



Workplace Wellness

How the business community can help improve Oklahomans' mental health

Business leaders recognize the need for workplace mental health support, yet many employers struggle with knowing where to find these critical resources for staff. With the majority of employees reporting that their employers have become more accepting of mental health challenges over the past year since the beginning of COVID-19, the desire of the business community is clear: cultivating a healthy staff and state is priority.ⁱ

Oklahoma employers can support employees struggling with their mental health through the use of evidenced-based practices that lead to better social and economic outcomes for the state. The business community can fuel economic growth by addressing the mental health of Oklahomans and advancing internal practices proven to support a healthy workforce.

Core Findings

- It's critical for employers to create and maintain a company culture free from stigma.
- Resources for workplace interventions in Oklahoma are readily available.
- Small changes in the workplace have big benefits for employers willing to invest in employee wellness.

Background

Many employers are struggling to fill positions as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to create new and unprecedented challenges. As discussed in [Oklahoma's Untapped Workforce](#), nearly 40 percent of Oklahomans¹ are not participating in the labor force, with a portion of that number attributable to or impacted by a lack of mental health treatment or supports.ⁱⁱ Depression is the leading cause of disability in the U.S. for ages 15 to 44, meaning that mental health plays a significant role.ⁱⁱⁱ However, the impact of untreated mental health is not limited to unemployment.

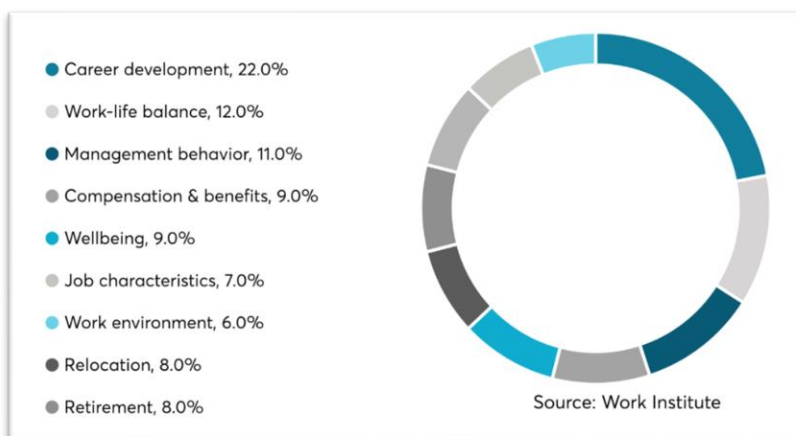
It is estimated that one in five Oklahomans have a diagnosable mental illness.^{iv} In July of 2020, two in five Oklahoma adults reported experiencing anxiety and depression symptoms at the height of the pandemic.^v For those struggling with their mental health, it may be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to function fully in the workplace without the proper supports. Presenteeism – the practice of employees coming to work but not fully functioning – is a natural result, causing productivity loss in the workplace. When sick,

¹ In this context, civilian refers to “persons 16 years of age and older residing in the 50 states and the District of Columbia, who are not inmates of institutions (e.g., penal and mental facilities, homes for the aged), and who are not on active duty in the Armed Forces.” The civilian labor force population consists of civilians classified as either employed or unemployed, as defined by U.S. Department of Labor. (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d)

fatigued, depressed and anxious employees show up for work, they are not bringing their best selves to the table. Employees experiencing depression miss an average of 31 days of work each year and lose another 28 days of work due to lack of productivity.^{vi}

Annually, the U.S. loses \$193.2 billion due to untreated mental illness.^{vii} Considering that poor mental wellbeing often results in expensive physical health issues when left unaddressed, the costs are likely much higher. Though there is no generally agreed upon annual cost of untreated mental health in healthcare, research consistently shows higher medical costs for those with untreated mental illness than those without.^{viii}

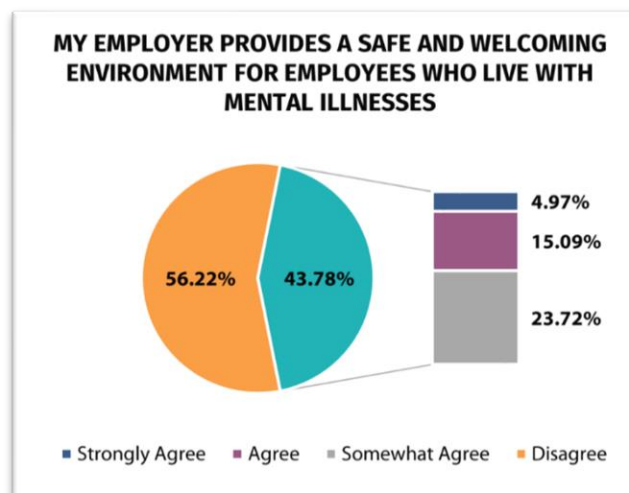
With many workplaces lacking in the knowledge and resources to address, let alone identify, symptoms of an employee struggling with their mental health, turnover can be an issue for companies. The practice of job-hopping, or moving from job to job, is often a reaction to feeling as though a person is not valued in their position. Three-quarters of employee turnover is preventable.^{ix} The chart below details the breakdown of the top reasons for turnover.^x Career development, work-life balance, management behavior, compensation and benefits, and well-being made up the top reasons for seeking employment elsewhere. Pervasive stigma, as well as resistance to reasonable accommodations, can contribute to this. In fact, 72 percent of U.S. employers report that the stigma associated with mental illness prevents staff from seeking help.ⁱ



What's in it for Oklahoma?

Small improvements in the workplace environment can have big benefits for employers willing to invest in employee wellness. Cultivating an organizational culture where employees feel acknowledged and appreciated encourages company loyalty and discourages turnover.^{xi} Current data show that a majority of employees report spending time looking at other employment opportunities, which is unsurprising as 56 percent of respondents did not feel that their employer provided a safe environment for employees living with mental illness.^{xi}

Lower turnover and higher employee retention have proven savings. Costs can be as



much as 33 percent of a worker's annual salary to fill that same position.^{viii} Improving employee retention is necessary to ensuring a thriving business.

Larger scale impacts of widespread workplace wellness practices include improved physical and mental health outcomes, leading to a healthier, happier and more productive workforce. More than 80 percent of employees who received mental health treatment report both improved levels of efficacy and satisfaction at work.^{xii} A workplace with a healthy, positive company culture can actually improve employee mental health when done well. Meaningful work provides the opportunity for reinforcing purpose and identity, in addition to reaping the benefits of strengthening the social ties that come alongside engaging with colleagues.^{xiii} Staff wellness is a priority for sustaining successful companies, with happy employees' productivity measuring at nearly twenty percent higher than their unhappy coworkers.^{xiv}

Oklahoma Industry

As discussed in [COVID-19 Projections and Effects on Mental Health and Addiction in Oklahoma](#), Oklahoma's oil and gas industry has experienced a swift drop in price, resulting in existing wells being shut down, a lack of investment in new capacity, and oil field worker layoffs.^{xv} With these additional stressors on the workforce only exacerbated by COVID-19, targeting mental health screening and treatment resources to the geographical areas of Oklahoma that would be most affected is increasingly pressing.

Industry leaders, such as ONEOK, Webco and Love's, have begun participating in the WellOK Coalition, an organization whose mission is, "to understand and improve the value of the healthcare our employees and families receive through a business coalition focusing on the quality and cost-effectiveness of care."^{xvi} [ONEOK's website](#) extensively lists all of their benefits for interested candidates. Transparency allows potential employees to evaluate whether or not the benefits package will meet their needs, as well as prepare any questions for the employer. Their EAP program is fully confidential and free, and includes access to an online resource tool. Dependents of employees are also encouraged to utilize the EAP, recognizing the importance of the family dynamic as an inherent factor in an employee's health and wellness. Mental health and substance use are mentioned explicitly, reducing stigma and normalizing conversations about behavioral health.

Opportunities & Resources

Competitive pay is often touted as a way to attract a strong and dedicated workforce. However, pay alone cannot guarantee low turnover. Offering a competitive benefits package and cultivating a healthy company culture are critical to staff wellness, productivity and loyalty. The WellOK Coalition acts as a valuable resource for Oklahoma business leaders seeking to support their staff through a comprehensive benefits package. Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) play an important role in maintain employee wellness. EAPs, designed to help employees manage stress and create a healthy work-life balance, typically give staff several free sessions with a mental health care professional and occasionally access to additional resources, such as assistance with child care or financial planning.

Educating staff about benefits is equally important to providing them, as well as encouraging staff to maintain a healthy work-life balance. Despite the majority of employers offering EAPs, their utilization rates consistently chart in the single digits.^{xvii} In addition to this, nearly one-third of U.S. workers report feeling fearful of workplace repercussions if they take leave, despite it being a guaranteed part of their employment contract.ⁱ This reflects a sociocultural prioritization of productivity being seen as more important than even the health of employees, as well as a missed opportunity for employers and concerning lack of accessible care for the workforce.

In early 2021, the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services (ODMHSAS) announced a new initiative, “Are You OK?,” targeted at suicide prevention in the workplace. According to an agency news release, “Approximately 80 percent of all people who die by suicide are of working age, making the workplace the most cross-cutting system for suicide prevention, intervention and crisis response; and, more and more workplaces understand that they have a part to play in helping to address this issue.”^{xviii} “Are You OK?” is a free virtual training tool available online^{xix} through the ODMHSAS website.

Actively encouraging or offering incentives for employees to attend trainings such as “Are You OK?” is a good way to acknowledge the importance of mental health, encouraging stigma-reduction in the process. Other Oklahoma-based mental health trainings available to employers are QPR (Question Persuade Refer) and Psychological First Aid (PFA). QPR, provided at no cost by Mental Health Association Oklahoma to Oklahoma businesses and organizations, is a short class that teaches attendees how to identify warning signs of suicidal thoughts, as well as how to start a conversation after noticing the signs.^{xx}

Curiosity is key. Avoid *only* encouraging employees to attend trainings; attend and actively participate *with* staff. The American Psychiatric Association has released a [toolkit for business owners](#) about the inextricable relationship between mental health and business health, with information about creating wellness programs.^{xxi} The resources provided come together for a common-sense foundational guide for beginning and enhancing organizational knowledge about mental health in the workplace.

All of these resources provide the opportunity to invest in and strengthen the workforce, not only to improve the economic landscape of the state, but to allow for the healthiest, happiest version of Oklahoma possible.

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