The Group Solutions Sit-Down

Workplace Disability Prevention Mini-Series: Mental Health

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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SPEAKERS

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Kristen 00:07

Workplace injuries happen every day. From sprains, strains, and tears to migraines and chronic pain, workers in all occupations and industries are exposed to a broad range of injury risks. And each year, these risks leave millions of workers unable to do their jobs on a short-term or long-term basis. In fact, according to the National Safety Council, there were 105,000,000 days lost due to work-related injuries in 2019. Which cost businesses $53.9 billion in wage and productivity losses alone. The good news is that through workplace disability prevention and identifying at-risk employees before a disability occurs, we can help prevent disabilities or reduce their severity and shorten the duration of an absence. I'm Kristen Osburn, a marketing strategist with New York Life Group Benefit Solutions. In this five part mini-series, I sit down with Cassie Mills, a certified rehabilitation counselor and ergonomic specialist with New York Life Group Benefit Solutions, to discuss workplace disability prevention and the key steps that employers can take to help their employees stay healthy and productive at work. In this episode, we'll be focusing on Mental Health.

Cassie, I'm so glad to have you back with us for this important episode.

Cassie 01:39

Thank you. I am really happy to be here today.

Kristen 01:41

You know, Cassie, I am really glad we're talking about mental health today specifically, it's such an important topic. And really, it's something that I think is often shied away from in general. But I'm especially glad that

we're talking about it in relation to the workplace, because I think that the workplace might be one of, if not the, most important environment to be discussing mental health. And yet, unfortunately, I think that it's often the last place that it's actually discussed.

Cassie 02:14

You know, Kristen, you're absolutely right, it is incredibly important to start the workplace conversations about mental health. So in a Mind Share Partners 2019 Mental Health at Work Report, they found that 61% of workers said their productivity was affected by their mental health.

Kristen 02:35

Wow, wow.

Cassie 02:36

That is huge. So just imagine, let's take an example of, an employee who has been diagnosed with panic disorder and suffers from panic attacks during work. What this might look like in the office is he might have recently run out of meetings dripping with sweat. And now working from home, he's really struggling every time he has to turn on his camera for virtual meetings. If his workplace is an environment where he doesn't feel comfortable talking about his panic disorder, the situation could become so much worse... he might not seek treatment, which could cause his performance to plummet. So without mental health awareness and open discussions, his supervisors or managers might just see that as a performance issue and might consider firing him. But in a workplace focused on mental health and reducing stigma, where check-ins are not just focused on projects are getting done, numbers, but also on the person and their overall well-being, the situation looks very different. They're able to work together to create a plan that would improve not only the employee's health and confidence, but boost his productivity and the employers bottom line.

Kristen 03:52

Oh, well, Cassie, I know in your example, which was incredibly helpful, and I think that's exactly what we're talking about here today is shifting that environment and going from a workplace where someone doesn't feel comfortable to where they do. So, mental health is a pretty broad term. You mentioned again, panic disorders... Can you help me maybe define mental health and provide some examples of what types of conditions that might include?

Cassie 04:21

Absolutely. So according to the National Alliance on Mental illness, which you may have heard be called NAMI, a mental health condition is defined as a medical condition that disrupts a person's thinking, feeling mood, ability to relate to others, and daily functioning. So if you think about somebody with a medical disorder, like diabetes, which is a disorder of the pancreas, mental illnesses are medical conditions that often result in a diminished capacity for coping with ordinary demands in life. And some of these mental health conditions might look like ADHD, autism, anxiety, eating disorders, substance abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder, bipolar and even postpartum depression.

Kristen 05:14

Yeah, Cassie, I actually it makes me think of, I recently read an article on languishing, which was something I had never heard of before. But it's what they were calling the neglected middle child of mental health and how it's become this common thing. And kind of known as this middle place between wellness and diagnosed mental illness that people experience with this blah feeling kind of the sense of stagnation or emptiness. And it really was this a-ha moment for me. It really resonated because I too had been feeling off recently, just kind of not feeling myself and struggling to identify what exactly it was that I was experiencing. So I was asking myself, you know, like, am I just tired? Am I not drinking enough water? Am I, you know, not practicing proper ergonomics and I've got some stress and tension and headaches? And I think, actually, that can often

be some of the initial feelings with mental health conditions, or just some of those feeling off and having questions of like, what is this? So, you know, especially with the pandemic, Cassie, and I know, languishing was something that they talked about really being common because of COVID-19 and what people have experienced, I would love to hear if you know any information or statistics around how mental health conditions have increased because of COVID-19.

Cassie 06:45

Absolutely, Kristen. So, you know, that's really something I've heard actually a lot about. And it makes sense. COVID has been categorized as a traumatic event. And that's something that can have a major impact on mental health. We've even seen individuals who reported not having mental health challenges before the pandemic are now reporting having bouts of anxiety and depression. The pandemic had significant consequences, both physically and mentally. And actually, according to one CDC report, which surveyed adults across the US in late June of 2020 31% of respondents reported symptoms of anxiety or depression, 13% reported having started or increased substance use, 26% reported stress related symptoms, and 11% reported having serious thoughts of suicide in the past 30 days. Not to mention, we really won't see all of the numbers related to the impacts for probably another couple of years. So what we do know was that according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and their 2019 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, in 2019 there was an estimated 51.5 million adults age 18 or older with any mental illness, representing 20.6% of all U.S. adults. So compare that to the recent CDC report were 31% of respondents reported symptoms of anxiety or depression. So this is really important for employers to know and understand given these statistics, and according to the Integrated Benefits Institute and their 2019 study on health and productivity, looking at depression and mood disorders, for every 1000 us employees, mood disorders in the workforce cost about $324,000 in excess healthcare treatments and lost work time.

Kristen 08:51

That's huge. Wow. So Cassie, we know that something has to be done. And mental health in the workplace has to be addressed. And not just once we get in, you know, future stats from COVID impacts and not waiting until it blows up in the news, but it really has to be addressed today, which is why I'm so glad we're talking about this. So Cassie, what can employers do? Give us some tips and things to think about for how we can all create safer and healthier workplaces.

Cassie 09:24

So Kristen, I think the biggest thing is to start the conversation around mental health challenges, make it the norm like you would with somebody with a broken leg or a bad back. So if somebody had a broken leg, their manager would talk with them about how we can make adjustments in you performing your job, what type of accommodation do you might need and helping you perform your job or you know, just kind of how everything is going with your broken leg. And I think a lot of times those are visible things that people can see and feel comfortable asking about because those are really kind of a norm, it's normal to ask about, oh, how's your leg doing or how's your back doing. But the mental health challenges are kind of almost looked at as those silent challenges because it's not something you can physically see. So a good place to start is when managers and employees meet for a 1 to 1, start that conversation more about how are you really doing, instead of about, tell me about where you are in your projects, where your numbers at, things like that. Really take the time to ask them how they're doing. And if you get an "okay" or "fine", which most people are going to say, maybe say, "timeout, let's start over. Let me tell you about how I'm doing" and really open up and give a little bit to that employee and then ask them, "So I really want to know how you're doing mentally." And I think by doing that will really help continue to break down that stigma in the workplace. Another great thing would be a training course that's designed for HR managers and frontline supervisors so that they feel more comfortable and having these conversations with their employees around mental health. So an example of this is Mental Health First Aid. And what this program is, it's similar, you're hearing first aid, so you're like, I'm going to render aid to an employee. This program is not designed to have employers diagnose or treat, what it

is there is just what it suggests first aid is making employees feel comfortable understanding about how to start the conversation, how to provide resources and things for individuals that are struggling with mental health. Maybe somebody doesn't know what type of care is out there, or who they should go see. So that loops into providing, you know, good access and care information to employees. That could be what type of access is out in their local community, what the employer has to offer, such as EAP. And I think when it comes to EAP, really explaining that it is confidential, that you as the manager, an employer, do not get any information back from that at all. I think that's really important. I think most employees are scared to open up about any mental health challenges for fear it might get back to their employer. Another great idea is starting mental health advocates groups. Maybe it's an ERG group, or maybe it's a group within a certain office location that's made up of managers and supervisors and employees. Maybe they provide like a panel to ask questions about mental health. What are other companies doing around mental health so that they can get ideas and help implement these and also help advocate for, really, that company to be open around decreasing the stigma around mental health. And last, but certainly not least, provide accommodations for mental health challenges. So like we said, in the broken leg, what type of accommodation could I provide for you to help you in performing your job, those same type of ideas can be applied to mental health. So think about if somebody was maybe struggling with some anxiety while they're at work, maybe providing an accommodation to give them a couple more breaks throughout their day, maybe there's a private room that they can go and practice some deep breathing some meditation or teaching them how to understand mindfulness and what that means in the workplace. It also could include like giving them, you know, time off on a certain day to actually go to counseling. Maybe it's during the day when their counselor can meet. So looking at things like that from a different standpoint and how that might help the employee while they're at work.

Kristen 13:52

Well, Cassie, I know that we could probably talk for hours and hours about this topic. I'm really passionate about it, I know you are as well, and, I mean, I think the bottom line is that the most valuable resource for any employer is their people, their employees. And so we want people to be healthy and well, to be able to be their most productive selves. And actually, I would love to have you back on the show again for us to be able to dive into this deeper, Cassie. So I'm hoping that maybe you'll come back.

Cassie 14:25

Absolutely. I would love to come back and talk about this more.

Kristen 14:29

Great Well, for now, thank you Cassie. Thank you again for being here, for creating important dialogue around this topic, for starting the conversation, and for giving us some key things to think about and actual steps that employers can take, and that we can all personally think about and bring to conversations in the workplace. Were really all better for it and everything that you shared.

Listeners, make sure you also tune in to the other four parts of our workplace disability prevention series where Cassie continues to connect the dots, provide information, practical tips and tools on the different disability issues that employers and employees are facing, such as musculoskeletal disorders, ergonomics, accommodations and migraines. And these are all things that are critical, important parts of our larger discussion on helping employees stay healthy and productive at work.

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