

Exclusive Reports

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The blues has companies seeing red

Addressing mental illness could aid bottom line

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Business people might look on mental illness as another item driving up the cost of health insurance, but the payoff in dealing with the disease in the workplace may be increasing the productivity and lowering absenteeism of workers who now cost employers billions each year.

That's the conclusion of local mental health experts and some recent national studies focusing on mental illness and the cost to business. With a variety of disorders affecting one in five workers, mental health has become a hot topic among human resource professionals.

"There are employees in every workplace dealing with mental illness, whether it's the employees themselves or their families," Arapahoe/Douglas Mental Health Network CEO David Briggs said. "But only two-thirds of those needing help actually seek services."

Local and national groups are trying to heighten awareness of the issue with workshops for employers and other resources. Their message: Treating depression is good for business.

It's a hard issue for employers to address because they can't see it or necessarily ask about it. Plus, workers who are affected by depression, stress disorders or other psychiatric illnesses are often reluctant to seek help, fearing the stigma often attached to such conditions.

Depression alone costs the United States \$43.7 billion annually, including \$31.3 billion in indirect costs such as decreased productivity and lost worker days, according to the National Mental Health Association.

Depression affects 19 million adults, 9.5 percent of the population, nationwide. Women are twice as likely as men to suffer from depression. Symptoms include fatigue, difficulty concentrating or making decisions, irritability, excessive crying and loss of interest or pleasure in ordinary activities.

Left untreated, it may disrupt work, family and personal life. Adults who are depressed are less physically healthy, less socially active and less satisfied with their life.

They also are more likely to be absent from work and experience limitations in the work that they can do.

"There are a number of large companies who are extremely aware of the cost of mental illness, and particularly the impact of depression on overall cost. And it's not just direct health care costs for illnesses like depression, but it's also the cost of lost productivity," said Donna Marshall, executive director of the Colorado Business Group on Health, a nonprofit coalition representing a dozen large purchasers of health-care services. "They've even coined a new term called 'presenteeism,' where you have a worker who is on the job but not functioning at a full, productive level."

The group has supported the Colorado Clinical Guidelines Collaborative -- members include health plans, business groups and health care providers -- which developed a guideline for physicians to help diagnose and treat depression in primary care practices.

"There's a paradox there when you focus on a disease such as depression," Marshall said. "If you are just looking at the direct medical costs ... you may see some increase in the out-of-pocket expenses. ... The payoff is the improved productivity."

Some businesses have chosen to combat the economic impact of mental illness with employee assistance programs that include mental health benefits. Colorado is among the states with laws requiring employers to offer equal insurance coverage for physical and certain mental health conditions.

"A company can't treat mental illness any different than they treat physical illness," said Donneve Rae, a staff attorney with the Mountain States Employers Council, a nonprofit that advises member employers.

Medtronic Inc., with operations in Louisville and Parker, has included mental health benefits as part of its employee assistance program for at least 20 years. In Parker, workers may schedule visits with a counselor, who also provide on-site workshops covering such topics as stress management and coping with grief and loss.

"It's valuable for our employees. Really, the company wants to do what it can to improve productivity and help employees out in any way possible," said Michelle Light, human resource manager with Medtronic. "Everything is completely confidential."

Betty Friesen is an on-site social worker from Arapahoe/Douglas Mental Health Network who provides services to Medtronic employees. Some schedule appointments. Others just walk in. Friesen's office is located in part of a Medtronic building that is not being used, so workers are not observed coming and going.

"If people feel like they want to come back and see me ... they don't have to tell anybody," Friesen said. "It's completely confidential. [Medtronic administrators] don't even know who I see."

Arapahoe/Douglas Mental Health Network offers mental benefits for four companies. Generally, between eight and 10 percent of workers use the program, said Scott Williamsen, director of communications. Three-quarters of the calls requesting services, which are up 11 percent from last year, are for substance abuse help, he said. The rest are for anxiety and depression.