

Total Worker Health: Mental and Physical

By Bruce Morton

As I sit here this morning drinking coffee and sore from last night's boot camp class, (thanks to fitness trainer, Kat Musni!), I cannot help to think about the relationship between physical health and mental health. When I was younger and played sports, there was never talk of how your physical wellbeing could affect your mental wellbeing. We look at professional athletes and they have sports psychologists to help them process what is going on in the mind to how their body performs. Have you ever wondered how the best athlete can have a bad game or how a golfer can get the shanks? Their head gets in the way and it affects what their body does. Now let us think about a construction worker who is 40 feet in the air and has one of those moments in their brain where it affects what the body does. Could this issue cause an injury or a fatality? Most employees that I interview after an incident report being distracted by something, or in a rush when that incident happens. As employers, how do we help our employees be in the best mental and physical shape that they need to be in to get the job done safely and effectively.

For the past several decades, when people would hear "wellness" they usually assumed that meant physical wellness or fitness. Indeed, for a long time companies had wellness programs that focused on pedometers, walking challenges and weight loss goals. Many view physical well-being as a lever to pull for reduced healthcare costs. While it certainly can help with cost containment, it is more powerful than just that. Today, we view physical wellbeing as just one dimension of "whole person health" and one that is interconnected and integral to mental and social wellbeing.

Only half of U.S. adults get the physical activity they need to help reduce and prevent chronic diseases. Social isolation and loneliness seem to have distinct pathways to mortality and health. Financial stress makes employees five times more likely to be distracted at work. I know this firsthand when we found out our insurance company was not going to continue to pay the bills for treatments my son needed. We had to choose between getting our son needed treatments or borrowing money from family and our investments. We chose our son's treatments, but are still paying off the money to this day – though it was well worth it! Therefore, I know firsthand how these stressors can affect your day-to-day life at work.

Because companies typically pay a significant portion of employees' health insurance costs, it is not difficult to see the value of investing in wellbeing. As employees feel supported in their personal and professional lives, we see decreases in costs associated with absenteeism, attrition, illness, workplace injury and overall claims. Employers are increasingly embracing a more holistic view, knowing that wellbeing is highly correlated with increased engagement and productivity. Studies by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that employee wellbeing has a direct impact on engagement in the workplace. We also know there is a strong linkage between engagement and productivity. A Gallop poll found that actively disengaged employees cost U.S. companies around 500 billion dollars in lost productivity each year.

Best Practices

At Marsh McLennan agency, we use six workplace mental health and wellbeing best practices. These include raising awareness about the importance of mental health and wellbeing, assessing mental health

and wellbeing needs, and measuring intervention impact. They also include collaborating with local and national organizations to extend and share mental health and wellbeing practices, managing psychosocial risks related to work, environment, and culture, and providing and promoting access to evidence-based, high-quality mental health care. All this integrates mental health and wellbeing into a total worker health program that strives to keep employees injury free, productive and happy. It also seeks to break the stigma of getting help for mental health, so more employees ask for the help they need, whether mental or physical. I know when my hip or back is hurting, I need to take a break and focus on something else so I can perform better at work and at home.

Bruce Morton is a senior loss control consultant in the Milwaukee office of Marsh & McLennan Agency. He can be reached at bruce.morton@marshmma.com.