to access mental healthcare and providing easy access to care so employees can get the mental health support they need. Here are two steps employers can take to support the mental health needs of employees:

1. Understand the impact the pandemic may have on employees' lives.

The abrupt nature of COVID-19 should not be underestimated. In late February and early March, officials in the U.S. began to issue stay-at-home orders as hundreds of people became ill with the virus. Employees were asked to work from home resulting in a sense of isolation and confinement and, for some, creating other mental health issues.

The collective trauma caused by a major life-changing event resulted in the "fight, flight, freeze" response for many people. Suddenly, employees no longer had clear direction on what to do or how to effectively manage their lives. They struggled with questions about how to protect their loved ones. These feelings of not knowing what to do resulted in a variety of mental health issues, including:

- Acute stress disorder
- Post-traumatic stress disorder
- Sleep disturbances/nightmares
- Anxiety and depression
- Difficulty concentrating
- Weight loss (or gain) and appetite changes
- Lack of motivation/low energy
- Complicated grief resulting from the death of a family member or friend

Mental health issues such as these are common during events like the COVID-19 pandemic. In the May issue of *Biological Psychiatry*, Dr. Celso Arango writes: "Some professionals develop a sort of learned helplessness. It does not matter how hard they work and how well they do their jobs—the next day there is no reward, only punishment."[3]

When people suddenly lose their freedom to conduct normal daily activities in addition to no longer having stable work lives, moods can shift and habits change—not always for the better.

For many, changes to mental health may result in sleep interruptions resulting in a lack of energy. In others, anxiety and depression can consume individuals, removing their ability to function normally at work or creating impulse behaviors like eating or drinking.

The pandemic has also caused families to lose loved ones to the virus and kept them from saying goodbye and grieving for those who died. These life-changing events frequently require medication and/or treatment. If left untreated, they can result in more severe situations like post-traumatic stress disorder.

2. Reduce mental health stigma and help employees access and obtain the care they need.

In Teladoc Health's recent survey, respondents made it clear they're becoming more comfortable using remote forms of mental healthcare, including virtual care services. This is especially good news given the pandemic and continued need for employees to work at home to further reduce the spread of the virus.

Since the demand for mental healthcare support and resources is growing, employers need to adopt a proactive approach designed to reduce stigma around mental healthcare and deliver easy access to mental healthcare solutions. Some simple actions employers can take to accomplish this are to:

• Include mental health resources in company health and well-being programs. Make sure employees are aware of preferred providers and therapists and, given that many employees continue to work from home, offer convenient, confidential access to mental healthcare services through virtual care providers.

• Emphasize open communication and confidentiality. Thoughtful conversations and openness about mental health creates a more empathetic environment. Having meaningful conversations with employees will help them feel heard, understood, and hopeful that if they need it, there is help. Invite senior leaders to have a voice on the topic in town hall conference calls, information on company intranets, and in other employee communications.

COVID-19 drives positive mental health conversation around access and care

Comfort is growing in the use of remote forms of mental healthcare

Open to virtual care

69% today   vs.   **40**% in 2019

- Educate employees about strategies for good mental wellness and how to address mental health issues that they may face while working from home. Regular communications that address topics such as stress, anxiety, depression, substance abuse, grief and loss, and more will help employees remain aware of the options available to them.

- Empower all managers to have meaningful discussions about mental health challenges. When employees are ready to talk, managers need to listen, respond in a supportive manner, and direct employees to the care they need.

If an employee needs support for a more complex mental health concern, help him or her understand how to get the assistance that is needed. In some situations, this may require in-person care with an expert practitioner who can review his or her diagnosis and treatment plan.

The emerging mental health impact of the COVID-19 pandemic may evolve into a multitude of long-lasting health problems, isolation, and stigma. A proactive and comprehensive mental health response should include innovative treatment modalities, and virtual care must lead the way. While virtual care isn't meant to be used as a replacement for emergency care, it can accommodate many of the life-changing and trauma-inducing situations that employees face today. Access to virtual care during a period when employees may fear scheduling and participating in an in-office visit with a mental healthcare provider ensures that they get the care and support they need. And, virtual care visits can be scheduled quickly, allowing employees to get care when needed instead of waiting weeks for an appointment.

The ongoing pandemic may be driving the use of virtual care services designed to support the mental well-being of employees. And, by expanding virtual mental health services, employers can offset spending on mental health conditions that would otherwise go unattended. When the pandemic ends and employees return to a sense of normalcy, access and continued use of virtual care services will remain part of that norm.

[1]Lai, Jianbo, Simeng Ma, Ying Wang, et al. 2020. "Factors Associated With Mental Health Outcomes Among Health Care Workers Exposed to Coronavirus Disease 2019." *JAMA Network Open* 2020;3(3). https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2763229.

[2]Holmes, Emily A., Rory C. O'Connor, V. Hugh Perry, Irene Tracey, Simon Wessely, Louise Arseneault, et al. 2020. "Multidisciplinary research priorities for the COVID-19 pandemic: a call for action for mental health science." *The Lancet* April 15, 2020. https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpsy/article/PIIS2215-0366(20)30168-1/fulltext.

[3]Celso Arango. 2020. "Lessons Learned From the Coronavirus Health Crisis in Madrid, Spain: How COVID-19 Has Changed Our Lives in the Last 2 Weeks." *Biological Psychiatry* April 8, 2020 (correspondence, articles in press). https://www.biologicalpsychiatryjournal.com/article/S0006-3223(20)31493-1/pdf.

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