

Health Care

Worker mental health problems spike due to Covid's ongoing effects, experts say

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The pandemic has forced many of the region's mental health service providers to think quick on their feet — especially [Marni Stahlman](#) and her team at the Mental Health Association of Central Florida near downtown Orlando.

Critical services that were offered face-to-face by the association — such as free psychiatric services for depression, anxiety and other behavioral care conditions — have had to shift to telehealth. Luckily, the association was able to service existing patients and many new individuals needing help at a time when many people are stressed with the ongoing pandemic.

Just north in Longwood, phones are ringing off the hook for [Eric Welch](#) and his staff at the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Greater Orlando. Support services are needed more than ever, said Welch, the group's executive director.

Unfortunately, it's a problem that persists. That's because Covid-19's harm to work/life balance for many employees has been deep, causing concerns for the rise in mental health disorders and even suicidal thoughts.

The pandemic forced many people to work from home, businesses to cut jobs or even resulted in the tragedy of seeing friends, family and colleagues fall ill or die from the virus. All of that has led to a growing feeling of isolation, depression, financial insecurity and an ever-growing awareness of one's mortality.

There's also a cost to the national workforce's productivity. Employees with unresolved depression experience a 35% reduction in productivity, contributing to a loss to the U.S. economy of \$210.5 billion a year in absenteeism, reduced productivity and medical costs, according to a McLean Hospital report citing data from the American Psychiatric Association.

ANXIETY AND DESPAIR

The pandemic clearly had a negative effect on mental health, showed a February study from the Kaiser Family Foundation, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit on national health issues. About four in 10 adults in the U.S. have reported symptoms of anxiety or depressive disorder during the Covid-19 crisis, up from one in 10 adults who reported these symptoms from January to June 2019, the report said.

One of the big factors causing the concerns is the uncertainty on when life may return to normal, said Stahlman, president and CEO of the Mental Health Association of Central Florida.

“This second wave of the pandemic has compounded intense feelings of anxiety and despair in a world that is no longer predictable and safe due to high rates of unemployment and homelessness coupled with traumatic memories of surviving one’s own brush with Covid-19 or the death of a partner, parent or loved one. The personal, social and economic burden of human suffering, treatment costs, disability compensation and productivity losses related to mental health problems in normal times have been major public health issues in Florida and the U.S.”

Unfortunately, it’s also meant an increase in thoughts of suicide. About 13% of adults reported new or increased substance use due to coronavirus-related stress, and 11% of adults reported thoughts of suicide in the past 30 days, a June 2020 survey by Kaiser Family Foundation showed. Suicide rates have long been on the rise and may worsen due to the pandemic.

In fact, the NAMI Greater Orlando experienced a significant jump in requests for help, Welch told *OBJ*. Year-over-year calls increased 16%, and there was a big change in the types of calls received, as 20% currently are for support groups. This is double the organization’s 2019 number, he said. The national suicide lifeline showed a 40% increase in calls as the pandemic started, Welch said.

HOW TO HELP

Employers must use all their tools to ensure the overall health of employees, Welch said.

For one thing, everyone is encouraged to use self-care, he said. “Put the oxygen mask over yourself first, before helping someone else.”

Examples can include encouraging physical, emotional, social and spiritual activities such as walks and sleep, stress management and kindness, support systems and positive social media, as well as meditation, prayer and journaling.

The reason this should be something on employers’ radar is simple: The cost to business is quite clear, Stahlman said. If left unaddressed, the issues can be a “serious threat” to worker safety and can result in productivity losses, absenteeism and workers’ compensation claims, she said.

Some ways to deal with it include planning ahead and implementing worker support-related programs, Stahlman said.

“Additionally, how the level of infection control procedures in the workplace, and the adequacy of personal protective equipment in the workplace, are implemented can directly relate to symptoms of anxiety and depression as workers grapple with the uncertainty about infection.”

[Cheryl Brown-Merriwether](#), president, Greater Orlando Society for Human Resource Management:

"Ideally the first step toward identifying a mental health crisis should have begun before the crisis occurs. Employers should recognize that because of the 'stigma' associated with mental health and/or addiction, employees are afraid to talk about their struggles with managers or co-workers. As a result, many will not ask for help until after a crisis occurs. The goal should be to eliminate the stigma associated with mental/behavioral health issue. The solution is for employers to create a workplace culture, policies and practices that clearly communicates that employees' overall health and well-being are important and supported by the company."

[Frank Sheppard](#), managing partner/employment and labor attorney, Rumberger, Kirk & Caldwell PA:

"From a legal perspective, an employer needs to treat a mental health illness or crisis just as any other medical crisis. If an individual has a crisis or needs time off, then they're entitled to time off just as any person with a physical illness would be under the employer's policies regarding sick leave or FMLA. If someone has the flu or Covid-19, employers grant time off. The same goes for an employee who is struggling with mental health. In addition, a mental illness also can be considered or regarded as a disability, and an employee who has a mental health illness is entitled to protections and accommodations, just like any employee with a physical disability, under the ADA."

[Eric Welch](#), executive director, National Alliance on Mental Illness Greater Orlando: "Ask direct questions. What is going on? Express concern. Mirror responses. Provide help [such as] employee assistance programs, the NAMI Greater Orlando, encourage counseling, [and] contact crisis line in an emergency."

[Marni Stahlman](#), president and CEO, Mental Health Association of Central Florida: "Significant workplace stigma and bias attached to mental illness unfortunately still are prevalent, and conversations around creating an open, welcoming and supportive workplace environment for all when it comes to mental health needs to be initiated by company leadership. Public/private partnerships could be key to raising awareness of the importance of mental health in the workplace and facilitating the adoption of best practices. Also, if the company does not yet have an option to offer employee assistance programs, they should investigate that through the insurance broker. The prioritization and investment in the mental health of all employees is both a business necessity and a societal imperative."

Down days

Here's how people reported their mental health was impacted in Florida District 7 — Brevard, Orange, Osceola and Seminole counties — between April and June in the last two years:

Psychiatric adult patient days

- 2019: 33,703
- 2020: 38,564

Reported anxiety of workers

- 2019: 8.1%
- 2020: 25.5%

Depression symptoms of workers

- 2019: 6.5%
- 2020: 24.3

By the numbers

- 51%: No. of people who reported worse mental health since Covid started
- \$210.5 billion: Lost annual productivity due to unresolved depression
- 57%: Percentage of women who reported declining mental health versus 44% of men
- 46%: Percentage of women experiencing symptoms of depression or anxiety versus about 37% of men

Sources: Mental Health Association of Central Florida, American Psychiatric Association, The National Center for Health Statistics, The 19th News

Biz pulse

Since April, *OBJ* readers shared their job and health insurance status through an online survey. Here are the responses:

- I lost my job and my health insurance: 50%
- My company continues to pay for my health insurance even though I was furloughed: 25%
- I'm still working, but my company is talking about layoffs: 25%