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## Mental Health Care in the Workplace: Why We Need It

By Dr. Gretchen Moran Marsh, Ph.D.

May 2, 2022 – Unilever is a century-old company headquartered in London. Employing 167,000 people worldwide, it produces goods from Dove soap to Hellman’s mayonnaise. Although its origins date to the 1800s, Unilever takes a 21<sup>st</sup>-century approach to its employees’ mental health.

Unilever has created a culture where mental health struggles carry no stigma. Workers don’t have to hide their mental care any more than they would a herniated disc. The company brings in speakers, makes mental health support readily available, runs in-house workshops on topics such as mindfulness and sleep, and invests heavily in improving its employees’ overall wellbeing. Unfortunately, few companies approach mental health the way Unilever does.

Twenty percent of adults have a mental health problem at any given time, and half of all adults will face a mental health problem in their lifetime. Most of those people—between 50 and 60 percent—never receive treatment. And, they take these illnesses and struggles to work with them.

When companies don’t prioritize employee mental health, employers hurt themselves. Mental health problems become work-related problems: decreased productivity, increased absenteeism, poorer communication among coworkers, more cases of both short-term and long-term disability, increased turnover, and difficulty attracting new talent. These consequences cost the global economy a trillion dollars per year.

Mental health treatment at times has come with a stigma. Companies too often have not known how to address this stigma, and may even unintentionally contribute to it. Frequently when businesses do offer services, employees are reluctant to use them.

More employers need to start using a multimodal approach to mental health care. First, they can decrease the stigma by having company leaders share their own experiences. When those at the top reveal that they have struggled with anxiety or sought therapy, the rest of the company feels safer addressing their own needs. Executives also improve the climate by modeling self-care: working

reasonable hours, taking mid-day breaks to walk outside and openly making use of the company's support systems.

Companies may want to consider providing on-the-clock opportunities for people to meet in peer support groups. Currently, employees' anxiety is worsened by the sense that they are going through it alone. Support groups are highly effective ways of eliminating that loneliness and encouraging healthy conversations.

Employers also could invite guest experts to teach techniques employees can use throughout the day to improve their mental health. These tools, if taught well and practiced regularly, will lead to less burnout and more resilience in the office.

Depending on the company's size, other strategies may include offering assistance to people struggling to find services or even providing an in-house therapist.

There is another population that businesses need to take into consideration: their employees' children. Prior to the pandemic, rates of anxiety and depression were on the rise in the young. Now, because of COVID, those numbers are skyrocketing, causing U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy to declare a mental health crisis among youth.

On average, it takes fifty days for a person to find mental health treatment for their child because there aren't enough mental health professionals. Parents struggling to find services for their children bring this stress to work with them. Companies who truly are addressing their employees' mental wellbeing will remember to serve the whole family. So, what's in it for the companies themselves?

According to an independent evaluation of company mental health programs conducted by Deloitte, for every dollar they invest in mental health initiatives, they will see a four dollar return in improved productivity. Absenteeism will decrease, and employee retention will increase. This is especially true among younger workers, who prioritize their own mental health and are less afraid to say so.

Psychologists are not new to the office; companies have been hiring them for a hundred years. Historically, they critiqued interviewees and evaluated executive candidates for leadership potential. At times, these industrial organizational psychologists have assessed workers' interests and abilities to identify where they would thrive.

In addition to industrial organizational psychologists, today's businesses should bring in clinical psychologists. These mental health professionals can be given a new role: instead of assisting in the workforce's selection and placement, they can help workers improve their mental health and teach them strategies to prevent mental illness in the future.

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