

# Mental well-being in high-tech.

Barriers, benefits and best practices.



High-tech companies rely on their employees to be sharp, innovative, collaborative and productive. But mental well-being issues like anxiety, depression and substance misuse can hinder employee performance. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, one in five U.S. adults experienced some form of mental illness every year. Those numbers are likely to increase as a result of prolonged social isolation and health and financial implications of the pandemic — making mental well-being more important than ever. Yet only 45% of those in need receive treatment.<sup>1</sup> The business cost in loss of productivity and turnover is staggering.

In this article, we'll identify the key barriers impeding larger adoption of treatment, along with some best practices that companies can implement to improve employees' mental well-being.

## Defining the terms.

In this article, we use the terms “**behavioral health**” and “**mental well-being**” differently.

**Behavioral health:** Specific health plan benefits designed to treat one's mental well-being.

**Mental well-being:** A person's mental state; how they feel and how well they cope with life's daily challenges. This spans a broad spectrum of issues ranging from mild to severe.

<sup>1</sup> National Alliance on Mental Illness. Mental Health Facts In America. Available at: [nami.org/nami/media/nami-media/infographics/generalmhfacts.pdf](https://nami.org/nami/media/nami-media/infographics/generalmhfacts.pdf). Accessed July 1, 2020.

## Mental well-being issues can cost businesses big.

Astute benefits managers would be well served to shop health plans that feature enhanced behavioral health benefits. Ignoring this opportunity could result in an increase of lost workdays, reduced productivity and/or costly turnover.

### Common problem: underutilized treatments

1 in 5



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mental illness every year.



Only 45% receive treatment.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental well-being issues are the leading cause of disability. Depression alone is estimated to cause 200 million lost workdays and cost \$17 billion to \$44 billion annually.<sup>2</sup> In the worst cases, mental well-being issues can lead to death. Stress, one of the most common mental well-being issues in the workplace, causes an estimated 120,000 deaths each year.<sup>3</sup>

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each year.

Yet even when employees with mental well-being issues can make it to work, there is still a negative impact on productivity. The Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM) found that 61% of workers report their productivity is affected by their mental well-being.<sup>4</sup> When these issues make employees feel burned out, Deloitte found that more than 40% will leave their job.<sup>5</sup> This turnover costs companies up to 50% of the employee's annual salary<sup>6</sup> to replace them.

Taken as a whole, mental well-being issues are estimated to cost U.S. businesses \$105 billion each year, mostly due to lost productivity.<sup>7</sup> This staggering figure should be reason enough for employers to prioritize mental well-being among their workforces.

2 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Depression Evaluation Measures. April 1, 2016. Available at: [cdc.gov/workplacehealthpromotion/health-strategies/depression/evaluation-measures/index.html](https://www.cdc.gov/workplacehealthpromotion/health-strategies/depression/evaluation-measures/index.html). Accessed July 1, 2020.

3 The American Institute of Stress. 42 Worrying Workplace Stress Statistics. September, 25, 2020. Available at: [stress.org/42-worrying-workplace-stress-statistics](https://www.stress.org/42-worrying-workplace-stress-statistics). Accessed July 1, 2020.

4 Theresa Agonivo. Society for Human Resource Management. Mental Illness and the Workplace. August 3, 2020. Available at: [shrm.org/hr-today/news/all-things-work/pages/mental-illness-and-the-workplace.aspx](https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/all-things-work/pages/mental-illness-and-the-workplace.aspx). Accessed July 1, 2020.

5 Deloitte. Workplace Burnout Survey. 2020. Available at: [deloitte.com/us/en/pages/about-deloitte/articles/burnout-survey.html](https://www.deloitte.com/us/en/pages/about-deloitte/articles/burnout-survey.html). Accessed July 1, 2020.

6 Nick Otto. EBN. Avoidable Turnover Costing Employers Big. August 9, 2017. Available at: [benefitnews.com/news/avoidable-turnover-costing-employers-big](https://www.benefitnews.com/news/avoidable-turnover-costing-employers-big). Accessed July 1, 2020.

7 Mental Health First Aid. Mental Health First Aid Workplace. 2020. Available at: [mentalhealthfirstaid.org/population-focused-modules/workplace/](https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/population-focused-modules/workplace/). Accessed July 1, 2020.

# Barriers to treatment

## Prevailing attitudes can impede those seeking help.

There are considerable barriers facing high-tech companies looking to create a viable mental well-being environment. The first is perception. The most common mental well-being issues in high-tech are anxiety, chronic depression and addiction/substance misuse. Issues like these aren't always treated with understanding and compassion in this competitive, high-bar industry.

For some mental well-being issues like depression, the stigma is decreasing, and those affected are more comfortable talking about it and seeking help<sup>8</sup>. For other issues, like stress and anxiety, a dynamic is developing where seeking treatment is becoming much more acceptable, rather than something to hide.<sup>9</sup>

But for employees with other mental well-being issues, like drug or alcohol abuse, the stigma persists. This stigma can encourage employees to hide their abuse to the point where productivity suffers. They may even delay care until their condition requires more extreme and costly treatment options like detox.<sup>9</sup>

“Behavioral health claims of more than \$25,000 rose almost 10% year over year among our high-tech plan sponsors,” says Bill Gillis, Psy.D., senior director of Behavioral Health for Aetna. “Reducing the stigma can help members seek treatment earlier, which in turn can keep these high-cost claims to a minimum.”<sup>10</sup>

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**– Bill Gillis, Psy.D., senior director of Behavioral Health for Aetna**

## Low mental health literacy.

Mental health literacy, according to WHO, is “knowledge and beliefs about mental disorders which aid their recognition, management or prevention.”<sup>11</sup> Low mental health literacy also contributes to perception issues and stigma around mental health challenges, even those that are prevalent in the population.

For example, a 2017 study conducted by Michigan State University surveyed 4,600 people about mental health awareness through specific examples and stories.<sup>12</sup> One-third could not identify the signs of prescription drug abuse and fully one-half could not recognize the signs of anxiety. Treatment knowledge was another huge indicator of a failing in mental health literacy: 80% of respondents believed that drug abuse was not treatable, and a large majority did not know how depression was treated. Also, a Kaiser Family Foundation poll found that half of respondents would feel uncomfortable having a person with a “serious mental illness” living next door.<sup>13</sup>

Education is key. Recognizing that mental health issues are both common and treatable will help move the proverbial needle in improving mental health literacy. Furthermore, 60% of college-aged Americans believe that seeking professional mental health treatment is a sign of strength, not weakness.<sup>14</sup> Clearly, when employees' are knowledgeable about mental health issues, they feel more empowered to take action for their own well-being. Knowledge also increases compassion for others who have mental health struggles, helping to destigmatize so that everyone can seek the help they need.

8 Stan Kutcher, Yifeng Wei, Connie Coniglio. SAGE Journals. Mental Health Literacy: Past, Present, and Future. March 3, 2016. Available at: [journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0706743715616609](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0706743715616609). Accessed July 1, 2020.

9 Bill Gillis, Psy.D., Senior Director of Behavioral Health for Aetna

10 Aetna High-Tech CAIR, 2019, page 12

11 Stan Kutcher, Yifeng Wei, Connie Coniglio. SAGE Journals. Mental Health Literacy: Past, Present, and Future. March 3, 2016. Available at: [journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0706743715616609](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0706743715616609). Accessed July 1, 2020.

12 Michigan State University. National Mental-Health Survey Finds Widespread Ignorance, Stigma. April 27, 2017. Available at: [msutoday.msu.edu/news/2017/national-mental-health-survey-finds-widespread-ignorance-stigma/](https://msutoday.msu.edu/news/2017/national-mental-health-survey-finds-widespread-ignorance-stigma/). Accessed July 1, 2020.

13 KFF. Kaiser Health Tracking Poll: February 2013. February 27, 2013. Available at: [kff.org/disparities-policy/poll-finding/kaiser-health-tracking-poll-february-2013/](https://kff.org/disparities-policy/poll-finding/kaiser-health-tracking-poll-february-2013/). Accessed July 1, 2020.

14 Anxiety and Depression Association of America. College-Aged Adults Face Less Mental Health Stigma. August 10, 2015. Available at: [adaa.org/college-aged-adults-face-less-mental-health-stigma](https://adaa.org/college-aged-adults-face-less-mental-health-stigma). Accessed July 1, 2020.

### **Finding treatment and navigating health benefits**

Recognizing the need for help is just the beginning — it's hard to know where to start. Even with all the community and peer support groups that are available, it can be challenging to find the right treatment options for the many different mental well-being issues that exist.

“Many people experience symptoms that aren't commonly associated with a specific mental well-being issue,” says Ashley Karpinski, M.A. LPC-S, Aetna Behavioral Health. “So, they spend a great deal of time and money just trying to figure out what is wrong, so they can treat it. The process can be very discouraging.”

It's no wonder, then, that research shows less than 50% of those with mental well-being issues seek treatment.<sup>8</sup> And that rate may be even lower in high-tech. According to Aetna's data, just 6.2% of members covered by a high-tech company plan access behavioral health services.<sup>10</sup>

Once a diagnosis is established, one might think the path to treatment is unobstructed, but this is not the case. Statistics show that 77% of counties in the U.S. do not have enough psychiatrists to meet the needs of the local population.<sup>15</sup> Finding treatment outside of traditional business hours, along with the long workdays typical in the high-tech industry, makes it difficult to see a mental health professional consistently without direct support from a supervisor.

This problem often goes hand in hand with a lack of benefits knowledge in employees. High-tech companies usually provide some of the best health insurance benefits available, but not knowing how to get access to resources creates significant barriers to treatment. In companies that offer a variety of mental health benefits and resources, sometimes from different providers, employees may not know how or where to get the care they need. With fear of stigma and discrimination, employees are hesitant to ask their supervisor or human resources how to access their behavioral health benefits. Without guidance, complacency sets in.

## **Barriers to treatment.**

**Attitudes:** Stigmas still surround some mental well-being issues, hindering those seeking treatment.

**Low Mental Health Literacy:** Being better educated about mental health conditions and recognizing early warning signs can empower individuals to seek treatment and help others.

**Finding treatment and navigating benefits:** Difficulty getting an accurate diagnosis, finding the right care, and confusion about how to use their health benefits and resources can limit an employee's ability to get the right level of care when they need it.

<sup>15</sup> Theresa Agonivo. Society for Human Resource Management. Mental Illness and the Workplace. August 3, 2020. Available at: [shrm.org/hr-today/news/all-things-work/pages/mental-illness-and-the-workplace.aspx](https://shrm.org/hr-today/news/all-things-work/pages/mental-illness-and-the-workplace.aspx). Accessed July 1, 2020.

# Three ways high-tech employers can improve mental well-being in the workplace.

## Reduce the stigma.

Enough about the problems. Let's talk solutions. Studies show that encouraging company leadership to share their own mental well-being journey can move mountains. For example, Buffer, a software company, has a Slack channel where everyone from the CEO on down posts about therapy appointments, anti-anxiety medications and more in an effort to increase transparency and reduce the stigma of mental well-being issues in the workplace.<sup>15</sup>

"One of the best things an organization can do to promote mental well-being is for leadership to be upfront about their own challenges," says Gillis. "Especially for issues that people may think of as a 'normal' part of working in high-tech, like stress and anxiety, managers can have a big impact when they lead by example."

## Educate and promote mental health literacy.

Reducing stigmas around mental health issues is not enough. Employers can take active steps to encourage real knowledge about all aspects of mental health by offering mental health literacy resources and training.

Organizations such as Mental Health First Aid offer courses for improving awareness, which covers a range of topics — from information about frequency of mental health issues in the population, to how to recognize a potential crisis in a co-worker or friend. By improving mental health literacy, everyone benefits from appropriate and timely intervention, reduced stigmas and greater empathy.

## Provide behavioral health benefits and guidance to find treatment.

Mental well-being issues range from mild to severe, so employers are offering a variety of behavioral health benefits and resources to help employees find the right treatment and get the care whenever it's needed. In-person and telecounseling, self-directed mental well-being tools, and Employee Assistance Programs (EAP), which often provide free mental well-being services, give employees the freedom to access the help they need in a way that best fits their circumstances.

High-tech employers with this variety of benefits can guide employees toward the right services by connecting them with a mental well-being advocate. These trained professionals can help employees navigate their benefits and get them the care and services they need.

"Aetna has long recognized the unique challenges of mental well-being care, so we have mental well-being advocates who are trained to assess a member's needs and help them identify appropriate clinical treatments," says Karpinski. "These advocates also help members understand what options are covered by their health plans. They can even connect members with the right type of care, whether that's telecounseling, an in-network psychologist, a support group, an EAP service or other type of treatment a member may need."

Virtual mental well-being services are also growing in popularity because they use video, phone and text messaging to provide high-quality, personal care in a setting that is confidential, convenient, fast and flexible. This is especially important for high-tech employees who may not have the time or desire to travel to in-person sessions or have access to local services. These virtual mental well-being services also provide a less-intimidating entry point to care for those who still struggle with the stigma of mental well-being issues.



## Mental well-being advocates help break down barriers.



**Knowledge:** Help members identify the right clinical treatments



**Educate:** Help members understand what is covered by their current health plan



**Assist:** Connect members to specific treatments



**Convenience:** Available via phone or online chat

# Conclusion

Plainly put, mental well-being issues are common, but treatments are underutilized. These issues are not going away, thanks to larger societal and work trends.

However, there may be a light at the end of this proverbial tunnel. High-tech companies have a well-earned reputation for being on the leading edge of employee culture and compensation. They now have the opportunity to lead the way again by offering robust behavioral health benefits — along with the cultural education necessary to ensure those who need the benefits use them without fear or without fear of self-judgment.

## Checklist for improving mental well-being at work.



### Lead by example to reduce stigma.

Encourage senior leaders and managers to be transparent about their own mental well-being journey.



### Increase mental health literacy.

Education about the range of mental health issues and how to help empower individuals and increase empathy.



### Provide a variety of benefits & guidance.

Offer a variety of behavioral health benefits and mental well-being resources and connect employees to a mental well-being advocate who can guide them to the care they need.

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