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Mental Health in the Post-Pandemic Workplace: 3 Things Employers Should Consider

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Executive Summary

The Coronavirus pandemic has impacted our collective mental health. Employees have lost loved ones, connections to co-workers, friends and families, and the comfort of their daily social rhythms. Several studies, such as a study conducted by Boston College, found that during the pandemic, reports of anxiety increased to 50 percent and depression to 44 percent by November 2020 – rates six times higher than in 2019. A CDC study reported similar results. For some, “fear of missing out” has been replaced by “fear of normal,” which can range from anxiety about returning to the office to worries about how to socialize with people outside their immediate household. Many employers report increased mental health issues among employees since the pandemic began. How can employers respond to mental health concerns? Here are 3 things to consider.

1. Mental Health Issues Decrease Work Performance, Reduce Job Satisfaction, And Impact Interpersonal Relationships

There has long been a stigma surrounding mental health issues, but the truth is mental health problems impact not only the employee, but also the business. Increased absenteeism, negative impact on productivity, and reduction in morale among colleagues affect the company’s business directly. Moreover, mental health issues may increase accidents due to human error and staff turnover. According to the World Health Organization, depression and anxiety alone cost the global economy approximately one trillion dollars annually due to lost productivity. According to Phillip G. Levendusky, Ph.D., ABPP, director of the Psychology Department at McLean Hospital and a member of the faculty at Harvard Medical School, “addressing employee mental health is cost effective for the employer and beneficial for the employee. When employees receive effective treatment for mental illness, the result is lower total medical costs, increased productivity, lower absenteeism, and decreased disability costs.”

2. Create an Environment and Clear Policies that Acknowledge the Importance of Mental Health

Even though mental illness is covered under the Americans with Disability Act (“ADA”), many employees are afraid to come forward and, thus, miss valuable accommodations that would greatly assist them. By creating

policies that openly acknowledge the importance of mental health and its impact, employers can help employees feel comfortable addressing issues as they arise. In addition, managers should keep an open-door policy and let employees know they are there for support. Employee Assistance Programs (“EAPs”) are also a valuable resource to emphasize mental health to employees. Many companies added or expanded EAPs and services during the pandemic to help employees cope. Employers should consider continuing to support employees through EAPs and employer-sponsored mental health programs.

3. Establish Clear Procedures and Policies for Accommodation Requests

Under the ADA, employers are required to make reasonable accommodations for mental health disorders unless it results in undue hardship for the company. Specifically, employers are required to provide reasonable accommodations for any mental health condition that would, if left untreated, “substantially limit” an employee’s ability to concentrate, interact with others, communicate, eat, sleep, care for him or herself, regulate his or her thoughts or emotions, or do any other “major life activity.”

It is vital for managers to understand how to respond to mental health concerns and accommodation requests. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission’s guidelines emphasize that to request accommodation, an individual may use “plain English” and does not need to mention the ADA or use the phrase “reasonable accommodation.” It is, thus, important for managers to recognize the need and requests for accommodations. By communicating to employees how to request accommodations and maintaining a comprehensive and well-thought-out procedure to address accommodation requests, employers can help ensure compliance with the ADA.

Examples of accommodations for mental health concerns include altered break and work schedules (e.g., scheduling work around therapy appointments), quiet office spaces, changes in supervisory methods (e.g., providing written instructions as opposed to oral instructions), and working from home.

Please contact Riebana E. Sachs or a member of the Employment, Labor and Benefits Group with any questions.