

Improve Mental Wellbeing in the workplace

A webinar with GEB, Generali Health Solutions and FlourishDx



Recently, GEB Health & Wellbeing, Generali Health Solutions, and FlourishDx participated in a webinar hosted by HRGrapevine focusing on how employers can take a risk management approach to improving mental wellbeing in the workplace. You can listen to the full webinar here: <https://www.hrgrapevine.com/events/ondemand/2019-10-22-identifying-and-managing-stress-among-your-global-workforce/>.

Webinar participants included Daniela Masters, Head of Global Health & Wellbeing Programmes at GEB; Dr. Juliane Sachschal, Mental Health Programme Development at Generali Health Solutions, and Jason Van Schie, Managing Director at People Diagnostix (creators of FlourishDx). Below you'll find a summary of the main discussion topics from the webinar.

The financial impact of poor mental health at work

The impact of poor mental health in the workplace is significant, causing an estimated loss in global productivity valued at more than US\$1 Trillion per year*. Unaddressed mental health issues not only impact workplace productivity, but also the ability of employees to thrive and flourish at work and at home. To help address these issues, employers, insurers and mental health service providers must work collaboratively to share knowledge and strategies that could help support employee mental health improvement.

Understanding the difference between stress and mental disorders

To understand how to address mental health issues across the global workforce, it's important to differentiate between what is stress and what is mental illness, and then consider unique resources for each that may be available to help employees help themselves. Dr. Juliane Sachschal, Mental Health Programme Development at Generali Health Solutions commented, "Stress itself is not necessarily negative - it is really a natural adaptive reaction...a physiological response to external or internal stimuli. Stress in the short-term can be positive, as a motivating factor to accomplish difficult tasks

or focus on solving complex problems. Stress in a long-term state, however, can be damaging and should be addressed. Mental disorders are quite different and can include bipolar disorder, anxiety disorder and even schizophrenia. These involve a pathological change in thoughts/behaviours/feelings over a longer period of time, and patients experiencing these conditions need to seek professional treatment."

Treatment for mental disorders is usually supported by employers through coverage of mental health treatment as part of their employee benefit programme and group medical cover - However, it often takes a long time for people with mental disorders to find the right treatment. Specific health management programmes that address gaps in public health care can help employees receive appropriate treatment more quickly and easily. Furthermore, stress in the workplace is often completely unaddressed. Since stress is not a 'pathological' condition, employees are often left to fend for themselves to resolve stress and associated anxiety, with many suffering in silence.

Understanding how stress manifests in the physical body

Our bodies can manifest stress through a variety of physical symptoms including headaches, insomnia, musculo-skeletal pain and even an increased heart rate. Stress can also exacerbate existing conditions and illnesses such as Asthma, Cardiovascular disease and Irritable Bowel Syndrome. Because stress is an unseen, insidious contributor to poor health, it's important to recognize these 'symptoms' wherever possible and address them as part of an overall risk management strategy.

Looking at Stress Management through the Prism of Risk Management

"What's needed is an integrated, risk management approach that aims to mitigate the health impacts of stress among employees, prevent harm and promote flourishing," says Jason van Schie, Managing Director of FlourishDx, a provider of digital preventative mental health solutions. "Like physical health and safety, there is a shared responsibility between

employer and employee to identify and address sources of stress, and to address these appropriately. Effective workplace interventions can increase mental health literacy, reduce stress levels across staff, prevent unnecessary time off work, and improve overall quality of life at work and at home for all employees”.

To accomplish this, employers need to:

- Assess risks to mental wellbeing in the workplace, such as long hours, unrealistic deadlines, lack of autonomy, unclear roles, etc;
- Follow the hierarchy of controls at work to eliminate or reduce risks at their source, and encourage self-care among all levels of staff, including senior management;
- Review control measures and goals for ongoing risk management and continuous mental health improvements.

Working Cross-functionally to create better solutions

In order to create an effective risk management strategy, it's key that all departments in an organisation bring to bear their expertise and available data to gain a better understanding of mental health across the employee population. Useful data, if available and appropriately aggregated, can include medical claims data (focusing on indicators of physical manifestations of stress), absence data, occupational health & safety data, HR/personnel data, employee surveys, etc. Working collaboratively, departments can begin to form a clear picture of the health and wellbeing of their workforce and develop a strategy to create a mentally healthy workplace.

Using Medical Claims Data to identify potential stress indicators

Daniela Masters of GEB commented, “Through our ongoing data collection and analysis, we have identified three groups of conditions that may indicate underlying problems related to stress in an employee group including: 1) conditions with a clear psychological component (like anxiety); 2) conditions that may represent a physical manifestation of stress (like back pain, migraines and hypertension); and 3) conditions that can be exacerbated by stress (like Asthma, skin disorders and indigestion). A high or rising incidence of employees with such conditions, and a high or rising utilisation of related medical services for such conditions could both be warning signs that stress is pervasive in an employee population.” It is for this reason that medical claims data can be so useful – because the data can be leveraged to identify stress indicators among seemingly unrelated conditions.

Creating a mentally healthy workplace

Creating a mentally healthy workplace requires collaboration at all levels, with all key stakeholders including senior management, employees, HR/benefits, Health & Safety, and external insurers.

By working with both internal and external partners, employers can create better strategies to support a mentally healthy workplace.

** Mental health in the workplace, World Health Organisation (WHO), May 2019 https://www.who.int/mental_health/in_the_workplace/en/*