Support Employee's Mental Health By Supporting Their Total Well-Being

Are mental health apps a panacea? Are they enough?

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In recent years there has been broad employer recognition of the important role that mental health plays in effective work performance. While there are dozens of new apps and other mental

health programs, their overall success rate is not yet established. Researchers found that 64% of mental health apps claimed efficacy, although only 14% included any evidence, and none referenced

certification or accreditation.[1] Reviews of the quality of the content within publicly available mental health apps report that the majority of consumer-available apps are not evidence based and can contain harmful content.[2,3,4]

Recognizing Mental Health is Just the First Step

Normalizing mental health issues and providing benefits to meet this challenge is truly a step forward. But is it enough? While mental health challenges can arise as an isolated concern, more often than not, they surface as a comorbidity to another issue. An individual may exhibit the classic signs of anxiety, stress or depression and begin to treat the symptoms. In reality, a big part of the mental health condition is often another factor. Mental health conditions can arise from a variety of life transitions and health issues. For example, infertility, a health diagnosis, dealing with chronic pain, substance use, or caring for a sick family member often trigger or are the precursor to mental health conditions.

Life Transitions that Can Impact Employee Mental Health

- Family building: infertility, pregnancy, adoption, and surrogacy
- Juggling career and family, especially when raising young children
- Marriage or divorce
- Caregiving responsibilities for older or infirm family members
- Death of family members

Health Issues that Can Impact Employee Mental Health

- Chronic disease such as obesity, diabetes, metabolic syndrome, high blood pressure, cholesterol, and heart disease
- Chronic pain
- Substance abuse
- Cancer

- Sexual health
- Stroke
- Age-related health problems

Offering a comprehensive digital Health & Wellness Library can assist employees by addressing underlying health issues that contribute to their mental health. This type of benefit from a trusted source that can be accessed 24/7 can boost the effectiveness of healthcare benefits, Employee Assistance Programs, and other offerings. It enables employees to self-serve on the health issues that impact them and their family members. The ability to take action provides employees with agency over their health by improving health literacy.

When employees don't have access to unbiased, high-quality health and wellness information, they are left to search the internet outside the company "safety zone" to find answers. Internet searches can lead to results that are full of misinformation, bias from medical advertisers, and unsupported or misleading health claims.

Cyberchondria, Just a Click Away

The internet is a powerful tool for people seeking health information. It's also an endless minefield of medical information where people can happen to stumble upon gold, or more often be directed to misleading, and even dangerous health advice. In fact, there's a digital-age term for one of these pitfalls: cyberchondria (hypochondria in cyberspace). Cyberchondria is defined as searching the internet for a diagnosis based on your symptoms—and confirming your own worst fears.

Scenario of Employee Accessing Internet to Self-Diagnose

This scenario demonstrates how a fictitious employee, Sam Marks, becomes a cyberchondriac after researching symptoms on the internet.

Sam is not sleeping well and his head hurts. This is impacting his mental and physical health. Pain relievers don't help. Sam's employer does not provide an integrated web-based health and wellness library

as a benefit, so Sam opens his favorite search engine and begins clicking around. Half an hour later Sam is hot on the trail, and the news is ominous. It could be a brain tumor.

Sam visits a site where people diagnosed with brain tumors talk about their pre-diagnosis symptoms—these match his own. After two or three days of nonstop worry, Sam sees his primary care doctor. He happens to mention in the course of the discussion that in hopes of curing his insomnia, he gave up coffee. What Sam didn't realize is that caffeine withdrawal is a very common cause of headaches, and his anxiety about a possible brain tumor is certainly not helping his insomnia.

The odds of persistent headaches being caused by a brain tumor are about 1 in 10,000—a fact that Sam might never have unearthed on the internet. This is because more internet content is indexed to serious disorders than to simpler explanations of symptoms. The abundant content on rare diseases leads many people astray. It's much easier to find bad news than good news on the internet.

If Sam's employer provided a science-based Health & Wellness Library as an employee benefit, Sam would have been able to safely search for information about sleep problems and learn about the variety of

possibilities that could be impacting his sleep. With an extensive Health & Wellness Library, Sam could learn about healthy behaviors to improve his sleep, and health conditions that might be impacting his sleep.

Instead of being anxious about his condition as in the internet scenario, he would be empowered to sort through the options and eliminate possibilities. He can attempt to improve his sleep on his own or seek medical attention from the appropriate provider. This not only would improve his well-being, mental health and productivity at work but would also be more cost effective for Sam and his employer as he seeks targeted medical care when needed.

Employee Utilization Depends on HR Support

Benefits make up about one-third of employee compensation. Benefit utilization is an important piece of the puzzle in your benefits package, and the right benefits drive recruitment and retention in a competitive market. Tips for a successful benefit rollout of a digital Health & Wellness Library include:

- Offer robust employee **Education**
  - Tailored to your workforce
  - Presented with a multigenerational approach that speaks to the broad range of lifestyle transitions

- Record benefits education and provide as a "must-see" in new employee onboarding and make available for all employees to view as needed
- Provide a range of **Examples**
  - Scenarios that speak to different age groups about health concerns and life transitions
- Schedule **Reminders**
  - Focus on utilization and engaging people in the benefits offering on a regular basis

Examples of Mental Health Decline and Contributing Issues

Caregiver Burnout

Mike is overwhelmed and stressed because his mother is experiencing dementia and responsibilities for her care have unexpectedly fallen on his shoulders. He's distracted and less effective than usual at work, has difficulty sleeping, and has no time for activities he previously enjoyed. In a demonstration to employees on how Mike can use the Health & Wellness Library for his situation, articles and videos would be sourced on these topics:

- Dementia
- Caregiver Burnout
- Sleep
- Stress Management

Pain Management

Jessica is in pain. Her back pain has intensified and she's concerned about her growing use of painkillers. The pain and worry are major contributors to her stress. In a demonstration to employees on how Jessica can use the Health & Wellness Library for her situation, articles and videos would be sourced on these topics:

- Management of Back Pain
- Pain Relievers
- Musculoskeletal Health
- Stress Management

Infertility Concerns

Ramon and his wife have been trying to become pregnant for 16 months. The whole process has caused them anxiety and chronic stress. In a demonstration to employees on how Ramon and his wife can use the Health & Wellness Library for their situation, articles and videos would be sourced on these topics:

- Infertility
- Fertility Treatments
- Donor-Assisted Reproduction
- Adoption
- Anxiety
- Stress Management

Diagnosis of Metabolic Syndrome

Renee has just been diagnosed with metabolic syndrome. She's been concerned about weight gain over the past few years but has never even heard of metabolic syndrome. Learning that it can be a precursor to prediabetes and diabetes, she is depressed and panicked. Renee realizes that she needs to make some lifestyle changes to reverse the course of her diagnosis. In a demonstration to employees on how Renee can use the Health & Wellness Library for metabolic syndrome and lifestyle changes, articles and videos would be sourced on these topics:

- Prediabetes
- Prevention of Diabetes
- Healthy Eating
- Weight Management
- Physical Activity
- Depression
- Stress Management

Make a Meaningful Impact on Employee Total Well-Being

To make a material impact on mental health, the total health of your employees needs to be addressed. By providing employees with a robust Health & Wellness Library and HR support, each employee has the resources and support to address their unique situation to improve their overall health and well-being, including their mental health.

References:

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Andrea Bloom is the Founder and CEO of ConnectWell, a leading-edge provider of digital health and wellness content that is academically sourced and designed for a consumer audience. ConnectWell's content is packaged for digital delivery with rich graphic content, and written for a wide-ranging consumer audience. ConnectWell licenses its content for integration into the platforms of a broad scope of healthcare companies, employers, and benefits providers to engage patients, employees, and members in their health and well-being.

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