

The Madison Business Journal

Alternatives & Options to Keep Employees Mentally Healthy

By: Deborah Abrams Kaplan

Trying to keep an employee physically and mentally healthy may seem like an unreasonable financial and time burden to a small employer. However, unhealthy workers cost employers in the form of workers compensation claims, short and long-term disability claims, missed work days and decreased productivity. Providing employees with resources to maintain their physical and mental health is not just a benefit to employees – it can be a long-term benefit to employers as well.

Mental illness in the United States cost \$148 billion in 1990 (the last time the total cost was measured). This includes indirect costs like days lost from work, according to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). In addition, the NIMH notes that mental disorders, including depression and obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), account for four of the 10 leading causes of disability in established market economies worldwide. Depression costs the nation more than \$30 billion per year in direct and indirect costs, while social and economic losses due to OCD totaled over \$8.4 billion.

Treating mental illnesses can decrease overall healthcare usage and make employees more productive. David Katzelnick MD, a psychiatric researcher and cofounder of Healthcare Technology systems, LLC (HTS), studied patients with high medical expenditures. His results showed that patients who were suffering from depression but were undiagnosed had greater medical expenditures than those without depression.

After diagnosing and treating the depression, the patients' general healthcare utilization decreased. With psychiatric treatment, patients in the study reported a better quality of life and achieved a higher level of functioning at work and home.

The NIMH notes that nearly two-thirds of depressed people do not seek treatment, thereby suffering needlessly. The NMH also estimates that 80 percent of depressed people can be helped with medication, psychological treatment or a combination of the two. In addition to relieving current depressive episodes, treatment can reduce the severity or frequency of future recurrences.

Traditionally employers support employees by providing health insurance, which often contains at least some mental health benefits. With a competitive marketplace for workers, employers are now looking beyond traditional benefits to gain and retain employees and to increase productivity. The use of employee-sponsored self-help mental health programs is gaining popularity, because they help employees become healthier and more productive.

With proven effectiveness, user convenience, and low cost, self-help programs for certain mental problems are a viable treatment option. COPE was recently introduced by HTS as a program for treating mild to moderate depression. COPE uses a variety of tools

including booklets, charts and an interactive voice response (IVR) system accessed via an ordinary touchtone telephone. COPE increases a person's understanding of depression and its causes, while allowing the user to practice what he or she is learning.

John Greist, MD, cofounder of HTS and one of COPE's developers, noted that "although the concept of computer-based therapy may seem off-putting, patients like the personalized notions of the interaction with the program."

Using a branching logic, COPE's IVR system leads a person through the modules he or she expresses the most interest in, such as grieving, assertiveness communication, constructive thinking, pleasant activities and maintaining gains.

Greist related that "the program branches based on responses each patient makes and "remembers" what they have said in earlier calls, just as a good therapist would."

Periodic assessments taken through the IVR system provide feedback to the caller on the severity of the depression, and how it is affecting work and home life. The user can track this on charts provided in the COPE materials, and the results can even be faxed directly to the patient's physician.

"Sixty-eight percent of the calls to the COPE computer occurred after 5 p.m. and before 9 a.m., or on weekends times when therapists prefer not to work, and the very times patients find it most convenient to have therapy sessions, said Greist.

As part of a wellness program, many employers offer reimbursement for costs associated with smoking cessation, weight loss and exercise. Employers are now considering adding COPE as an option to prompt employees with mild to moderate depression to take steps to improve their situation. HTS can set up a system that allows an employee to request COPE directly, to protect confidentiality and possible embarrassment to the user. Major health care organizations are also planning to add COPE as a treatment option.

Traditional forms of psychiatric treatment may emphasize psychotherapy, medication and hospitalization. It's been shown, however, that self-help treatment can lead to longer-term success for disorders where self-help is appropriate. "Mild to moderate depression is a disorder where self-help is indicated and maybe even be essential," said Greist.