

## SUPPORTING EMPLOYEE MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING:

# The Importance of an Individualized Approach

### Why the relationship between mental health and the workplace matters

The COVID-19 pandemic and the unprecedented challenges of the past two years have had a tremendous impact on the entire U.S. population, and as a result the country is facing a mental health crisis. The number of Americans reporting mental health issues, in particular depression and anxiety, has sharply increased. Mental health issues can often impact performance and productivity in the workplace. For some, work can also be a source of stress and anxiety. Mental Health America's "[Mind the Workplace 2022 Report](#)" found that workplace stress affects relationships with friends, families and coworkers for 4 out of 5 workers surveyed. [Data analyzed by EARN](#) indicates symptoms of both anxiety and depressive disorders tripled between 2019 and 2022 among U.S. adults aged 18 and over.

An intersectional lens is needed to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on employees' mental health. Several factors contribute to the disparate impact on people from underserved communities. People of color, the LGBTQ+ community and people with disabilities were more likely to be employed in less secure positions or on the front lines in roles defined as "essential" during the pandemic.<sup>iii</sup> Health considerations for people from underserved communities were also impacted by growing concerns around systemic inequality and discrimination leading to negative impacts on mental health and wellbeing.<sup>iii,iv</sup> Workers with disabilities experienced disproportionate impacts including increased loneliness as a result of required or self-imposed isolation, greater health anxiety and lack of access to home and community-based supports.<sup>v</sup>

### Common causes of workplace mental health challenges



Increased anxiety around health and employment security



Social isolation related to in-home sheltering



Strain from other responsibilities such as family caretaking



Information overload



Societal stressors disproportionately impacting people with intersecting identities

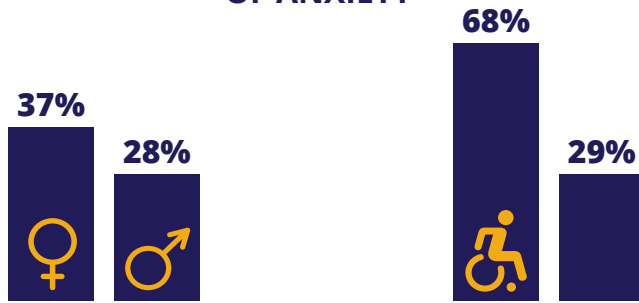
### The facts...

Many factors impacted people's experiences with symptoms of anxiety and depression according to the Household Pulse Survey data collected between July-October 11, 2021.

#### THE NUMBERS OF EMPLOYED PEOPLE IMPACTED BY SYMPTOMS OF ANXIETY AND/OR DEPRESSION



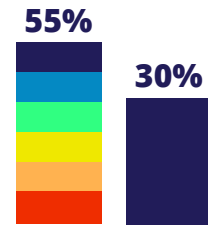
#### LIKELIHOOD OF EXPERIENCING SYMPTOMS OF ANXIETY



Women were more likely to experience symptoms of anxiety and depression (37%) than men (28%), regardless of age.

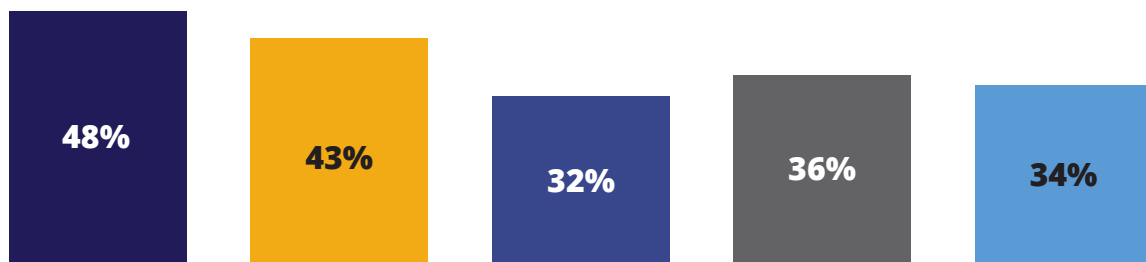
People with disabilities reported symptoms of anxiety and depression at 68% compared to 29% for people without disabilities, regardless of disability type.

#### REPORTED SYMPTOMS OF ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION



LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning) reported symptoms of anxiety and depression at 55% compared to 30% of non-LGBTQ+ people.

#### ESSENTIAL WORKERS EXPERIENCE HIGHER LEVELS OF ANXIETY AND/OR DEPRESSIVE DISORDER SYMPTOMS



Food and Beverage      Pharmacy      Hospitals      Nursing and residential health care facilities      Ambulatory health care workers

**Employers play an integral role in supporting employee mental health and implementing effective strategies to create a mental health-friendly workplace, from an organization-wide approach all the way down to individualized supports. What can you do?**

## Strategies for Employers

- 1 Ensure** that you are actively building an inclusive workplace culture around mental health. Explicitly express your company's commitment to mental health initiatives by providing accurate, credible and up-to-date messaging from leadership.
- 2 Work** with your employees to develop organization-wide mental health supports. Incorporate feedback from diverse employee groups, such as people with disabilities and people from traditionally underserved communities on best and emerging practices.
- 3 Have** all employees, including leadership, participate in mandatory trainings about mental health in the workplace. Have resources that provide information on mental health supports readily available for all employees.
- 4 Create** a positive impact through the influence of leadership. Leaders can do so by setting an empathic tone for the organization, identifying realistic goals and expectations, prioritizing self-care so others in the organization do the same, offering supports for those who choose not to disclose their mental health issues and providing proper vehicles to allow for employee input.
- 5 Allow** for flexibility in workplace policies and practices such as expanded benefits, disclosure processes and accommodations. Implement innovations in work-life balance, such as the option to telework or utilize a hybrid or flexible work schedule.
- 6 Provide** visible and responsive programming and services such as wellness and social support programming or employee assistance programs (EAPs). Increase the number of EAP sessions available around mental health to provide guidance and more information around all things mental health in the workplace.
- 7 Understand** there is not a 'one size fits all' approach to supporting employee mental health. Encourage open communication for employees to feel comfortable discussing their mental health concerns, and be prepared to address individual reasonable accommodation requests as they arise.

### Important Note for Employers: Long COVID



The COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S. began in the spring of 2020. COVID-19 has affected people in many ways and for some resulted in prolonged symptoms, a condition known as Long COVID. To date, [millions](#) of Americans may have experienced, or are experiencing, lingering COVID-19 symptoms. People with Long COVID have a range of new or ongoing symptoms that can last for weeks or months after they are infected with the virus. Symptoms may include overwhelming fatigue, brain fog making simple tasks difficult, persistent breathlessness, depression and cardiac problems.

As more of the workforce returns to in-person work, many employees are experiencing [fear and anxiety](#). Workplaces will need to adapt to significant increases in disability prevalence, and employers need to take Long COVID into account as they work to best support the mental health of their employees. Thus, mental health and workplace wellbeing should be at the forefront of every employer's planning.

## Related Resources

### EARN Resources

- [EARN Mental Health Toolkit](#)
- [EARN Online Mental Health-Friendly Workplace Course](#)
- [Checklist for Mentally Healthy Workplaces](#) (PDF)
- [Lead the Way: Merck's Inclusive Business Culture](#) (PDF)
- [PepsiCo: Every Mind Enabled](#)
- [EARN Mental Health Resources](#)

### Campaign for Disability Employment Resources

- [The "Mental Health at Work: What Can I Do?" PSA Campaign](#)
- [Workplace Guide](#) (PDF)

### JAN Resources

- [Mental Health Conditions](#)
- [Performance Management Role Play Video](#)
- [Negotiating Reasonable Accommodation](#)

### Additional Employer Resources

- [Mental Health in America: A 2022 Workplace Report](#) (PDF)
- [2022 Mind the Workplace: Employer Responsibility to Employee Mental Health](#)
- [The ICU Program - An Awareness Campaign Made Especially for the Workplace](#)
- [Notice.Talk.Act. at Work](#)

## Endnotes

- i Hankivsky, O., & Kapilashrama, A. (2020). Intersectionality offers a radical rethinking of covid-19. *The BMJ Opinion*. <https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2020/05/15/intersectionality-offers-a-radical-rethinking-of-covid-19/>
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- iii Williams, D. R., Lawrence, J. A., Davis, B. A., & Vu, C. (2019). Understanding how discrimination can affect health. *Health Services Research*, 52(S2) 1374–1388. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6773.13222>
- iv Damian, A. J., Armah, T., & Lee-Winn, A. E. (2021, Feb. 17). An intersectional approach to understanding the mental health challenges of America's essential workers. *Harvard Medical School Primary Care Review*. <http://info.primarycare.hms.harvard.edu/review/mental-health-essential-workers>
- v Petri, J. C. M. Embregts, Kim J. H. M. van den Bogaard, Noud Frielink, Moniek A. C. Voermans, Marloes Thalen & Andrew Jahoda (2020) A thematic analysis into the experiences of people with a mild intellectual disability during the COVID-19 lockdown period. *International Journal of Developmental Disabilities*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20473869.2020.1827214>

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