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Mental health & substance abuse: protecting the employee wellbeing

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Mental health and substance abuse challenges in the workplace are increasingly prevalent, yet often remain unaddressed due to stigma, lack of awareness, and insufficient employer resources. These issues can negatively impact employee productivity, workplace morale, and overall organizational success. Many employers struggle to recognize warning signs, provide adequate support, and implement effective policies that promote employee well-being while ensuring compliance with legal and regulatory standards.

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STATISTICS OF % OF AG SECTOR IN CA THAT STRUGGLES WITH MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS

- About 1 in 5 agricultural workers may be struggling with a substance use disorder and/or mental health disorder. This equates to roughly 20% of the agricultural workforce. This is significantly higher than the national average, which hovers around 10% for the general population.

- Depression and anxiety are among the most common mental health disorders in this population. For instance, one study found that farmers and ranchers experience higher rates of depression (up to 40%) compared to the general population (which averages around 7-8%).

- Farmers have one of the highest suicide rates of any occupation, with studies showing that suicide rates for agricultural workers can be up to twice as high as the national average.

- A study from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) highlighted that farmers are at greater risk for suicide due to factors like financial stress, isolation, and physical demands of the job

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HOW TO RECOGNIZE AN EMPLOYEE IN NEED

To address this growing concern, it is critical to equip employers with practical tools and strategies to foster a culture of openness and support. By learning to identify early warning signs, encourage open communication, and implement compassionate yet compliant workplace policies, employers can create a healthier, more inclusive environment where employees feel valued and supported. This proactive approach not only benefits individuals but also enhances overall organizational resilience and success.

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As an employer/manager, what are the warning signs I should look for in an employee who may be struggling with a mental health issue?

- **Changes in behavior or performance:** Sudden declines in productivity, missed deadlines, or lack of focus.
- **Frequent absences or tardiness:** This can indicate emotional or physical struggles that prevent them from coming to work or being on time.
- **Increase in workplace conflicts**
- **Significant change in personality**
- **Withdrawal from team activities:** Avoiding social gatherings, meetings, or interactions with coworkers.
- **Mood swings:** Overly irritable, anxious, withdrawn, or tearful behavior that seems out of character.
- **Physical symptoms:** Complaints of unexplained fatigue, headaches, or other physical ailments that could be stress-related.
- **Increased mistakes or errors:** A noticeable drop in attention to detail or quality of work.
- **Change in personal appearance:** Neglecting personal hygiene or appearance, which could be a sign of depression or stress.
- **Difficulty with concentration:** Difficulty completing tasks that were once manageable or maintaining focus on work. 2.

As an employer/manager, what can I do to support an employee?

- **Create a supportive work environment:** Foster an atmosphere where mental health is treated with the same importance as physical health.

- **Maintain open lines of communication:** Regularly check in with employees without being intrusive. Let them know you are available if they need to talk.

- **Offer flexibility:** Provide flexible hours or remote work options if needed. Sometimes mental health struggles are easier to manage with these accommodations.

- **Respect privacy:** It's important to approach sensitive conversations with confidentiality and care. Employees should feel safe sharing personal issues without fear of judgment.

- **Encourage breaks:** Stress management often starts with adequate rest. Encourage regular breaks during the workday and respecting personal time off.

- **Promote a work-life balance:** Encourage employees to disconnect from work outside of working hours to avoid burnout.

What resources can I provide? Where can I send them?

- **Send them to a mental health network!** Encourage them to create a log-in, take an assessment, and schedule a free intro call with a specialty care navigator

- **Focus on 4 treatment areas** - SUD, Trauma, ED, Severe Depression

- **Specialty Care Navigators** - licensed therapists that serve as the singular point of contact for an employee to help them identify treatment needs, and support them along the way

- **Evidence-based psychotherapy** with experts

- **Medication Management**

- **Peer Recovery Specialist**

- **As a manager** - leverage management consultation services! MC team are licensed therapists that provide support to HR and managers. Contact your health plan provider or local state and government resources.

HR Toolkit

Equipping HR professionals with a toolkit to address mental health and substance abuse challenges involves providing resources, training, and strategies that empower them to support employee well-being effectively. Here's a step-by-step guide:

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What are some communication strategies I should use when I interact with them?

Use the ALEC Framework

- **Ask:** Help the employee open up by asking open ended questions. This helps the employee feel heard and supported. For example, "How are you feeling?" or "What would be most helpful for you right now?"

- **Listen and Learn:** Give the employee your full attention, acknowledge their feelings, and refrain from interrupting. Be prepared to sit in silence - that's okay! Show that you are listening by summarizing what they say in your own words and reflecting it back to them. Ask for feedback to make sure you understood them.

- **Encourage Action:** Encourage them to think about what they might do to help the situation. What have they done in the past that has worked? What could they do right now to help them unwind, relax, take care of themselves? Encourage connection with a SH Care Navigator.

- **Check-in:** Ask permission to check in at a specific day/time in the future. "Would it be okay if we check in next week on Wednesday to see how you are doing?"

What are some communication strategies I should use when I interact with them?

- **Respect their boundaries:** If an employee doesn't want to discuss their personal mental health issues, respect their privacy but let them know you're available when they're ready. Ask permission to check in.

- **Be empathetic and non-judgmental:** Show understanding without trying to "fix" the situation immediately. Validation can be powerful.

- **Maintain confidentiality:** Make it clear that any information shared will remain private, except in cases where safety or legal concerns might require otherwise.

- **Be clear about accommodations:** If you are offering flexibility, make sure the employee knows what their options are and how to request accommodations without fear of stigma.

- **Pay attention to body language:** Use open and supportive body language by sitting forward, making eye contact, avoiding crossing arms, rolling eyes, dismissive gestures

- **Pay attention to your tone:** Use a calm tone and volume. Speak slowly.

- **Use "I statements"**

What is my responsibility as an employer to support, and when does it "cross a line?"

- **Your Responsibility:** As a manager, it's not your job to fix the problem your employee is facing. It is your responsibility to listen, and refer them to mental health support as needed and to communicate to HR to get guidance.

- **Duty of care:** As an employer, you have a responsibility to provide a safe and healthy workplace, which includes mental health. Failing to address mental health issues could lead to legal liability or a toxic work environment.

- **Reasonable accommodations:** Under laws like the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in the U.S., you may be required to provide accommodations for employees with mental health conditions, like flexible work hours or workload adjustments.

- **Prevent discrimination:** Ensure that employees are not discriminated against or penalized for seeking help for mental health struggles.

When it "crosses a line":
- **Invasion of privacy:** It's crucial to respect employees' personal boundaries. Asking invasive questions about their condition or pushing them to share more than they are comfortable with can cross a line.

- **Providing medical advice:** You are not expected to act as a therapist or counselor. Your role is to offer support and direct employees to the right resources, but not to diagnose or treat mental health issues yourself.

- **Overstepping in accommodations:** While you should provide accommodations, it's important to balance their needs with business operations. Excessive flexibility or requests may need to be carefully considered to ensure fairness to other employees.

Education and Awareness

- Provide Training: Offer workshops or courses on mental health, substance abuse, and employee well-being. Topics could include recognizing warning signs, understanding addiction, and breaking stigma.
- Use Certified Programs: Enroll HR staff in programs like Mental Health First Aid or similar certifications.
- Understand Legal Compliance: Train HR on laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), and local regulations to ensure they handle issues appropriately.

Policies and Protocols

- Develop a Clear Policy: Create policies for addressing mental health and substance abuse, including confidentiality, reasonable accommodations, and procedures for addressing concerns.
- Crisis Response Plans: Equip HR with protocols for handling immediate crises, such as when an employee is a danger to themselves or others.
- Employee Assistance Program (EAP): Offer or promote an EAP to provide employees access to counseling, therapy, and addiction recovery resources.

Communication Tools

- Normalize Conversations: Train HR to foster a culture of openness by initiating conversations about mental health and wellness in the workplace.
- Create Resources: Develop handouts, posters, and newsletters highlighting available support services and encouraging employees to seek help.
- Anonymous Feedback Channels: Implement tools for employees to report concerns or seek help confidentially.

Supportive Workplace Environment

Promote Work-Life Balance: Encourage flexible schedules, mental health days, and manageable workloads.
Designate Mental Health Champions: Train a team of individuals who can act as peer supporters and advocates within the workplace.

Host Wellness Programs

Introduce programs like mindfulness sessions, fitness classes, and resilience workshops.

Collaboration with Experts

Partner with Specialists: Build relationships with mental health professionals, substance abuse counselors, and community organizations.

Consult Legal Experts

Ensure HR staff understands legal boundaries and responsibilities by consulting with labor attorneys.

Leverage Technology

Use apps and platforms for mental health assessments, employee check-ins, or virtual therapy options.

Ongoing Evaluation

- Monitor Outcomes: Track usage of wellness programs, EAP services, and absenteeism trends to assess the impact of initiatives.
- Employee Surveys: Regularly survey employees to identify concerns and adjust policies to meet evolving needs.
- Review Policies: Update policies annually to reflect changes in laws and best practices.

Monterey County offers a variety of programs and servicesto support mental health and well-being. Here are some key services available:

At Monterey County Behavioral Health, our caring team and partners are here to support individuals of all ages, offering assistance from early pregnancy through the senior years. We work with children, youth, adults, and families. In partnership with others throughout the county, we promote prevention, mental health, and substance use services in a variety of settings such as outpatient, residential, and school-based. Our services are provided to those who are experiencing severe mental illnesses and substance use challenges. This includes MediCal eligible beneficiaries and those within underserved populations, ensuring that everyone finds the support they deserve.

If you or someone you care about needs help, contact our ACCESS Team at 1-888-258-6029 for a warm, caring, and confidential conversation.

If you are experiencing a mental health crisis that does not require an urgent response, please contact the Community Crisis Line of Monterey County (answered by Suicide Prevention Service of the Central Coast) at 1-866-615-1060, where support is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. You will be connected to a trained counselor. When appropriate, you can also be linked to a community-based mobile crisis in person. Services are available in English and Spanish.

ACCESS	ADULTS	CHILDREN & YOUTH (0-18 YRS)
TEEN & YOUNG ADULTS (16-25 YRS)	ALCOHOL & SUBSTANCE USE	PROP 47
WELLSCREEN MENTAL HEALTH QUESTIONNAIRE		

California offers a variety of government resources to support mental health and well-being. Here are some key services available:

1. California Department of Health Care Services (DHCS): The DHCS's Mental Health Services Division administers several programs for children, youth, adults, and older adults. Individuals seeking non-crisis mental health services or information are encouraged to contact their County Mental Health Department. Cal DHCS

2. CalHOPE: CalHOPE provides free, confidential emotional support to Californians facing stress and anxiety. The Warm Line is a 24/7 peer-run crisis hotline available in multiple languages.
   • English: (833) 317-HOPE (4673)
   • Spanish: (833) 642-7696
   • Live Chat: Available on the CalHOPE website
   CalHOPE

3. County Mental Health Departments: Local county mental health departments offer services tailored to their communities. For residents in Anaheim, the Orange County Health Care Agency provides behavioral health resources, including emergency phone numbers and quick-find resource guides.
   OC Health Care Agency

4. Crisis Hotlines: In immediate crisis situations, several hotlines are available:
   • National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 988
   • Crisis Text Line: Text "HOME" to 741741
   • San Diego Access and Crisis Line: (888) 724-7240 (available 24/7)
   • County of San Diego

5. Medi-Cal: Medi-Cal, California's Medicaid program, offers mental health and substance use disorder treatment among its benefits. Eligible individuals can access a range of services to support their mental health needs.

These resources aim to provide comprehensive support for mental health across California. If you or someone you know is struggling, consider reaching out to these services for assistance.

Questions?

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