



Employing a Holistic Behavioral Health Solution for Your Employees

A New Approach for a New Normal

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As is often the case during times of crises, systemic weaknesses are brought to the forefront. Such is the case with the COVID-19 pandemic and mental health care in the U.S. Loss of jobs, isolation, social distancing, loss of loved ones, and fear of becoming infected are just a few of the issues that have contributed to a massive increase in reports of mental health conditions. More than 50% of adults in the U.S. say that the pandemic has negatively impacted their mental health, and the number of Americans reporting anxiety and depression quadrupled during the pandemic.¹ What the pandemic has brought to light is that our healthcare system is sorely lacking in affordable, convenient, timely access to behavioral health care.



According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), “nearly half of the 60 million adults and children living with mental health conditions in the United States go without treatment.”² The reasons, according to NAMI, are numerous. Finding a mental health provider who is accepting new patients or who takes a patient’s insurance is especially challenging.³ In one survey, 28% of individuals receiving mental health care have had to use an out-of-network provider.⁴ This adds yet another barrier to access.

Mental health issues skyrocketed during the pandemic and continue to remain high compared to pre-pandemic levels.⁵

The Impact on Employers and Employees

The impact of untreated behavioral health issues on employers is considerable. For example, the average employer incurs around \$15,000 in costs for every employee experiencing mental health issues.⁶ Behavioral health issues are also associated with chronic conditions and can increase an individual's likelihood to use drugs, causing even greater challenges for both the employer and the employee.⁷

- **35%** - Reduction in employee productivity due to unresolved depression.⁸
- **\$15,000** – Annual employer-incurred costs for every employee experiencing mental health issues.⁹
- **\$4,783** – Cost of days lost per employee per year due to mental health distress.¹⁰
- **\$5,733** – Cost of turnover per employee per year due to mental distress.¹¹
- **3.5X** – Employees with mental health issues are 3.5 times likely to have substance use disorders.¹²

In many cases, stress of the workplace itself can impact an employee's mental health. A 2021 survey by Mental Health America (MHA) found that 85% of workers believe their workplace impacts their mental wellbeing.¹³ According to the National Safety Council, "Chronic exposure to stressful workplace conditions can lead to a variety of mental health conditions, including experiencing depression, anxiety, an inability to concentrate and emotional exhaustion."¹⁴

An integrated approach

Traditional employer offerings are often "carved up" into different benefit programs. They may have one program for behavioral health, another for diabetes, another for obesity, and so on. This puts the burden on the employee to figure out which programs to use. On top of this, research shows that various conditions, like depression and chronic diseases like rheumatoid arthritis, are often connected.¹⁵ In other words, to effectively treat the chronic condition, the employee's depression needs to be addressed at the same time.

An integrated approach to employee health and wellness ensures that mental health challenges are addressed in concert with physical and chronic health challenges.

What Patients Want in a Behavioral Health Program¹⁶

- Mental health offerings tailored to the employee
- Affordable mental health care benefits premiums
- A supportive culture that embraces mental health care
- Better work-life balance with flexible work arrangements
- Adequate paid time off, including maternal and paternal benefits

More forward-thinking companies realize the shortcomings of traditional behavioral health benefits and are choosing to implement programs that are more holistic and proactive in nature. They realize that every dollar spent on addressing behavioral health issues delivers value that benefits not just their bottom lines, but also the entire wellbeing of the employee—mental and physical alike. For example, multiple research studies have shown a close connection between behavioral health issues and chronic conditions—especially conditions associated with chronic pain.¹⁷ That's why a holistic approach is more effective; it proactively addresses behavioral and chronic conditions together.

Components of a Holistic Behavioral Health Program

- Holistic approach to each member's physical and mental health needs
- Depression screening for every member
- Customized care plan based on each member's mental health outcomes assessment
- Increased access to care and shorter waiting times for appointments
- Care managers with specialized training in behavioral health
- Utilization review to ensure members are leveraging all available services

Care managers are key to a successful holistic behavioral health program. These nurses act as health coaches to help support employees along their wellness journey; they become the quarterback of the care team to ensure the employee is receiving the appropriate care—both mental and physical. They help explain medical terminology and educate the employee about their condition while also encouraging accountability and care plan adherence.

A holistic approach to healthcare includes addressing lifestyle behaviors that impact an individual's health—ensuring they understand the interconnectedness of mental and physical health.

Success story

A 64-year-old man with Stage IV prostate cancer was in treatment for chemotherapy on an outpatient basis. The man was also struggling with depression and disabling foot and back pain. He was at high risk for complications and disease progression.

The man received benefits through his employer-sponsored Conifer VBC Personal Health Management Program. Mental health screening and assistance are vital parts of the individualized assessment performed by Conifer's Personal Health Nurse (PHN) when engaging a member. Conifer VBC follows The National Institute of Mental Health's recommendation and screens every member for depression using the Patient Health Questionnaire 2 (PHQ-2). This occurs during the initial phone call and continues while the member is engaged. A positive screening test will trigger immediate referrals and care coordination by the PHN. The integration of behavioral health and physical medicine is highly consistent with Conifer's holistic management philosophy.

As part of the program, the man's PHN followed him through his treatment, coordinating with his providers and reinforcing the treatment plan with the member. The PHN also provided local resources for mental health support, and coordinated with the man's care team to obtain behavioral health and podiatry referrals.

With the integrated Conifer program, the man has had no emergency room visits or hospitalizations following his chemotherapy treatment. He is back to working full time and reports that he is feeling upbeat and ready to beat his cancer diagnosis. With his renewed outlook, he continues to enjoy his family and is actively pursuing his favorite outdoor activities, including hunting and fishing.

For every dollar spent on treating and preventing mental health issues, employers receive a \$4 return on investment.¹⁸

A new approach for a new normal

The pandemic has taken its toll on the mental health of citizens around the world—a toll that many experts believe will continue for years to come.¹⁹ The traditional, reactive approach to employee behavioral health of the past is not sufficient for our new reality. Employers need to reevaluate their own approach and consider a more holistic offering. Partnering with healthcare experts like Conifer is a great place to start.

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