



HEALTHWORKS
By Carolinas HealthCare System

Good for Business: Focusing on Mental Health in the Workplace

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Reducing the Stigma: Creating a Culture of Wellness at Work

When Annette Nash, HR Director for Charlotte Eye Ear Nose & Throat Associates (CEENTA), sat across from a fellow employee -- after attending a "Mental Health First Aid" training session -- she realized right then how valuable the session had been. "I was able to use the skills I learned to recognize the symptoms of a significant mental health issue," she says. "Then I was able to help my colleague remain calm and find help."

Nash had recently attended a [Carolinas HealthCare System HEALTHWORKS](#) Mental Health First Aid training session, which is offered to employers free of charge. This training helps employees and business leaders assist others who may be experiencing mental health difficulties or even a full-blown mental health crisis. The goal of the program is to help participants learn risk factors and warning signs for mental health and addiction concerns, and strategies for making fast and appropriate suggestions for help. The course covers anxiety disorders, depression, panic attacks, psychotic disorders and substance use disorders.

"As a result of the large number of recent, well-publicized national tragedies, companies in the US are paying much greater attention to mental health," says Dr. John Santopietro, Chief Clinical Officer of Behavioral Health for Carolinas HealthCare System.

Mental health professionals estimate that roughly one out of every five American adults will experience a mental health issue in a given year. With more than 43 million people in this category, there is a significant chance these issues will be shown regularly in the workplace. "Unfortunately," says Dr. Santopietro, "the longstanding stigma associated with behavioral health hinders open discussion that would benefit employees and employers alike. Mental Health First Aid programs are a proven way to reduce the stigma and empower more people to identify co-workers who are at-risk."



Larry S. Boress, President and CEO of the Midwest Business Group on Health, and Executive Director of National Association of Worksite Health Centers, echoes this sentiment. “Employers have recognized that the mental status of their workforce plays a major role in the health, productivity and safety – and bottom line - of their businesses,” he says.

A small investment in awareness and identification training can reduce productivity losses and have a measureable impact on the company’s healthcare spend.

The Economic Burden

According to the Partnership for Workplace Mental Health, mental illness and substance abuse cost employers an estimated \$80-to-\$100 billion in direct and indirect costs annually. Prompt and effective treatments are important for both the employee and the company. They result in lower total medical costs, increased productivity and presenteeism, lower absenteeism and decreased disability costs.



Depression alone has been named by The World Health Organization (WHO) as the number one disease burden for the economy worldwide. According to WHO, mental disorders also have serious economic consequences: depression was estimated to cost at least \$800 billion in 2010 in lost economic output, which is expected to more than double by 2030.

Writing for the [American Journal of Managed Care](#), Dr. Santopietro noted that co-morbid mental health conditions (conditions that accompany another medical diagnosis) can double or triple the total cost of care. Most of that cost stems from inpatient hospitalizations and emergency room visits. Boress agrees. “To effectively address all chronic conditions and injuries,” he says, “you must address any related mental and behavioral health challenges.”

In 2015, HEALTHWORKS hosted more than 150 business leaders in Charlotte for a seminar on [Workplace Mental Health](#). The speaker was [nationally recognized behavioral health expert David Covington](#). He shared the importance of understanding the impact of mental health on employee health. He emphasized that businesses need to understand how that affects their healthcare spend. “The more we focus on our employees’ perception of making a contribution and their connectedness to others, the stronger the productivity and financial return we are going to see as well,” Says Covington.

Ahead of the Curve

In addition to helping employers with Mental Health First Aid, Carolinas HealthCare System has trained more than 5,000 individuals in the Charlotte area, including teachers, clergy, athletic trainers and law enforcement officers.

The system has also taken an innovative approach by integrating mental health into routine patient care at some of its 200 primary care practices. More than 5,000 patients have been helped, to date, utilizing this new model of care. Mental health professionals working off-site connect directly with patients and clinical care teams using computers, mobile phones and tablets. This type of “virtual care” has reduced the number of inpatient admissions and reduced length-of-stay for those who do require hospitalization, according to Dr. Santopietro.

A Change in Culture

More and more, business leaders are seeing emotional health as a top priority, something that is basic to the physical health of employees and important for the company’s financial health.

“The goal is we want healthy employees because we know that makes for a much more productive work environment. And, we have patients to take care of, so we want employees who are in a really good place,” says Nash.

Companies such as Belk, Rowan County, Charlotte Pipe & Foundry and J.R. Cole are just a few of the organizations that have made a strong commitment to this aspect of employee health through HEALTHWORKS’ Mental Health First Aid training.

“It’s not enough to simply know that behavioral health issues are going to impact a certain percentage of the workforce,” says Dr. Santopietro. “It’s important to identify the illnesses in question, understand their impact and provide a workplace that fosters help.”

