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Employers Grapple with Surge in Mental Health Issues

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More employees are [struggling with mental health conditions - \(<https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/pages/mental-health.aspx> \)](https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/pages/mental-health.aspx), and, as a result, employers are fielding more requests for accommodations and dealing with increased absenteeism. Pandemic-related stress at work and at home was a significant part of this trend during the last two years.

Under the federal Americans with Disabilities Act and other nondiscrimination laws, most employers must provide reasonable accommodations to qualified employees with mental health conditions.

Forty-three percent of employers have seen a spike in reasonable accommodation requests related to mental health since the coronavirus pandemic started, [according to a new survey - \(<https://www.fisherphillips.com/news-insights/fp-flash-survey-reveals-majority-employers-workers-mental-health-issues.html> \)](https://www.fisherphillips.com/news-insights/fp-flash-survey-reveals-majority-employers-workers-mental-health-issues.html) from law firm Fisher Phillips.

"We are seeing an increase of employees requesting remote work or a hybrid schedule to accommodate their anxiety and depression," said Emily Litzinger, a Fisher Phillips attorney in Louisville,

Ky. "Additionally, there have been an uptick of requests relating to bringing an emotional support animal to the workplace to help ease the stress related to in-person work."

Accommodations don't necessarily break the bank. Almost half of employers said their telework, hybrid and other flexible schedules are helping to address their workers' mental health problems.

"Reasonable accommodations are almost always inexpensive fixes that get your workers on the right track and lead them to be more productive than they otherwise would have been," said Raeann Burgo, a Fisher Phillips attorney based in Pittsburgh.

Effective Steps to Address Mental Health

Burgo recommended the following strategies for employers:

- Ask employees what they are struggling with in the workplace.
- Ensure that mental health resources are easily accessible to workers.
- Remind workers about the mental health resources that are available.
- Create a work culture and environment that fosters positive mental health.

"Employees are more likely to stay in their job if they have personalized, confidential mental health benefits," Burgo said. "Employers should think of the mental health safety of their employees just as they think of their physical safety."

Eighty-eight percent of HR professionals believe offering mental health services can increase productivity, while 86 percent believe doing so can boost retention, according to a [2022 survey by SHRM](#).

Meanwhile, 73 percent of employers offer mental health coverage and 73 percent provide employee assistance programs, according to SHRM. But 41 percent of HR professionals feel their organization does not offer enough mental health support to employees.

Employers can also make sure mental health is not a taboo topic at the workplace. At least 59 percent of companies are openly discussing mental health and well-being in the workplace, Fisher Phillips reported.

"Don't get scared away from starting a companywide conversation on mental health because it may slightly increase your chances of receiving an accommodation request," Litzinger said. "As long as your managers are trained to route such requests to HR, your organization will be all the better for it."

Employees may be reluctant to discuss their mental health struggles at work, so managers should let them know it won't lead to negative backlash.

While progress has certainly been made in the past few years, especially given the dire impact the pandemic has had on overall mental health, there is still an unfortunate stigma associated with mental

health issues that employers should take specific actions to mitigate against," said Marissa Mastroianni, an attorney with Cole Schotz.

SHRM RESOURCE HUB PAGE

Mental Health - (<https://www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/Pages/mental-health.aspx>)

Increased Costs for Employers

Mental illness has a significant cost for employers, not just in medical claims but also in absenteeism, turnover and presenteeism. In the Fisher Phillips survey, 51 percent of employers said they have fielded reports of burnout or mental fatigue, while 46 percent said they faced higher turnover rates and 34 percent said they faced higher absenteeism rates during the last two years.

"Employees who are unwell are more likely to call in sick and have a decrease in productivity. Absenteeism is an ongoing result of burnout from stress, anxiety and depression. Additionally, there has also been an increase in workers who are parents or caregivers and who have had to take time off from work to handle their child's mental health issues," Litzinger noted.

However, this trend has not necessarily translated to more legal battles for employers. Only 12 percent of employers faced an increase in legal claims or demands related to mental health in the last two years, Fisher Phillips reported.

In general, it's a mistake for employers to ignore or avoid the topic of mental health.

"This is an issue that the workforce is facing across industries, and it is key for employers to get ahead of the issue by taking proactive steps to manage employee wellness," Litzinger said. "This includes creating relevant mental health policies and ensuring managers and supervisors are trained to spot mental health issues and provide resources to employees to manage their stress or anxiety."

Leah Shepherd is senior legal editor at SHRM.