

MANAGING WORKPLACE  
MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

# Proactive strategies needed to address growing mental health challenges at work

*ESIS' Heads of its Medical Program and Integrated Absence Management practices provide insights into suggested strategies*

## Mental health is taking an increasing toll on employees and employers alike.

As a result of conditions such as depression and anxiety, employees are missing more than 100 million workdays per year, resulting in an estimated [\\$47.6 billion in lost productivity](#). These estimates do not reflect the impact that mental health also has on the pace of recovery from work-related injuries and illnesses.

Similarly, in a [National Alliance on Mental Illness/Ipsos survey](#) earlier this year, 36% of respondents noticed their mental health suffers because of work demands. Burnout is playing a major role. This survey also showed that 52% of employees felt burned out in the past year because of their job, while 37% reported feeling so overwhelmed it made it hard to perform their job.

There are also implications for employee retention, as about 30% of employees under age 50 in the NAMI/Ipsos survey reported that they considered quitting because of work's impact on their mental health. This compounds productivity loss and risks spreading overwork to other team members.

## How employers can take control of mental health risks

Many employers are now recognizing the correlation of mental health and its impact in the workplace. According to a [Gallup survey](#) released in late 2022, 40% of employees noted that their work had a negative effect on their mental health – 47% for workers under age 30.

Facing these daunting trends, it's more important than ever for employers to get proactive and take meaningful steps to create an environment that supports employee well-being. Key strategies include:

**Enhancing mental health benefits and resources** – Ensure that employees and their family members have access to affordable mental health care services, either through insurance coverage or other employee assistance programs that may include confidential counseling services or helplines. In a 2023 [American Psychological Association/Harris Poll survey](#), 43% of employees noted that their employer offered health insurance with coverage for mental health and substance use disorders, while 29% said their employer offered employee assistance programs.

**Promoting awareness and training** – Offer training programs for managers and employees on how to recognize signs of mental health issues, have supportive conversations, destigmatize seeking help, and create a mentally healthy work environment.

**Supporting work-life balance and offering wellness programs** – Encourage boundaries between employees' work and personal lives, discourage excessive overtime or overwork, and offer flexible work arrangements if possible. Emphasize self-care and provide related resources for stress management and relaxation techniques. Offer wellness programs that promote physical and emotional well-being through such activities as mindfulness exercises, fitness memberships and nutrition workshops.

Encouraging employees to take their earned vacations is also key in supporting



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a balanced life. A recent [Harvard Business Review article](#) clearly articulates the impact on well-being that a vacation can bring. The University of Pittsburgh's Mind-Body Center found that taking vacation increases positive emotions and reduces depression.

### **Claims management approaches can make a difference in outcomes**

Beyond their efforts to create a supportive environment, when these areas start impacting employee leave requests or workers' compensation claims, employers should partner with a trusted third-party claim administrator (TPA) to apply expertise in data analysis and case management. Through their skilled approach, TPAs will provide help to employees on leave, ensuring that they utilize appropriate mental health resources and return to work as soon as they are able. Administrators can often alert employers to emerging trends in claims data, which can be shared with their health insurer or pharmacy provider for possible proactive programs to address them.

TPAs can also identify opportunities to bridge the gap between an employer's own mental health resources that may make it easier for employees to navigate. For example, a team within the human resources department is often responsible for employee benefits and disability leaves, while a team in the finance department

typically oversees workers compensation insurance. In the NAMI/Ipsos survey noted earlier, 25% of employees were unsure whether their employer offered mental health coverage, highlighting the need for better awareness of available resources.

When employees are on leave, whether solely due to mental health conditions or those they may experience during recovery from a work-related injury, the following approaches have proven effective in restoring employees' health while reducing time away from work.

**Acknowledging injury impact on mental health** – This first step is critical, and more employers are connecting the importance of providing support and care surrounding all aspects of the injury, not just tied to physical recovery.

**Skilled case manager review** – Determining whether employees can work and getting them connected to the right mental health resources as early as possible are critical. Your TPA should have highly experienced case managers who specialize in mental health and can evaluate needs throughout the claim to direct employees to the most appropriate care services for their specific conditions and severity level – whether that's in-person therapy or simply a referral to EAP resources.

**Communication and encouraging leadership** – Maintaining regular communication with employees on

leave can help them feel connected to the workplace and supported in their recovery. Managers and leaders should check in with these employees and demonstrate empathy, provide encouragement, and offer resources to assist employees during their absence and return to work.

**Accommodations and support** – Offering accommodations tailored to employees' mental health needs can facilitate their return to work. This may include flexible work schedules, modified duties, workspace adjustments, or temporary reassignments as appropriate.

**Gradual return to work** – Allowing employees to gradually increase their work hours and responsibilities as they recover can reduce the likelihood of relapse or exacerbation of symptoms. Employers can collaborate with employees and healthcare providers to develop customized return-to-work plans based on individual needs and abilities.

While the challenges that mental health issues pose for employers are substantial, taking proactive steps to improve the work environment and manage leave claims effectively offers the best opportunity to minimize impacts for employees and the organization, while improving overall health and well-being.