

A BHS WHITE PAPER

THE GREAT MENTAL HEALTH AWAKENING

Trends and Strategies for Supporting
Your Workforce in the COVID Era

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CONTENTS

3

PRELUDE

5

INTRODUCTION

6

WHAT IS DRIVING DISTRESS
IN THE WORKPLACE?

10

MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES ON THE RISE

13

IMPACT ON THE WORKPLACE

16

IMPACT BY INDUSTRY

19

STRATEGIES FOR ADDRESSING MENTAL
HEALTH IN THE “COVID ERA”

24

AFTERWORD

25

ABOUT BHS

25

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

26

REFERENCES



PRELUDE

It's late Spring in 2021. Michael's world has changed drastically over the last year.

The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns in March 2020 were difficult for Michael to navigate. He never worked from home before. He never had a day in his life where he didn't have an in-person interaction with a colleague, neighbor or family member. He never feared that a highly contagious virus could kill him.

In May 2020, Michael was in horror as he watched the disturbing murder of George Floyd. The lockdowns forced Michael to sit with his feelings. As he reflected, Michael learned a lot about his own biases, which was upsetting for him. How could he not see this before? His eyes were more open to the inequity and injustice that is prevalent in the United States.

The 2020 election season was as intense as it gets. Michael had differing political views from several family members. A political conversation with his cousin quickly turned into a heated argument where hurtful comments were traded. Michael has not spoken to his cousin since their argument. He often thinks about reconnecting with him, but he is afraid that things will only get worse between them.

In January 2021, Michael watched as the U.S. Capitol was breached by protesters. He was in disbelief that an event like this could happen in the United States. Michael continued to worry about the future of the country. Would there be more violence? More protests? More hate?

Michael's employer announced that they would be returning to the workplace in May, which made him uneasy. He was worried about not knowing who was vaccinated or whether he should wear a mask. Knowing that his fears and uncertainties would lead to awkward situations, he avoided conversations with his coworkers. Deep inside, he yearned for a return to the workplace as he used to know it.

Three weeks after Michael returned to the office, his mother passed away unexpectedly. He was very close to her. Before the pandemic, he would visit her several times a week on his way home from work. But that changed in March 2020. His mother was immunocompromised and feared contracting the virus. She asked that Michael stop visiting her during the pandemic. He still would drop by now and then and would speak with her through her storm door. But it was never the same as before.



The thought of losing such an important person in his life was overwhelming for Michael. Just when he thought that the worst was behind him, this new tragic event unfolded in his life and Michael was completely overcome by emotions. Thoughts of ending his life swirled in his head.

At work the next day, Michael mentioned to his manager that he doesn't want to live anymore, and he had thoughts about ending his life the previous day. They talked for a few minutes and Michael assured his manager that he was fine.

The next day, Michael did not show up for work...

This scenario is playing out in workplaces everywhere. The ongoing traumatic events over the last year and a half are wreaking havoc on individuals' mental health in ways we have never seen before. It's difficult for employers to understand what is affecting their employees in their personal lives, issues that can be further complicated by a new reality in the workplace. However, there are strategies and best practices that organizations can implement to recognize and respond to those experiencing emotional distress.

Does your organization have the right strategies and resources in place to create a supportive workplace culture that embraces mental health and help-seeking?

INTRODUCTION

We are in the middle of a great mental health awakening. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has shined a long-overdue spotlight on the importance of mental health. Almost every single person has experienced a mental health challenge of some level during the pandemic.

The changing behaviors that we are currently experiencing are a direct result of people’s lives being overwhelmingly disrupted. Even people who were not prone to mental health issues before the pandemic might be now. And many will continue to have ongoing struggles with how to get back to normal life at home and work.

This whitepaper explores:

- What is driving **distress in the workplace**
- **Mental health issues** that are on the rise
- **The impact** mental health issues have on the workplace
- **Strategies** for addressing mental health in the “COVID Era”

In January 2021, a quarter of employees indicated that they were planning to quit their jobs post-COVID.¹⁷

WHAT IS DRIVING DISTRESS IN THE WORKPLACE?

A tsunami of traumatic events devastated our world as we knew it in 2020. Even before 2020, workers were already feeling distressed in the workplace. **Burnout, for example, was officially recognized by the World Health Organization in 2019 as an occupational phenomenon resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.**¹

Let's take a deeper look at what is driving distress in the workplace in 2021.

COVID-19 Pandemic

Lives and businesses were completely disrupted when COVID-19 quickly spread globally from Wuhan, China in late 2019. Governments,

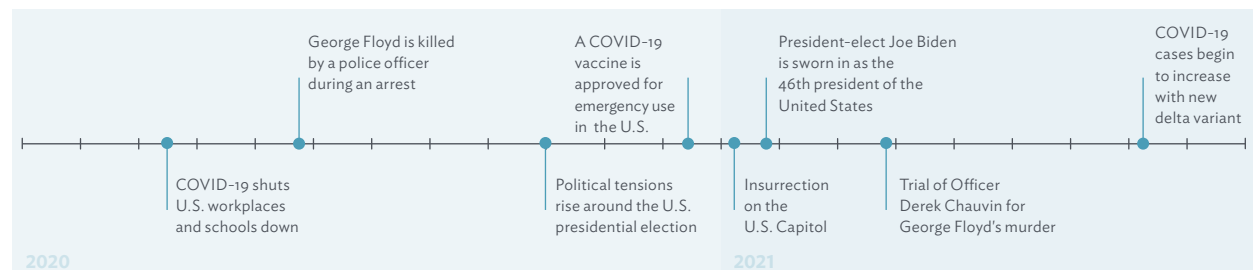
businesses, communities and individuals were not prepared for this historic event and were forced to rapidly adapt.

Millions of workers were sent home to work remotely for the first time in their lives. Kids were sent home from school with no immediate plans to resume education, further complicating remote work for many parents.

Essential workers continued to show up to work on the frontlines whether at the hospital or the grocery store. Daily, they feared they might contract the virus or bring it home to their family members.

Lockdowns forced everyone to live in isolation, instantly eliminating in-person connection to family, friends, neighbors and colleagues. Many

Traumatic Events Driving Distress in the Workplace



businesses had to furlough or lay off employees creating significant financial stress for individuals as well as business owners.

The pandemic also forced scores of women out of the workforce to provide caregiving. There are 1.8 million fewer women in the workforce now than pre-COVID.²

All these major disruptions to our everyday lives had a tremendous impact on our mental health. Fast forward a year and a half later, and we are still struggling.

People are exhausted from constantly adapting as the number of COVID cases continues to fluctuate.

For a large part of the country, mask policies have been relaxed. While this is great news to many, others are still worried about the spread of the virus. A large part of the population is now vaccinated, but there are still those who are hesitant or refuse to get it.

The new variants of the virus are also causing uncertainty around kids returning to school, and employees returning to the office. Many employers have already pushed back their return to the workplace. These constant adjustments are draining for both leaders and employees.

The pandemic has been a great disrupter in our lives. **It's hard to predict how long the pandemic will last and the damaging effects it will have on society and businesses.**

Racial Injustice and Inequity

The murder of George Floyd in May 2020 sparked demonstrations across the United States calling for an end to racial and social injustices. As a result, racial and social equality is now front and center in the public eye and our workplaces.

At the time of Floyd's murder, Americans were already struggling with mental health problems stemming from the pandemic.

Data from the Census Bureau showed that the rate of clinically significant signs of anxiety or depressive disorders in black Americas jumped from 36 percent to 41 percent a week after the video of Floyd's death became public.³

A survey in early 2021 of more than 2,000 adults found that 69 percent of Americans believe that racial injustice was a problem. Sixty-eight percent believed that racial injustice issues should be discussed at work. Furthermore, 54 percent would consider leaving their job if their organization did not speak out against racial injustice.⁴

While there has been some progress, there are many challenges and hurdles that society must overcome to ensure equity, inclusion and justice for all.

Political Tensions

With the pandemic and social injustice already taking a toll on our mental health, the 2020 election cycle brought on a new wave of stress. Political turmoil, the assault on the U.S. Capitol and ongoing political divisions fueled tensions among family, friends, communities and colleagues.

An American Psychological Association poll study found that 68 percent of adults indicated that the 2020 presidential election was a significant source of stress in their life.⁵ Research conducted by the Society for Human Resources

Management (SHRM) in October 2020 uncovered that **44 percent of HR professionals reported intensified political volatility at work**, up from only 26 percent in 2016.⁶

As the pandemic era continues and decisions are made by politicians about our health and safety including mask and vaccination policies and laws, political tensions will continue to be an issue.

Burnout

Burnout is a state of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress.

It can happen to anyone – managers and employees alike. It is a serious issue that impacts all aspects of life and daily functioning.

With the shift to remote work, studies have shown that productivity has increased. This can largely be attributed to fewer distractions and a more flexible work schedule. However, rates of burnout have increased significantly since the shift to remote work.

Nearly 83% of respondents felt emotionally drained from their work.

In the 2021 Mind the Workplace report by Mental Health America, most employees who were surveyed indicated that they were experiencing the early signs of burnout. Nearly 83 percent of respondents felt emotionally drained from their work, with over 40 percent stating they strongly agreed with this statement.⁷

A Harvard Business Review study on burnout released in February 2021 reported:

- **89%** of respondents said their work life was getting worse
- **85%** said their well-being had declined
- **56%** said their job demands had increased
- **62%** of the people who were struggling to manage their workloads had experienced burnout “often” or “extremely often” in the previous three months
- **57%** of employees felt that the pandemic had a “large effect on” or “completely dominated” their work⁸

Throughout the pandemic, layoffs and the safety net of enhanced unemployment benefits caused many workers to rethink their professional ambitions. Many did not return to work as the economy reopened and those who have returned are facing overwhelming workloads.

As employers continue to be challenged with employees changing careers, leaving their jobs and a workforce shortage, more is being expected of employees to fill the gaps. These added responsibilities bring more pressure to an already overworked workforce, causing higher levels of stress and burnout.

Opposing Views About Vaccinations

Vaccinations for COVID-19 started rolling out in December 2021. As of the end of July, the CDC reports that 70 percent of adults have had at least one shot of a COVID-19 vaccine. This is a monumental achievement, however, there are still many people who are on the fence or outright refuse to get the vaccine.

Personal views on whether individuals should get vaccinated are sparking conflict among family members, friends, neighbors and colleagues.

Strong beliefs on highly controversial topics such as vaccinations can have a direct impact on mental health causing anger, fear, anxiety and stress.

Uncertainty Around the Return to the Workplace

For those whose jobs transitioned to remote work during the pandemic, employers are now inviting – and in some cases demanding – them back into the workplace. While there are individuals who are more than ready to return to the office, many are not ready to return due to concerns about personal health and safety, while others do not wish to return because they enjoy working remotely.

Returning to the workplace with no end to the pandemic in sight is causing high levels of anxiety and stress. According to a study conducted by McKinsey, **49 percent of employees surveyed expect that the return to the office will have a negative impact on their mental health.**

Of those who have returned to the workplace, 36 percent reported negative mental health effects from working on-site.⁹

The return to the workplace will be a highly contentious topic, especially with the rise of COVID-19 variants. The delta variant has many concerned that their employers are returning to the workplace too soon.

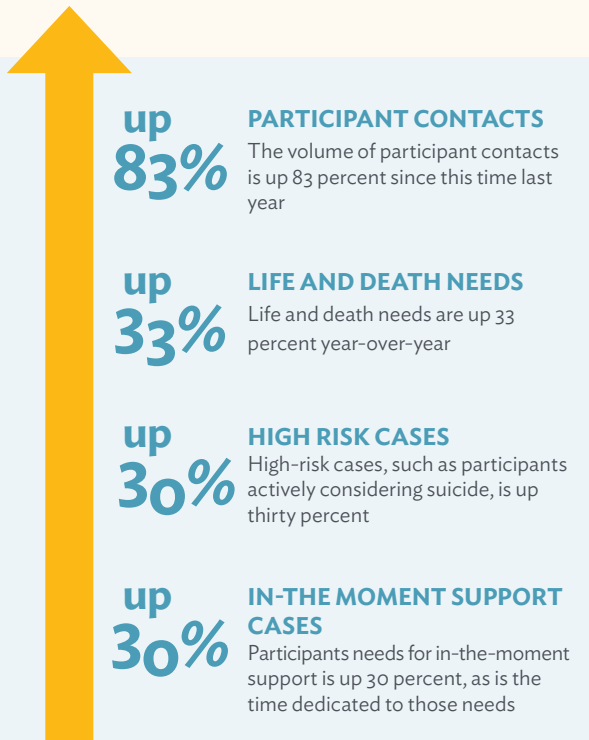
MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES ON THE RISE

The traumatic events of 2020 have severely impacted the mental health and well-being of millions of Americans:

- More than **four in 10 adults** (43 percent) report the pandemic has had a serious impact on their mental health
- **Nearly half (48 percent) of adults with children** say the pandemic has caused mental health problems for one or more of their children
- An estimated **one in eight working-age adults has depression**, with more seeking diagnosis and care
- **Drug overdoses and suicides have overtaken traffic accidents** as the two leading causes of death among young Americans ages 25-44¹⁰

As the frontline mental health care coordinators for more than 600 organizations and over two million covered lives, **BHS is experiencing this unprecedented surge in demand:**

BHS Participant Utilization Trends





Alcohol and Substance Use is Exploding

In the first half of 2021, BHS has seen a 64 percent increase in the number of cases with reported alcohol use. Recent data from the CDC reports that there was a 29.4 percent increase in drug overdose deaths between December 2019 and December 2020.¹¹

Substance use is exploding and is going to continue to climb even as we get on the other side of the pandemic. People have increased their alcohol intake as a mechanism to cope with anxiety, depression and loneliness. As employees return to the workplace, substance abuse issues will show up too.



Suicidal Ideation and Attempts Are Rising to Extraordinary Numbers

Suicide has been a growing public health concern since the turn of the century. Since 1999, suicide rates have increased 33 percent through 2019.¹²

Suicidal ideation cases are up a startling 60 percent.

Surprisingly, early data from the first half of 2020 suggests that suicide attempts decreased during the beginning of the pandemic. In 2021, however, there has been a surge in suicide attempts and individuals reporting suicidal ideation. Suicide attempts have been more lethal, and more women are attempting it.

At BHS, suicidal ideation cases are up a startling 60 percent year-over-year with a 33 percent increase since January 1, 2021.

There have been several occasions when our

contact center had multiple active suicide calls. This is unprecedented and there are little to no signs indicating that this trend is slowing down anytime soon.



Individuals with No History of Counseling or Coaching are Seeking Help

The demand for mental health support is skyrocketing. **BHS has seen a 70 percent increase in the number of individuals who have no history of receiving counseling services for mental health concerns.** This can largely be attributed to the events of the last year and a half. But this is also a sign that the stigma around mental health is improving.

While it is comforting to see more people asking for help, the increased demand is putting more strain on a mental health system that is already difficult to access. The limited availability of providers is creating longer wait times for those who need timely access to services. At a time when individuals must get help, the slightest roadblock can prevent them from getting the support they need.



Burnout

A recent Mind the Workplace report by Mental Health America acknowledges that **nearly 9 in 10 employees report that workplace stress affects their mental health.**¹³

Employees who are experiencing exhaustion, an early sign of burnout, report that workplace stress was affecting their mental health. Of employees who strongly agreed that they feel emotionally drained by their work, 99 percent agreed (somewhat agreed to strongly agreed), and

71 percent strongly agreed that their workplace stress affects their mental health.

Nearly 1 in 4 employees have experienced the more severe signs of burnout, including reduced professional efficacy and cynicism towards coworkers and their jobs. And over 23 percent of employees reported that they don't care what happens to their colleagues or clients.⁷



Grief and Loss

Grief and loss have been major themes throughout the pandemic. At the beginning of the pandemic, it was extremely difficult to appropriately mourn loved ones. Virtual funerals have been the toughest and most heartbreaking to attend and closure has been challenging to attain.

The pandemic has also caused grief for many through the loss of life experiences. Weddings, birthdays, graduations, anniversaries, vacations and countless other events have been greatly impacted. Uncertainty about the future is also causing anticipatory grief, leaving people constantly worried about what is going to happen next.

BHS has seen a 70 percent increase in the number of individuals who have no history of receiving counseling services for mental health concerns.



Impact on Physical Health

The pandemic has not only put an enormous strain on our mental health, but it has also had a profound impact on physical health. Throughout 2020, many people skipped regular health examinations, whether it was out of fear of getting infected by COVID-19, or healthcare systems not having enough capacity.

The added anxiety and stress from the pandemic itself, as well as the other traumatic events also have an impact on physical health. Lack of sleep, eating disorders, weight gain or loss are all effects of prolonged stress and anxiety.

A survey conducted by the American Psychological Association in February 2021 found that 42 percent of adults reported undesired weight gain since the start of the pandemic. Weight gain carries mental health implications as well and often contributes to depression and anxiety, emotional distress, and disordered eating.¹⁴

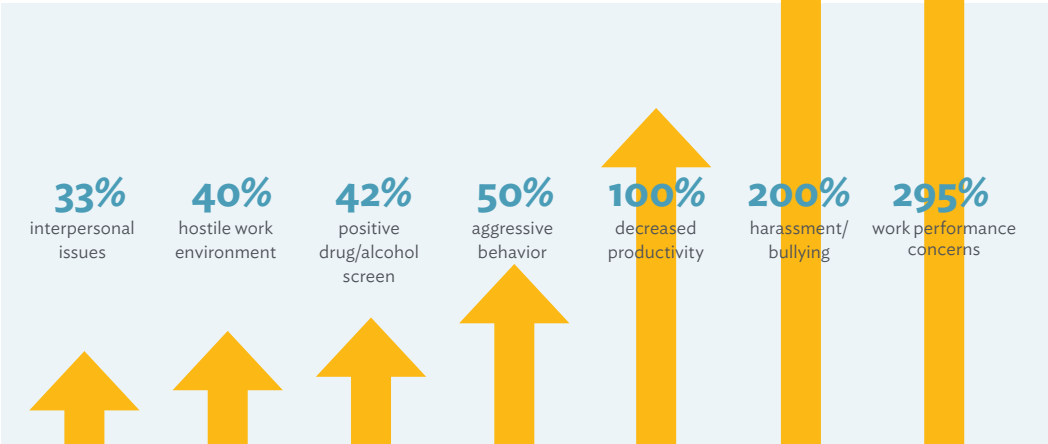
The ongoing psychological effects of the pandemic will continue to have an impact on physical health throughout the COVID Era.

IMPACT ON THE WORKPLACE

It is well documented that unresolved mental health issues can decrease work performance and company morale and increase absenteeism, turnover, safety incidents, and claims costs. The pandemic, social injustice, and political and social divisions are creating many challenges for employers.

In the first half of 2021, BHS has seen the following year-over-year workplace management referrals trends:

BHS Workplace Management Trends



Absenteeism and Presenteeism on the Rise

It is well noted that mental health is a major cause of employee absenteeism and presenteeism. The above trends often lead to unplanned, prolonged absences from work. They also prevent employees from being fully present during work hours.

At BHS, calls are up 127% for performance/absenteeism concerns.

These unplanned absences and distractions can be very costly to organizations. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, **productivity losses linked to absenteeism are roughly \$1,685 per employee.**¹⁵ The cost presenteeism is nearly 10x greater than absenteeism, with the average number of days lost at 57.5.¹⁶

In the BHS contact center, calls for performance/absenteeism concerns in the first half of 2021 are up 127 percent from the second half of 2020.

Recruitment and Retention

According to a survey conducted by Eagle Hill Consulting at the beginning of 2021, a quarter of employees indicated that they were planning to quit their jobs post-COVID.¹⁷ The Bureau of Labor and Statistics reported approximately **four million people quit their jobs in April 2021, with another 3.6 million leaving their jobs in May.**¹⁸ As the economy continues to recover from the pandemic, more jobs have become available, resulting in more people considering career moves.

While career mobility, new challenges and better pay are contributing factors for people

leaving their jobs, burnout is also highly cited as illustrated earlier in this whitepaper. A majority of employees in the Eagle Hill Consulting survey cited burnout as the main reason for wanting to quit. More than half of employees said they were struggling with burnout during the pandemic. Those employees are four times more likely to leave their organizations than those not feeling burned out.

The pandemic gave individuals time to reflect on what is important to them, including prioritizing mental health. Workplaces that don't have a clear plan for addressing employee mental health may struggle with attracting and retaining employees.

The average cost of replacing an employee is six to nine months of the employee's salary.¹⁹

That means for an employee making \$50,000 per year, recruiting and training costs are \$25,000-\$37,500. In professional services professions such as legal and healthcare, the impact is much greater. Replacing employees can cost hundreds of thousands and even into the millions of dollars.

Lower Employee Engagement

Before the pandemic, employers have struggled with employee engagement. A Gallup poll in 2018 revealed that more than half of workers (53 percent) are not engaged. When this happens, workers show up and do the bare minimum required, and are more likely to leave their organization for a slightly better offer.²⁰ A Gallup employee engagement poll for the first half of 2021 reports that only 36 percent of U.S. employees are engaged in their work and workplace.²¹

In addition to reduced employee loyalty, employees who are not engaged can impact the morale of their teams, especially when they must constantly pick up the slack of employees who are not fully productive.

In the BHS contact center, calls related to team dynamics and morale in the first half of 2021 are up 46 percent from the second half of 2020.

Distractions and Safety Concerns

Employee safety becomes a major risk when workers are not fully present on the job. Distracted workers are more likely to be involved in a workplace accident. An Australian study on the association between psychological distress and workplace accidents found that the odds ratio of an accident increased to 1.4 for employees in moderate and high psychological distress.²²

As more workers are impacted by life's new and existing challenges, the risk of workplace accidents will continue to be of concern. With increased risk comes increased liability for organizations. Workplace accidents can lead to increased workers' compensation claims, lawsuits and legal expenses, tarnished reputation, lost customers and employee turnover.

Increased Health Costs

Many employers are fearful that there may be a COVID-19 "hangover" once the peak of the pandemic is behind us. **Healthcare utilization is expected to climb in 2021 and beyond** as many employees who put off routine primary care visits or surgical procedures are now scheduling appointments. A report published by PricewaterhouseCoopers projects healthcare costs to increase 6.5 percent in 2022.²³

The expected prolonged impact of the pandemic on mental health will also contribute to the

increase in healthcare spending. Even though the stigma around mental health is subsiding and more people are seeking help, those that continue to go untreated are at greater risk for other health issues. A good mental health strategy that recognizes when people are in emotional distress and the right resources can reduce health costs.

IMPACT BY INDUSTRY

Industries have all been impacted greatly by the pandemic and the events of the last year and a half but the specific nature of certain professions brought unique challenges. Let's look at how mental health issues are impacting healthcare, first responders, professional services and education.



Healthcare

The impact of the pandemic on the mental well-being of healthcare workers has been devastating. **The prolonged exposure to trauma is causing mental health issues similar to those experienced in post-war periods.**

Healthcare workers are beyond burnout. They have not had a break since the start of the pandemic. When the number of COVID-19 cases started declining in 2021, individuals started flooding hospitals and healthcare providers for treatment and procedures they had put off during the pandemic. With COVID-19 cases on the rise again, many healthcare workers feel like there is no end in sight.

56% of assisted living and nursing home workers are feeling burned out.

A study conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation and the Washington Post in early 2021 found that 62 percent of frontline health care workers say that worry or stress related to COVID-19 has a negative impact on their mental health. **More than half (56 percent) say that worry or stress related to COVID-19 has caused them to experience trouble with sleeping or sleeping too much (47 percent), frequent headaches or stomachaches (31 percent), or increased alcohol or drug use (16 percent).**²⁴

Assisted Living workers are also deeply impacted by the pandemic. The KFF/Washington Post study also found that 56 percent of assisted living and nursing home workers are feeling burned out. Another 47 percent reported feeling anxious. In addition, assisted living and nursing home workers had the highest number of COVID infections, with 24 percent reporting positive COVID-19 tests.



First Responders

Like healthcare workers, first responders have been greatly impacted by the pandemic. According to data compiled by the Officer Down Memorial Page and the National Police Foundation, more law enforcement officers died from COVID than from gun violence, car accidents and all other causes combined.²⁵ As public-facing figures, social distancing is not possible, putting many first responders at greater risk of infection.

Police officers are also drained and do not feel that they are getting the support they need. More officers are leaving the police force as a result. According to the New York Times, retirements nationwide are up by 45 percent and resignations by 18 percent from April 2020 to April 2021.²⁶

Many officers worry about the lack of confidentiality if they seek mental health treatment and believe that they could be deemed incapable of performing their job. When mental health concerns continue to go untreated, it can lead to other behavioral issues such as substance abuse or suicidal ideation.

33% of EMS personnel are thinking about changing careers.²⁸

Even before the pandemic, nearly **one in four police officers have experienced thoughts of suicide** at some point during their lives.²⁷ Continued exposure to traumatic events and increased societal pressures have profoundly impacted the lives of our first responders. In August 2021, a fourth police officer who

responded to the January 6 siege of the U.S. Capitol died by suicide. This is an alarming trend continuing to impact the first responder community.

Emergency Medical Services (EMS) personnel have also experienced worsening mental health since the beginning of the pandemic. A survey conducted by the Journal of Emergency Medical Services found that 88 percent of EMS providers feel more stressed compared to non-pandemic times. Additionally, 70 percent of respondents reported that their mental health is worse during the pandemic.

Like police officers, many EMS providers are considering a career change. The survey revealed that 33 percent of respondents were thinking about changing careers due to the pandemic.²⁸



Professional and Business Services

Burnout is the most common mental health challenge within the professional and business services sector. As mentioned earlier, many professional services workers transitioned to working remotely for the first time at the beginning of the pandemic. During the first months of the pandemic when most of the country was in lockdown and isolation, working irregular and longer hours became the norm for many.

A year later, employees are feeling more burned out than the year prior. A survey conducted by Ketchum revealed that 52 percent of financial and professional service industry employees feel more burned out than at the beginning of the pandemic. Financial obligations, being isolated from colleagues and their job, in general, are the top causes of burnout.²⁹

In the legal profession, 50 percent of employees reported experiencing burnout during the first quarter of 2021 according to a Bloomberg Law survey. A previous survey during the same quarter in 2020 reported 40 percent of employees were experiencing burnout.³⁰ Additionally, **41 percent of senior associates and two-thirds of junior- and mid-level associates reported a decline in their well-being.**

52 percent of financial and professional service industry employees feel more burned out than at the beginning of the pandemic.

In the finance sector, a Benenden Health survey uncovered that almost two-thirds of managers reported experiencing burnout at work due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The main causes of burnout were anxiety about the future, lack of sleep, increased demands from management and working longer hours.³¹



Education

The toll of the pandemic on education has been detrimental for educators and students alike. Like many other professions, teachers have been struggling with mental health long before the pandemic started. According to an American Federation of Teachers survey in 2015, 78 percent of teachers reported feeling physically and emotionally exhausted.³²

Teachers are exhausted, stressed and burned out. In a survey conducted by the EdWeek Research Center in March 2021, 84 percent of teachers reported that teaching is more stressful than before the pandemic.³³

Since the start of the pandemic, teachers (and students) have been asked to adjust to remote, hybrid and in-person teaching. Teachers in a hybrid or in-person environment also have the same fears as healthcare workers about transmitting COVID-19 to family members.

Like many other industries, teachers are also leaving or are considering leaving the profession. In a study conducted by RAND Corporation, nearly one-quarter of teachers said they were likely to leave the profession at the conclusion of the 2020-21 school year. This would more than triple the normal rate of attrition.

In higher education, the number of faculty potentially leaving the profession is far greater. According to a report from Fidelity Investments and The Chronicle of Higher Education, about 55 percent of college-level faculty are seriously considering a career change or retiring.³⁴ Burnout is the most common reason stated for why faculty members are leaving.

Nearly one-quarter of teachers said they were likely to leave the profession.

Students are also struggling through the pandemic. **In the BHS contact center, there has been an increase in the number of parents who are concerned about the well-being of their college-age children.** According to a BestColleges.com survey, over 90 percent of college students say that they have experienced negative mental health symptoms.³⁵

A study on the Effects of COVID-19 on College Students' Mental Health in the United States revealed that 71 percent of students felt an increase in stress and anxiety. Other negative effects included fear and worry about their health, difficulty concentrating, poor sleeping patterns and decreased social interaction.³⁶



STRATEGIES FOR ADDRESSING MENTAL HEALTH IN THE “COVID ERA”

As some organizations prepare to invite individuals back to the workplace, they must have a clear strategy for addressing mental health and well-being. **Decisions on returning to the office including mask and vaccination policies, and how those decisions are communicated will have an impact on the mental well-being of employees.** No matter what policies are enacted, employers need to understand that not everyone will be happy with their choices and must be ready to support their people.

The pandemic has created a unique opportunity for organizations to evolve their culture and create lasting change around mental well-being in the workplace.

Organizations that seize this opportunity will enjoy the benefits that come with a supportive culture including higher employee retention, greater morale and loyalty and improved performance and productivity.

Human Resources professionals are well-positioned to influence executive leadership on their organization’s ethical code. They can help leaders clarify organizational culture, identify values and push for initiatives and strategies that match.

Here are several strategies to address mental health in the new workplace.

Gain Executive Buy-In

Executive buy-in is crucial for moving the needle on organizational culture. Redefining organizational culture must start at the top. The expectations must be set by executive leadership for everyone to believe there is a commitment behind well-being initiatives. Human Resources can help executives understand the importance of building a culture of well-being and the impact it has on meeting business goals.

Executive leaders are dealing with an overwhelming number of decisions to ensure business goals are being met. At times, it can be difficult for them to fully understand what their employees are going through as they navigate

challenge after challenge. Many employees do not want to return to the office right now whether it's for health concerns, lack of childcare or eldercare support, or prefer to work from home.

Leveraging research and your people data makes a huge difference when trying to get leaders to buy in for any initiative.

Your organizational people and culture strategy is no different.

Organizations can learn a lot about their people and culture from retention rates and exit interviews. We are experiencing one of the biggest shifts in careers in recent memory. Loyal employees are taking on new opportunities or retiring early. Organizational culture could be a key reason why they are leaving. Exit interviews can provide a wealth of information including recurring themes that need to be addressed with leadership.

Pulse surveys are another great way to gauge what your employees value. It's important to give employees a forum to express opinions and concerns, especially when it comes to making decisions on how to best support them and their well-being.

Organizations that are challenged with limited resources can consider leveraging an outside expert or consultant who specializes in people and culture strategies. They will be able to conduct research, formulate a strategy, support their recommendations and demonstrate how to measure success.

Invest in Empathetic Leadership

Empathy is a trait that we all have, and it is strengthened the more we believe it. **Now is the perfect time for leaders and managers to start practicing empathy.**

Continually investing in empathetic leadership

will be a growing part of every leader's role. Empathy in leaders is directly correlated with decreasing an individual's chance of burnout and increasing their sense of belonging. This can contribute to overall loyalty and commitment to the organization.

As organizations create their return-to-office plans and visualize managing a hybrid workforce, they will need to rely on their leaders to manage in a flexible and empathetic manner.

Flexible, empathetic leaders help organizations reduce turnover and increase job satisfaction.

Leading in this manner requires organizations to place just as much focus on supporting their leaders as they do with their front-line staff.

Leaders must also understand that people don't want to be valued just for their productivity. They want to be seen as dynamic humans with rich lives outside of the workplace. **Organizations benefit when employees have full-spectrum well-being**, from being happy and challenged at work to being healthy outside of work.

Empathy and leadership allow managers to build strong relationships with their people. It creates a greater level of trust, making it more likely that an individual is open to sharing when something is impacting their well-being.

Strategies for empathetic leadership include using a person's name, maintaining eye contact or asking for input on a key initiative or project. Organizations that lack a foundational knowledge of the principles of empathetic leadership should consider investing in professional training on the topic.

Empathetic leadership gets results. It increases productivity, it improves morale, and it decreases

turnover. When leaders understand the needs of others and are aware of their feelings, they create a proactive and united work culture that thrives.

Provide Mental Health Training for Leadership and Managers

In this period of change and constant adjustments, we must look out for one another. Frontline managers play a critical role in supporting the well-being of their employees. They are going to be called on to lead the charge back into the workplace.

Leaders and managers must respond appropriately when an employee is in distress or needs help. This does not mean that it is the job of a manager to be a therapist. But managers need to be able to recognize when there is an issue, be comfortable addressing it and know the well-being resources available that can help.

Organizations must ensure that management-level employees are thoroughly trained to have critical conversations around mental health in the workplace.

Training should be part of a long-term strategy and scheduled at regular intervals to keep ensuring progress is being made in transforming organizational culture.

Carefully Consider Return to the Workplace Plans

While many workers never left the workplace during the pandemic, others have adjusted to working remotely for well over a year. Employers who are inviting their people back to work will have many challenges to overcome, including the impact of new variants of the virus, mask and vaccination requirements and willingness to return to the workplace.

When considering your return to the workplace plans, flexibility and clear communication are paramount in helping employees adjust once again to a new environment. The workplace that they are returning to will not be the same as the one they left.

Communicate the plan clearly for returning to the office, whether you expect employees to work a hybrid schedule or return full-time. The communication should detail when employees are expected to return, any new policies and safety protocols, changes to the office layout, and most importantly, the “why” behind the return to the workplace. Be very clear about the benefits of returning to the workplace, including building a connection with co-workers, better innovation and increased communication.

If your organization is returning to the workplace, managers will need to be trained on organizational expectations. Like your employees, they must understand why you are asking them to return to the office. They will need to have the answers to questions about the return to the workplace.

Understand and Prevent Burnout

Effectively managing and preventing burnout requires strategies that impact individuals, teams, and organizations overall. At their core, these strategies may represent a cultural change within the management of a company to set different expectations around setting a healthier

work-life balance. These strategies can be implemented at micro, mezzo, and macro levels.

Micro interventions include encouraging employees to take regular short breaks throughout their day. Helpful suggestions can include stretching for 1-2 minutes several times a day, getting up to get a glass of water, taking five deep breaths throughout the day, or aromatherapy.

Mezzo interventions can consist of encouraging employees to take non-working lunch breaks (yes, you don't have to work during lunch), setting meetings for 50 minutes instead of an hour, and setting boundaries around working during the evenings or weekends. Several large financial institutions even made headlines this year for declaring meeting-free Fridays as a step toward a healthier balance.

Macro interventions such as taking a vacation and not working (this is challenging for many workers) is a great way to recharge your batteries. Turn off the sync to your email on your phone and put the laptop away.

The obvious first step to make sure employees take advantage of the benefits of spending time away from the workplace is to encourage and celebrate it.

Training all employees on what burnout is, how to spot it and offering strategies for preventing it is a critical step in supporting employee well-being. But there is more that leaders and managers can do such as role modeling behaviors that prevent burnout. They must also continually evaluate the workload of their employees and make appropriate adjustments to prevent burnout.

These small steps can go a long way in mitigating the risk for burnout and towards creating a workplace culture that cultivates positive morale, employee engagement, and retention.

Invest in Mental Health Benefits

Offering robust mental health benefits is a great start to helping employees get the support they need. As organizations continue to navigate the pandemic era landscape, it will be important to offer well-being benefits that engage employees.

Now is a great time to evaluate or optimize mental well-being resources. If your organization offers an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), that may be a good start, but consider performing some due diligence to determine if your program is truly capable of meeting the moment we are in. Too many EAP offerings are low-touch and priced in a way that disincentivizes the provider from helping more of your employees. Others lead with app-based approaches that are woefully inadequate to address employees with moderate and severe issues and risk levels.

At a time when the **NAMI estimates that 21 percent of adults in the U.S. have a diagnosable mental issue**, your organization's leadership should ask whether the typical 1-3 percent true utilization rate* of a discount EAP is sufficiently bridging that gap. If not, consider seeking a mental health provider that provides a high-touch, human clinician-led approach and specializes in people and culture solutions. Guide+Thrive by BHS, for example, is a concierge mental health solution that begins with immersion in the customers' goals, benefits and culture and offers a high-quality care concierge approach for employees in need. The effectiveness of the Guide+Thrive approach is

Guide+Thrive's approach has a 13.2 percent true utilization rate across its portfolio of customers.

demonstrated by its 13.2 percent average true utilization rate across its portfolio of customers.

As you begin the return to the workplace, now is also a great time to consider investing in a dedicated on-site or virtual counselor. These individuals can be trained on the unique challenges of your organization and are a great option to help employees readjust to life in the office.

The Great Mental Health Awakening is providing us with an opportunity to change how we address mental health in the workplace. Employers can't afford to ignore the importance of creating a culture that embraces mental health and supports help-seeking.

As more individuals prioritize their mental health, now is the time for organizations to invest in developing a sustainable mental health strategy and high-quality resources.

**EAPs will often report simple website hits toward utilization to pad their statistics instead of those who reached out for help.*

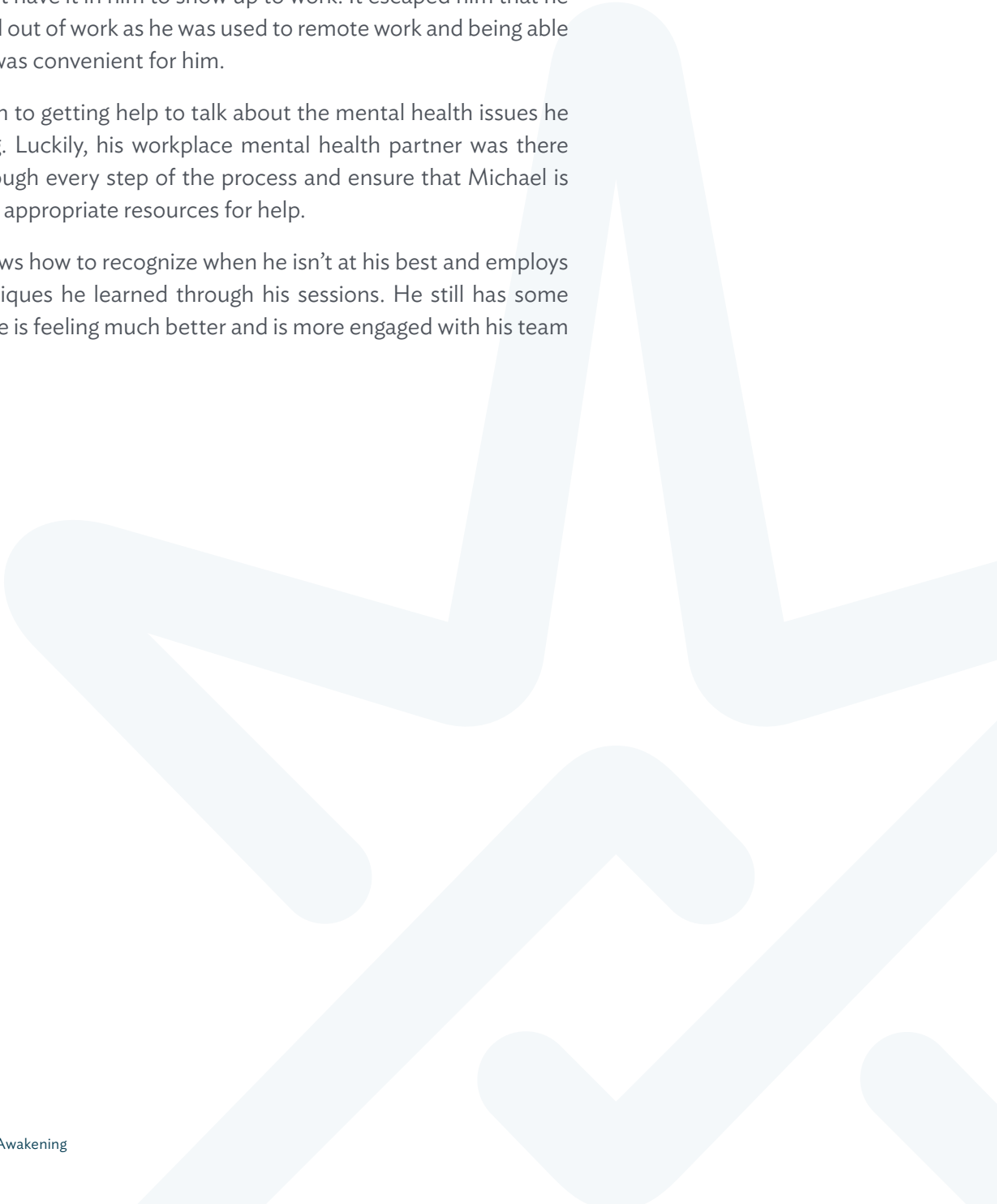
AFTERWORD

Michael didn't show up to work the next day after speaking with his manager about his recent struggles. Concerned about Michael's well-being, his manager contacted human resources and explained the situation.

With the support of their workplace mental health partner, they were able to contact Michael and verify his safety. Michael was in a bad place that day and just didn't have it in him to show up to work. It escaped him that he didn't need to call out of work as he was used to remote work and being able to log in when it was convenient for him.

Michael was open to getting help to talk about the mental health issues he was experiencing. Luckily, his workplace mental health partner was there to guide him through every step of the process and ensure that Michael is connected to the appropriate resources for help.

Michael now knows how to recognize when he isn't at his best and employs the coping techniques he learned through his sessions. He still has some tough days, but he is feeling much better and is more engaged with his team and his work.



About BHS

BHS, with our sister brand, Guide+Thrive, is a leading provider of workplace mental well-being solutions with over 38 years of experience. We provide frontline mental health support and navigation services to hundreds of corporate and government clients covering more than two million lives. Our high-quality, sustainable behavioral health care coordination solutions drive positive business outcomes for our customers.

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Over a 25-year career, Dawn has consulted with thousands of organizations on their people and culture and human performance strategies.

She places significant emphasis on the management of mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, PTSD, substance abuse, stress and other common problems that directly impact employees and their family members.

Dawn is a graduate of Western Maryland College (now McDaniel College) and earned a master's degree from the University of Maryland at Baltimore in Occupational Social Work, with a specialization in Employee Assistance Program administration. Dawn is the Chair of the Board of Directors at MedStar Union Memorial Hospital and leads the Quality, Safety and Professional Affairs Committee and Corporate Strategic Planning Committee. She also serves as a board member for the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Metropolitan Baltimore.

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Meghan began her career at BHS in 2004 as a Care Coordinator in the contact center. Since then, she has also held the roles of Contact Center Manager and EAP Director. In 2014, Meghan was promoted to Vice President of Clinical Services. In her role, she oversees all of BHS' program services.

In addition to holding the highest social work licensure, Meghan is also certified as a Clinical Supervisor and Field Instructor for undergraduate and graduate programs and has a certification in Critical Incident Stress Management.

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