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A MESSAGE FROM NCDHHS SECRETARY SANGVAI



In recent years, mental health has become a critical topic of discussion in various sectors, particularly in the workplace. The well-being of employees is directly linked to their productivity, creativity, and overall job satisfaction. As the pace of work continues to accelerate and job demands increase, maintaining mental health has become more challenging yet more crucial than ever.

Mental health in the workplace encompasses the psychological, emotional, and social well-being of employees. A healthy mental state allows individuals to cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively, and contribute to their community. In contrast, poor mental health can lead to decreased motivation, increased absenteeism, and a higher risk of burnout.

As a leader, I am often reminded that I cannot support mental wellness among my team without first modeling good mental health practice myself. By taking intentional time off, setting healthy boundaries and making the effort to ask how employees are really doing, we as leaders can be a catalyst for positive change throughout the workplace.

Employers who prioritize mental health create a supportive

environment where employees feel valued and understood. This not only enhances employee loyalty but also attracts top talent. A mentally healthy workplace fosters open communication, reduces stigma around mental health issues, and encourages employees to seek help when needed.

Creating a mentally healthy environment is not just beneficial – it is the foundation for a healthier, happier workforce. Investing in practical resources like paid mental health days and benefits that include affordable mental health care not only improves workplace well-being, but will increase job satisfaction, productivity and even retention rates in the long term.

The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services is committed to expanding access to mental health care and ensuring everyone knows where to turn

for help when they need it. But creating a culture that prioritizes mental well-being is a shared responsibility. Accessible resources for support and crisis services available in your community can be found on the NCDHHS website. Additionally, the NC Peer Warmline (855-PEERS-NC) and 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline are always there to provide immediate support for those in need. However, simple acts of caring – like checking in with a colleague or encouraging employees to take a mental wellness day – are often all the support someone needs to turn their mental health back in the right direction.

Together, we all have the power to build a workplace culture in North Carolina where employees across industries have the care, support and compassion they need to thrive.

A MESSAGE FROM MENTAL HEALTH DIRECTOR CROSBIE



Sougata Mukherjee and his team at Triangle Business Journal are true heroes of mine. Just over a

year ago, Sougata reached out to invite me to participate in one of TBJ's panels, where I had the opportunity to speak with local business leaders about mental health in the workplace. What began as a single panel has since grown into something much more—a series of special editions of TBJ, four podcasts, and a growing connection between the business community in the Triangle and the work we do in mental health and substance use.

As the State Mental Health Director and Substance Use

Authority, my daily work involves developing public programs and policies that support all North Carolinians living with mental health and substance use needs. It's been incredibly meaningful to see businesses stepping up—offering mental health and substance use benefits to employees, promoting wellness in the workplace, helping staff support their children's mental health, and fostering open conversations between supervisors and employees around these topics.

It takes real courage and

leadership to address sensitive issues like alcohol use and sports betting, and to prioritize the mental well-being of workers and their families. That's exactly what I've seen through our partnership with Sougata, his team, and the business leaders here in the Triangle.

To every business leader, parent, and fellow North Carolinian: thank you. Using the platform of TBJ to promote mental well-being is something I never imagined—and yet, it's happening. And for that, I am deeply grateful. Thank you, TBJ.

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HIGH STAKES: THE EFFECTS OF BETTING ON MENTAL HEALTH

BY CAROLINE BARNHILL

For many, a friendly wager with a neighbor or the pull of a slot machine at a resort casino is the extent of their gambling activity for the year. For others, problem gambling creates an ongoing cycle of financial strain and emotional distress. So what's the connection between gambling and mental health? What are the signs of problem gambling? And what do you do when you think you've taken it too far...

Every March, employees around the country throw in a nominal wager, submit their brackets to an office pool and enjoy the highs and lows that come with NCAA March Madness. Most of these individuals are likely casual gamblers who enjoy an occasional poker night or opt to pick up a lottery ticket when the Mega Millions jackpot hits ten digits. They play for fun, with the idea of

taking home some extra cash as a fun daydream. But for others, this occasional entertainment can spiral into compulsive behavior.

Gambling has long been a part of American culture, but in recent years, its landscape has shifted dramatically. Once confined to casinos and betting parlors, gambling is now as easy as unlocking a smartphone. The rise of online betting platforms has made

wagering more accessible than ever – bringing with it both convenience and new risks. As North Carolina expanded its gambling laws to allow sports betting and online wagering in March 2024, concerns are mounting over the potential rise in gambling addiction.

HOW PROBLEM GAMBLING BEGINS

Problem gambling often begins subtly, with small bets turning into larger wagers as individuals chase their losses. The cycle of winning and losing can create a psychological dependency, where the thrill of a potential win overrides rational decision-making. According to the National Council on Problem Gambling, an estimated 2.5 million U.S. adults meet the criteria for a severe gambling problem in a given

year, while another five to eight million would be considered to have mild or moderate gambling problems. This means that these individuals don't meet the full diagnostic criteria for a gambling disorder but do meet one or more of the criteria and are experiencing problems as a result of their gambling behavior.

Risk factors for developing a gambling addiction include genetic predisposition, mental health conditions like anxiety and depression and exposure to gambling at an early age, explains Amanda Winters, North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services problem gambling program administrator. The accessibility of online gambling exacerbates these risks, making it easier for vulnerable individuals to engage in compulsive betting without

the physical barriers of traditional gambling establishments.

CLICK. BET. REPEAT.

The growth of online gambling is making it easier for more people to develop problematic habits. Unlike traditional gambling venues, online platforms are available 24/7, allowing users to place bets anytime and anywhere. This constant accessibility removes natural stopping points – such as needing to leave a casino – making it easier to gamble for extended periods.

“Prior to sports betting becoming legal in North Carolina, the majority of the calls to the problem gambling helpline were related to lottery bets – particularly fast-play games like scratch-offs,” Winters says. “However, the introduction of sports betting didn’t result in a quick spike in calls because problem gambling doesn’t become a problem overnight. It usually isn’t until someone hits rock bottom and feels desperate that they, thankfully, reach out for help. Eighty percent of the calls we get to the problem gambling helpline are people calling to self-report.”

Studies show that individuals who gamble online are more likely to develop gambling disorders compared to those who gamble in person. The rapid pace of online betting, coupled with the use of credit cards and digital wallets, can lead to faster financial losses and a greater risk of addiction.

According to Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) data, it’s estimated that 5.5% of adults in

North Carolina meet the criteria for a gambling disorder, with another 15-20% potentially experiencing some harms from their play.

WHO IS MOST AT RISK FOR PROBLEM GAMBLING?

While anyone can develop a gambling problem, certain groups are more vulnerable than others. Studies indicate that young adults, particularly those aged 18-24, are at a higher risk due to their impulsivity and exposure to online gambling platforms. College students, who often experience financial pressure and peer influence, are also more susceptible to problem gambling behaviors.

Recent studies have highlighted the prevalence of gambling among young adults in North Carolina. Dr. Michelle Malkin, director of the Gambling Research & Policy Initiative at East Carolina University, found in her preliminary research across 12 University of North Carolina System campuses that nearly 60% of college students have engaged in gambling activities in the past year, with 13% gambling at least monthly. Notably, about 5% of these students are at risk for problem gambling, mirroring the 5.5% rate observed among the state’s adult population.

The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services also reports that approximately 10% of youth in the state experience issues related to gambling.

Additionally, individuals with a history of mental health disorders, such as depression and anxiety, are at an increased risk. Gambling can become



“There are so many stories of hope from individuals who have overcome a gambling addiction.”

AMANDA WINTERS

North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services

a coping mechanism for emotional distress, leading to a dangerous cycle of dependency. Veterans, who may struggle with PTSD and adjustment challenges, are another high-risk group. Socioeconomic factors also play a role, as those facing financial instability may turn to gambling as a perceived quick fix, only to fall deeper into debt.

Recognizing these at-risk groups is crucial in developing targeted interventions and support systems to prevent gambling-related harm.

MORE THAN A GAME

As online gambling continues to grow, so too must efforts to promote responsible gaming. Education campaigns and access to gambling addiction resources can help mitigate the risks. In North Carolina, free support and resources are available through the NC Problem Gambling Helpline (1-877-718-5543). Recently,

the state launched the “More than a Game” campaign, which focuses on providing resources to those struggling with problem gambling.

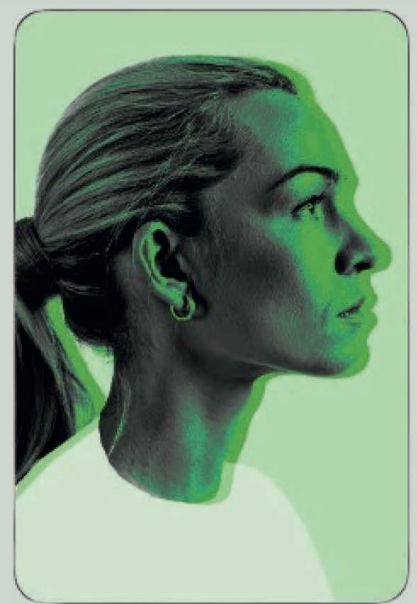
For Winters and her team, reducing the stigma around problem gambling and reminding people that they are more than their addictions is an important step.

“We know that behavioral addictions, for various reasons, are more stigmatized than other addictions – but it is still a disease. Once someone begins to experience psychological discomfort from gambling, it’s no longer a choice for them,” she says. “But this isn’t a scarlet letter you need to wear forever and it doesn’t have to take over your life. There are so many stories of hope from individuals who have overcome a gambling addiction. If you’re beginning to suspect you may have a problem, there are lower levels of interventions that can make a huge impact.”

WARNING SIGNS OF PROBLEM GAMBLING:

Recognizing problem gambling early is crucial to preventing long-term financial and emotional harm. Some common warning signs include:

- Increased Preoccupation with Gambling: Constantly thinking about gambling, planning bets or finding ways to get money to gamble.
- Chasing Losses: Continuing to bet in an attempt to win back lost money.
- Lying About Gambling: Hiding the extent of gambling from friends or family.
- Financial Trouble: Borrowing money, maxing out credit cards or even engaging in illegal activities to fund gambling.
- Neglecting Responsibilities: Skipping work, school or family obligations due to gambling.
- Emotional Distress: Feeling anxious, irritable or depressed when not gambling.



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HAPPY HOUR? UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF ALCOHOL IN THE WORKPLACE:

BY CAROLINE BARNHILL

In many workplaces, alcohol is embedded in company culture. From weekly happy hours to beer carts and kegs on tap, businesses – especially in the Triangle’s tech and startup scene – use alcohol as a perk to attract employees and foster team bonding. According to an American Addiction Centers survey of 3,800 Americans, one-third of American workers think after-work drinks with colleagues is a good team-bonding method.

While these initiatives may seem harmless or even beneficial, they can have significant consequences for mental health, productivity and inclusivity.

THE PREVALENCE OF WORKPLACE DRINKING

Workplace drinking is more common than many realize. According to Occupational Health & Safety, large federal surveys show that 24% of workers drank during the workday at least once in the past year. Additionally, 20% of workers

and managers reported that a coworker’s drinking – on or off the job – jeopardized their productivity and safety. Another study by the American Addiction Centers found 23% of employees have consumed alcohol during work hours.

“From a social perspective, alcohol in the workplace is seen as acceptable and there is often an unspoken rule that

everyone participates,” says Tameka Wade Brewington, a mental health and substance use counselor with 27 years of experience. Brewington, a board member of the Addiction Professionals of North Carolina and owner of Real Talk Counseling in Charlotte, N.C., helps working professionals navigate career and life transitions.

“Deals are made at the bar or on the

golf course and most professional events and conferences include happy hours,” she says. “The problem is if you’re drinking excessively, there will be consequences – both personally and professionally.”

While some companies promote moderate alcohol consumption to build camaraderie, workplace drinking can become a slippery slope. Employees may feel pressured to participate and those in recovery or with a family history of substance abuse may find these environments alienating or triggering.

THE MENTAL HEALTH CONSEQUENCES

Alcohol use is deeply linked to

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1/3 of American workers think after-work drinks with colleagues is a good team-bonding method.



After-work drink sessions last **1.8 hours** on average.



1 in 10 workers drink shots during after-work drinks with colleagues.

ALCOHOL.ORG

An American Addiction Centers Resource

Based on a survey of 3,800 Americans.

Continued from previous page

mental health. Studies connect excessive drinking with higher rates of anxiety, depression and stress. For professionals managing high workloads and tight deadlines, alcohol may serve as a coping mechanism, masking deeper issues rather than addressing them. Over time, casual workplace drinking can contribute to burnout, job dissatisfaction and substance use disorders.

“Because drinking is so normalized, many people struggle to recognize when they have an addiction,” says Brewington.

Since networking and socializing in corporate America often involve alcohol, many functioning alcoholics exist in the workplace, she adds.

“We have men and women who go to work, perform their duties, manage families and still drink at least two drinks a day – every day,” Brewington says. “But alcohol is progressive. Over time, you’ll need more to get the same effect.”

THE PRODUCTIVITY AND LIABILITY COSTS

Beyond mental health, workplace drinking has tangible business consequences. A Washington University School of Medicine study found that 9% of full-time U.S. workers – nearly 11 million people – met the diagnostic criteria for alcohol use disorder (AUD). Employees with severe AUD reported missing 32 workdays per year due to illness, injury or absenteeism – more than double the number of days missed by employees without AUD. In total, workers with AUD account for more than 232 million missed workdays annually.

Employees who frequently drink during or after work may experience decreased cognitive function, impaired decision-making and lower productivity. According to the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, workers with alcohol problems were 2.7 times more likely



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than others to have injury-related absences. Additionally, a hospital emergency department study found that 35% of patients with occupational injuries were at-risk drinkers.

While social drinking may seem harmless, companies encouraging alcohol consumption risk legal liability if an intoxicated employee causes harm.

RETHINKING WORKPLACE CULTURE

Rather than relying on alcohol to foster workplace connections, companies can adopt alternative strategies to promote a positive and inclusive environment:

- **Wellness Programs:** Encourage mental health initiatives such as mindfulness workshops or exercise classes.

- **Alcohol-Free Social Events:** Host team-building activities that don’t revolve around drinking such as volunteer days, outdoor excursions or cooking classes.
- **Mocktail & Coffee Bars:** Provide non-alcoholic options for social gatherings.
- **Flexible Work Policies:** Support mental well-being by prioritizing work-life balance with flexible scheduling and remote work options.

“People who struggle with alcohol use disorder drink on autopilot – it’s their way of coping with stress,” Brewington says. “They can’t wait to get off work to have a drink and unwind. But addiction often masks another issue, filling a void caused by stress or anxiety. It’s crucial to find healthier ways to manage



TAMEKA WADE BREWINGTON
Real Talk Counseling

those feelings. And if someone can’t manage their reliance on alcohol alone, there are resources available to help.”



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TOUCH GRASS: THE HEALING POWER OF NATURE AND HOW THE OUTDOORS SUPPORTS MENTAL HEALTH

BY CAROLINE BARNHILL

John Barnshaw, a seasoned higher education and management consultant in the Triangle, is a self-proclaimed screen addict. Between phone and computer screens, he estimates spending about 14 hours a day in front of them.

“Most days, I work at home managing employees around the United States, and the work, along with Zoom meetings, takes up a large part of my screen time from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. on weekdays,” he says.

Even stepping away from his device for a quick lunch would cause anxiety. What if he missed an important call? What if he didn’t immediately respond to a Slack notification?

John’s story isn’t unique.



AARON HIPPI
Professor
NC State College of Natural Resources

In an era dominated by digital screens and urban landscapes, the need to reconnect with nature has never been more pressing. Scientific research

increasingly supports the idea that spending time outdoors is essential for mental well-being. From reducing stress to improving cognitive function, the benefits of immersing ourselves in natural environments are profound. However, as society becomes more digitally entrenched, we often find ourselves increasingly detached from the world that can heal us.

THE SCIENCE BEHIND NATURE’S HEALING EFFECTS

Research has long suggested that exposure to natural environments can reduce anxiety, depression and stress while enhancing mood and overall mental clarity. Studies indicate that even brief interactions with green spaces can lower cortisol levels, the hormone associated with stress, and

improve heart rate variability, a key indicator of relaxation and resilience. Time in nature has been shown to increase serotonin production, enhance focus and even boost creativity.

We’re also seeing more research about how certain environments – whether it’s the forest or the ocean – provide distinct health benefits, explains Aaron Hipp, professor in NC State’s College of Natural Resources.

“There are certain organic compounds in trees, for instance, that may help with cell reproduction and maintenance,” Hipp says. “There’s also a fair amount of evidence about the health benefits of ‘blue spaces’ like

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oceans or rivers, and how they help improve mental health. However, more important than specific environments is simply giving yourself a break and restoring your attention.”

Hipp explains how attention restoration theory – the idea that spending time in nature can improve concentration and mental fatigue – is a simple, proven way to improve productivity that anyone can benefit from.

“Sometimes people hear about the importance of connecting with nature and assume that means they must do something significant like hike through Umstead Forest. However, as busy working professionals, there are many easy ways to incorporate attention restoration into your daily routine.”

Hipp, for example, has a standing 15-minute walk around the greenway with a colleague once a week. He schedules it for the middle of the day and finds that afterward, he returns to the office refreshed and ready to focus again.

“We’ve known for years that you can only focus so long before your mind wanders, your creativity is minimized and your productivity decreases. And now with all the technology and social media, our attention is pulled in so many directions. The best way to restore that attention is to simply step away and take time to observe what is called ‘soft fascinations’ – clouds moving or leaves falling. And that can happen on a bench in the shade outside your office or even while taking a quick walk down Fayetteville street downtown.”

PRACTICAL WAYS TO INCORPORATE NATURE INTO DAILY LIFE

Despite busy schedules, making time for outdoor experiences can be simpler than it seems. Here are some accessible ways to bring nature into daily routines:

- Take short walks: A 15-minute walk in a nearby park or green space can reset the mind and improve focus.



KRISTEN HARRISON
Richard Cole Eminent Professor
UNC Hussman School of Journalism and Media

- Practice outdoor mindfulness: Activities like yoga, meditation or simply sitting outside can amplify the calming effects of nature.
- Engage in active recreation: Hiking, biking or gardening not only connects you with nature but also provides physical exercise.
- Work or read outside: If possible, move meetings, reading time or breaks outdoors to enjoy fresh air and natural light.
- Bring nature indoors: Houseplants, natural light and even nature-inspired decor can mimic the benefits of outdoor spaces.

For those wondering if these seemingly little changes in routine make an impact, Hipp says without hesitation, yes. “Breaking up the monotony of your day, moving your body and changing your focus will make a huge difference in your productivity. Sure you can argue that you could use those extra few minutes to respond to a few emails, but I guarantee the quality of work won’t be the same.”

THE DIGITAL DILEMMA: WHY WE STRUGGLE TO DISCONNECT

While nature offers immense mental health benefits, many individuals struggle to step away from screens. Research suggests that people are increasingly using digital media as a form of sensory curation – managing

Nearly 1 in 3 (31%) U.S. adults who use social media said they doomscroll either “a lot” or “some.”

Source: 2024 Morning Consult survey

their sensory environment in ways that can be both beneficial and detrimental.

Kristen Harrison is the Richard Cole Eminent Professor at the UNC Hussman School of Journalism and Media. She runs the Family and Media Laboratory (FaMLab) and studies media content, uses and effects on children, adolescents and families.

“Researchers have spent more than a hundred years studying the uses and gratifications of media. Since the early days of media until now, individuals have used it for informational, emotional and relational purposes,” she says. “Now with social media and cell phones, we’re seeing kids – and even adults – using media devices to help manage sensory overload. It’s why your teenager may want to have their headphones on at a loud restaurant to drown out the outside noise. They’ve created for themselves an environment that makes them comfortable and when we, as parents, demand they pull themselves out of that curated environment, it causes conflict.”

Social media and digital entertainment serve as quick dopamine hits, reinforcing compulsive engagement with screens. And as our surroundings grow more stimulating, disconnecting from technology – the very thing that overstimulates us

– becomes even more challenging. This phenomenon is particularly concerning given the mounting evidence that excessive screen time can exacerbate anxiety and depression.

“It’s nice that our devices have the power to bring up our excitement when we’re bored, or help us unwind if we’re overwhelmed, but the truth is, nature provides us with both of those things as well,” Harrison says.

RECONNECTING WITH THE NATURAL WORLD

Given the overwhelming evidence supporting nature’s role in mental health, making intentional efforts to spend time outdoors is a simple yet effective strategy for well-being. Whether through structured outdoor activities or small moments of nature exposure, prioritizing the outdoors can lead to profound shifts in mood, focus and overall mental resilience.

As technology continues to evolve, so too should our understanding of how to balance technology with real-world experiences. The key lies in fostering a mindful relationship with both – leveraging the benefits of the digital world while ensuring we remain grounded in the real one.



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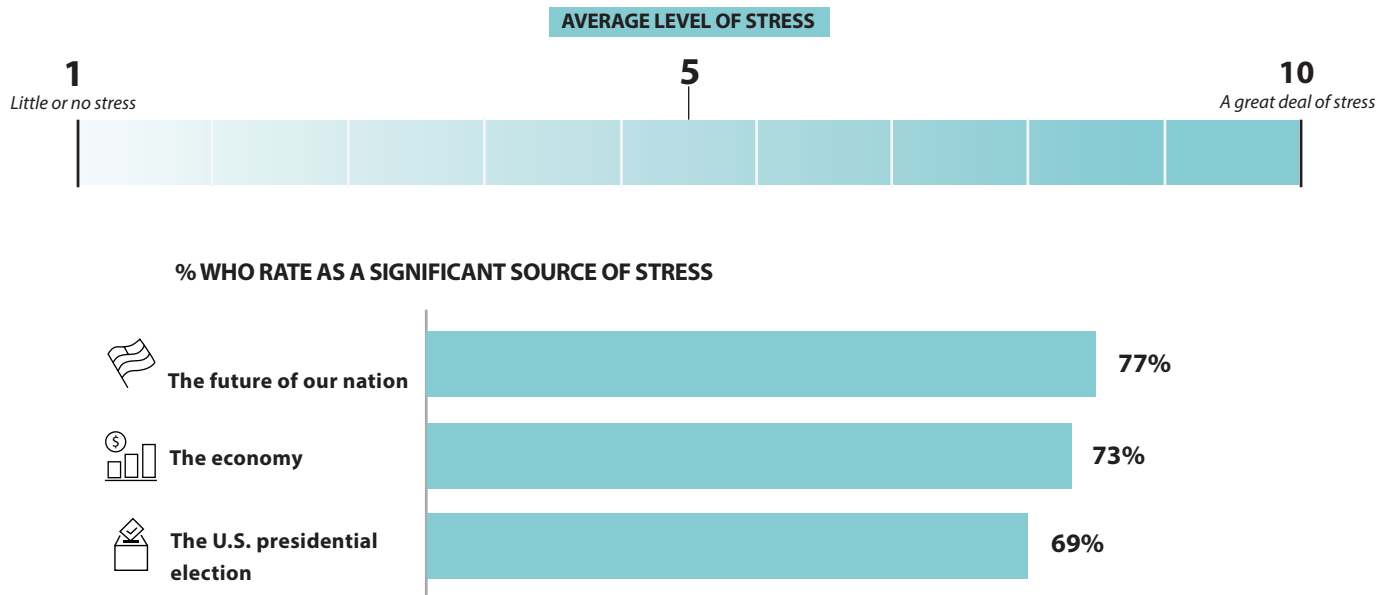
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This publication was made possible by Grant Number 93.959 from the NC Department of Health and Human Services, through funding support from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.



Political concerns commonly cited on U.S. adults’ list of worries



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LIVING IN UNCERTAINTY: COPING WITH ANXIETY AND CHANGE

BY CAROLINE BARNHILL

In an era of rapid political shifts, legislative battles and divisive debates, many professionals find themselves overwhelmed by uncertainty. The constant influx of news – whether about economic instability, global conflicts or social unrest – can lead to heightened anxiety, stress

and even a sense of helplessness. As business professionals juggle demanding careers with the pressures of staying informed and engaged, it is crucial to develop strategies that promote emotional balance while remaining active participants in shaping the future.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL TOLL OF UNCERTAINTY

Research has consistently shown that prolonged exposure to uncertainty can significantly impact mental health. According to the American Psychological Association (APA), nearly 68% of U.S. adults report that the current political climate is a significant source of stress. Furthermore, studies indicate that chronic stress associated with political and social upheaval can

contribute to anxiety disorders, disrupted sleep and decreased workplace productivity.

“Uncertainty has a significant impact on mental health. In addition to anxiety and depression, people may also experience paranoia or an inability to sleep or concentrate,” explains Tanya St. Julien Denson, MA, LCMHC-Supervisor, NCC, with Hidden Stream Counseling PC in Raleigh, N.C. “We also see an increase in dissociative behaviors,

where individuals detach from issues that cause them anxiety. This can create challenges within families and relationships.”

Denson is an experienced psychotherapist, clinical supervisor and trauma therapist working primarily with adults and older adolescents in the Triangle area. She has seen firsthand the impact of uncertainty in recent years – especially with the political and social change facing our nation.

One of the key reasons uncertainty fuels anxiety is the brain’s natural aversion to unpredictability. Research suggests that the human brain perceives uncertainty as a threat, triggering heightened stress responses. This heightened vigilance can lead to emotional exhaustion, difficulty concentrating and even burnout – issues that are particularly concerning for business professionals.

If you’re looking for signs that you may be experiencing anxiety

due to uncertainty or information overload, Denson says to first look for physiological sensations such as sweating, fidgeting, a racing heart, an inability to focus, challenges sleeping, rapid speech, or headaches and body aches. “Our bodies present what our minds are experiencing,” she says.

STAYING INFORMED WITHOUT FEELING CONSUMED

In today’s digital landscape, staying informed is easier than ever, but it can also be overwhelming. A Pew Research Center study found that 66% of Americans feel exhausted by the amount of news available. The challenge lies in balancing awareness with mental well-being.

Rather than allowing the constant flow of information to dictate daily routines, professionals can take control of their news consumption by setting clear boundaries.

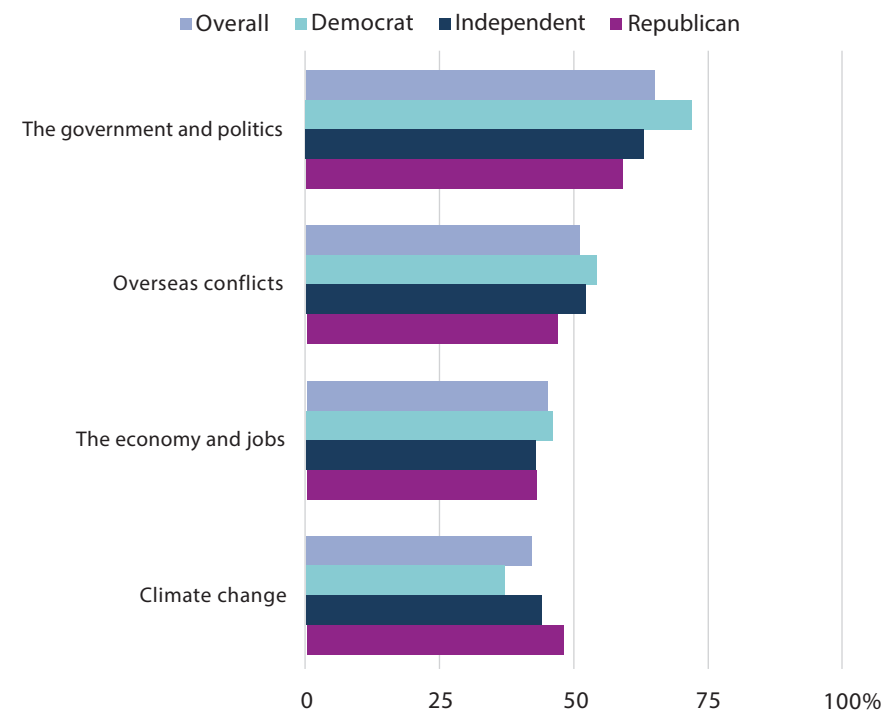
Denson recommends intentionally choosing one medium or platform to receive news. “There are so many sources shouting at us – radio, television, email, social media – so decide on one as your source of information. Then, choose one or two times a day to access it and set a time limit. Many people don’t realize they’re consuming redundant information. Instead, be intentional about setting a time to actively seek out the news and allow yourself to process it before re-engaging with daily life.”

For Denson, she decided to make her morning and afternoon commute as her time to listen to the radio for news. “I know I have a 30-minute time frame before I get to where I’m going, and then I sit for five to 10 minutes to process what I heard before I can re-engage back into life – whether it’s heading into work or walking into my house with my family.”

During times of political and social upheaval, individuals may find themselves anxious about engaging in conversations with colleagues, family or friends who may have differing opinions and viewpoints. If

Most adults feel the need to limit their media consumption about government and politics.

Percent of adults who say yes



Question: Recently, have you felt the need to limit your media consumption on the following topics due to information overload, fatigue, or similar reasons?

Source: AP-NORC poll conducted December 5-9, 2024 with 1,251 adults age 18 and older nationwide.



APNORC.org

that causes anxiety, Denson suggests choosing a safe person you trust to process that information with – as well as putting a time limit on those conversations before changing the subject. Setting these boundaries, she explains, can reduce anxiety.

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING ANXIETY

Managing anxiety requires a proactive approach to emotional well-being. Cognitive reframing can be a powerful tool, helping individuals shift their perspective on uncertain situations by focusing on aspects within their control rather than dwelling on worst-case scenarios. Similarly, mindfulness and meditation practices have been shown to alleviate symptoms of anxiety by keeping individuals anchored in the present, rather than allowing their thoughts to spiral into worry about the future.

Physical activity plays a critical role in stress management as well.

Exercise has been proven to lower stress hormones and boost mood-enhancing endorphins, making it an effective natural remedy for anxiety. Building a strong support system by staying connected with colleagues, mentors or professional networks can provide reassurance and foster a sense of community, helping individuals navigate uncertainty with greater resilience.

Denson emphasizes the importance of body awareness. “Check in with your body – do a quick body scan and recognize where you might be feeling sensations or stress. If you can do this first thing in the morning, great. Then, try to find a couple of times throughout the day to do this, including at bedtime. Based on how you’re feeling, engage in grounding activities – deep breathing, prayer, meditation, leisurely reading or stepping outside for some fresh air. Allow yourself to cry, scream or laugh – these are all healthy outlets. The



TANYA ST. JULIEN DENSON
Hidden Stream Counseling

key is to set a time limit, so you don’t become consumed by the tool you’re trying to use to help yourself.”

For employers or managers who want to support their employees dealing with anxiety related to external events, self-care is even more important.

“You can’t pour from an empty cup. If you prioritize your own mental health, you are in a better position to help those around you,” Denson says. “If you want to support your employees, check in with them. It may feel like you are crossing an ethical line, but it’s okay to recognize things that are going on and take the time to say, ‘I know a lot is going on in the world – how are you feeling?’ By opening up that line of communication, you’re acknowledging a lot is happening that can cause anxiety or concern and you’re giving your employee permission to share or not share.”

Either way, Denson says, by asking the question you are opening yourself up as a safe space by being a listening ear and a space of encouragement.

“Also, if your employee does open up, then you can share recommendations about what you are doing personally to take care of yourself. By being open and sharing that you, yourself, have issues that cause stress and anxiety, you are normalizing mental health issues and reinforcing the idea that it’s okay to take care of yourself.”

ADVOCATING WITHOUT BURNOUT

For business professionals who are passionate about social and political issues, advocacy can be both empowering and exhausting. The key to sustainable engagement lies in striking a balance between meaningful action and self-care.

Rather than feeling the need to address every issue at once, individuals can focus on actionable steps that align with their strengths and interests. This might mean leveraging professional skills to drive change, such as writing thought-provoking articles, organizing educational sessions or mentoring emerging leaders in their field.

Small but intentional contributions, such as volunteering or donating to causes, can also create meaningful impact without becoming overwhelming. Recognizing the importance of self-care by prioritizing

rest, engaging in hobbies and setting aside time for relaxation ensures that advocacy efforts remain sustainable in the long run. Finally, understanding personal limits and knowing when to step back from emotionally demanding discussions or activism is essential to avoiding burnout while remaining engaged.

"Choose one or two things to advocate for and determine how you can best contribute in a way that aligns with your strengths and well-being," suggests Denson. "For example, I have a client who is passionate about a particular cause, so she decided to volunteer once or twice a month. That's her way of making a difference while maintaining her mental health. Paying attention to your body's signals is essential. If you're feeling stressed or anxious, step back and engage in self-regulation tools."



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With Connections, you're never alone.

NC DHHS is pleased to offer you Connections, a free recovery support app for substance use. Connections provides 24/7 peer support, a recovery community, and tools to help you track and celebrate milestones!

What do people say about this app?

Here are some quotes from individuals in recovery who are using Connections.

"I am absolutely grateful for the friendship, support and continued encouragement that you offer me."

"A place where I can feel safe, where I can become more of the person I was meant to be. A place where love and words are honest and genuine. A place to laugh and build relationships with people who also desire to move forward and grow. A place called Connections."

"Checking in every day and keeping up with my friends on the app has become a daily ritual that helps my sobriety."



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MONEY ON THE MIND: HOW FINANCIAL STRESS IMPACTS MENTAL HEALTH

BY CAROLINE BARNHILL

Inflation. A volatile stock market. Medical expenses. Childcare costs. Even the price of a dozen eggs. Financial concerns are everywhere we look – and, for the average American, they can take a significant toll on mental well-being.

Financial stress is one of the leading contributors to mental health challenges, affecting millions

of Americans. According to the American Psychological Association's (APA) Stress in America™ survey, 64% of adults reported that money was a significant source of stress – and the most common money-related issue was difficulty paying for everyday expenses.

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Another survey conducted by Bankrate shows nearly half (47%) of U.S. adults say money has a negative impact on their mental health, at least occasionally – leading to anxiety, stress, worrisome thoughts, loss of sleep, depression or other effects.

And while the effects of financial stress are common, not all are affected equally. Research published in the Journal of Affective Disorders examined data from the 2018 National Health Interview Survey and found that higher financial worries were significantly associated with higher psychological distress among U.S. adults. The study also noted that this association was more pronounced among individuals who were unmarried, unemployed, had lower income levels and did not own a home.

Two common issues Jillian Knight, LMFT, sees around finances and mental health are financial stress and financial anxiety. Knight is a financial therapist and owner of Her Financial Therapy in Raleigh.





“Financial stress is caused by some sort of external financial stressor – carrying debt, rising cost of living, job loss or the threat of job loss, for example. That stress is similar to more generalized stress in how it impacts the body – loss of sleep, inability to focus, impaired decision-making and relationship strains,” Knight says. “And for that type of stress, once the stressor is addressed, the stress usually subsides.”

Financial anxiety, on the other hand, is more severe and it’s something a person experiences regardless of their financial situation. There’s no real stressor to point to, but the person still feels anxious about money, Knight explains. Both financial stress and financial anxiety can exist, but the underlying financial anxiety needs to be addressed before being able to apply any personal finance knowledge or tools.





“We are taught to think of money as a logical thing, so it’s sometimes hard to pay attention to the cues our body is giving us as a sign that we have financial stress or anxiety,” Knight says.

What Keeps Couples Up at Night

Top concerns amongst partners include:

-  **54%** Having enough money saved for retirement
-  **51%** Paying for healthcare costs in retirement
-  **47%** Making enough income to live the lifestyle they’ve always dreamed of
-  **42%** Building up an emergency savings

However, Gen Z’s top concerns slightly differ:

-  **60%** Making enough income to live the lifestyle they’ve always dreamed of
-  **57%** Having enough money to buy a home
-  **55%** Having enough money saved for retirement
-  **54%** Feeling financially secure enough to have and support children

Source: 2024 Couples and Money study, Fidelity Investments
Icons via icons8



JILLIAN KNIGHT
Her Financial Therapy

“I recommend people pay attention to those physiological responses they may experience when they are checking their bank account balance or paying their bills. Do they have tightness in their chest? Are they holding their breath? Are their palms sweaty or do they have knots in their stomach? If so, try to be intentional about calming your nervous system before entering into those tasks.”

And it’s not just an individual issue – financial difficulties often put a strain on relationships. Fidelity’s 2024

Couples and Money study reported that 45% of partners argue about money at least occasionally and 25% of couples identify money as their greatest relationship challenge.

“Money is not most people’s favorite thing to talk about and it can bring up a lot of emotions,” Knight says. “For couples who struggle with avoidance, financial stress or anxiety can cause even deeper avoidance, which makes dealing with financial problems even more difficult. Or for those who are argumentative, financial difficulties can exacerbate those fights.”

HOW FINANCIAL STRESS CONTRIBUTES TO WORKPLACE ANXIETY

For working professionals, financial concerns frequently spill over into their jobs, affecting performance and workplace relationships. Employees experiencing financial hardship often struggle to focus, leading to decreased productivity and increased absenteeism.

The pressure to meet financial obligations sometimes forces individuals to take on additional work or overtime hours, which can accelerate burnout and lower job satisfaction.

The cumulative impact of these stressors can create a vicious cycle, where financial worries make it harder to excel at work, which in turn exacerbates financial struggles.

STRATEGIES TO MANAGE FINANCIAL STRESS AND IMPROVE MENTAL WELL-BEING

Although financial stress can feel overwhelming, taking proactive steps can help individuals regain stability and peace of mind. The first thing to do, Knight recommends, is to become more aware of your financial situation. Many individuals who have financial anxiety or stress are avoidant, so sometimes simply having a clearer picture of your finances can lower your anxiety.

From there, she recommends individuals or couples create a spending plan – not a budget.

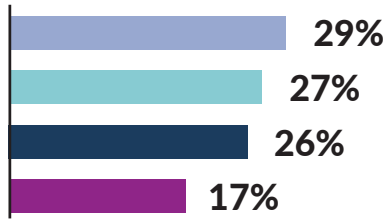
“I don’t like the word ‘budget,’ because people find it restricting. Much like a diet, I find that people who set strict budgets will eventually overspend and then scrap the budget altogether because they feel like they failed,” Knight says.

Still, Money Talks Can Be a Challenge

Nearly 1 in 4 couples say money is their greatest relationship challenge.

45% of partners still say they argue about money at least occasionally.

By generation



■ Gen Z ■ Millennials ■ Gen X ■ Baby Boomers

By generation



Source: 2024 Couples and Money study, Fidelity Investments
Photo: Getty Images

“Get an idea of your income versus expenses and how much you own versus how much you owe. Make a realistic spending plan that prioritizes what matters most to you. Are there streaming services you don’t watch? Do you care more about being able to go out to dinner with a friend than you do about buying a new outfit? Try to get your money to align with what you value.”

Another key strategy is to prioritize emergency savings, even if it’s just a small amount set aside each month.

“There’s a common recommendation to have three to six months’ of expenses in your emergency fund, but for most people, that sounds like a big amount that they’ll never be able to accomplish,” Knight says. “Set a realistic goal. Having one to two months of expenses is a great goal because having any kind of financial cushion can help alleviate the anxiety of unexpected expenses.”

Knight also recommends individuals prioritize emergency savings above paying down debt.

“While paying down debt might feel better than putting money in savings, it’s important to have those emergency funds to prevent you from going further into debt if unexpected expenses arise.”

Beyond practical financial

% WHO REPORT PAYING FOR ESSENTIALS IS CAUSING THEM STRESS AMONG THOSE WHO REPORT MONEY AS A SIGNIFICANT SOURCE OF STRESS



STRESS IN AMERICA™ 2023

management, addressing emotional responses to money is equally important. Many people develop deep-seated beliefs and behaviors around finances based on past experiences, and understanding these patterns can help break negative cycles of stress and impulsive decision-making.

THE ROLE OF FINANCIAL THERAPY IN MENTAL HEALTH RECOVERY

Financial therapy is an emerging field that combines financial planning with psychological support, helping individuals and families navigate

the emotional aspects of money management.

By working with a financial therapist, individuals can explore their underlying beliefs about money, develop healthier financial habits and learn effective strategies to manage financial anxiety. Financial therapists also provide guidance on improving communication around finances, particularly for couples and families facing money-related disagreements. Unlike traditional financial advisors, financial therapists go beyond financial literacy to address the emotional

and behavioral aspects of financial decision-making.

Financial stress is a reality for many, but it doesn’t have to dictate mental well-being. By understanding the deep connection between money and mental health and taking proactive steps to address financial challenges, individuals can regain a sense of control and peace of mind. Seeking professional support—whether through financial advisors, mental health professionals or financial therapists—can be a powerful step toward financial and emotional stability.



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RECOGNIZING AND ADDRESSING YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE USE RECOVERY

BY CAROLINE BARNHILL

For working professionals, the boundary between personal life and work life is often blurred. When a young person in their family struggles with mental health challenges or substance use, it inevitably affects their professional life as well. The stress, emotional burden and uncertainty can lead to decreased productivity, difficulty concentrating and increased absenteeism. While these issues may not be directly work-related, they can't help but spill into the workplace.

According to a survey by child advocacy group On Our Sleeves®, 53% of working parents reported missing work at least once per month to address their children's mental health needs and 54% experienced workday interruptions due to these concerns. So what are some early

warning signs of mental health challenges or substance use issues parents or caregivers need to be aware of? What resources are available? And how can employers provide support during these difficult times?

Coming out of the COVID-19



MONA TOWNES
Integrated Family Services

pandemic, children's mental health struggles significantly increased, with a notable rise in anxiety, depression and behavioral issues – primarily due to prolonged social isolation, disrupted routines and increased

stress at home, along with limited access to usual support systems like school and friends.

While life has somewhat returned to normal in recent years, many of these mental health struggles have persisted.

“For many children and young adults, the pandemic was a source of trauma. Some may have experienced the death of a loved one, others might have dealt with homelessness or a health issue – and nearly all of them experienced a form of isolation that they are still processing,” explains Mona Townes, a licensed clinical social worker and addiction specialist and mobile crisis director at Integrated Family Services. “So while we may have thought these mental health struggles would have leveled



1 OUT OF **3**

working parents report changing or quitting their job in the past two years because of their child's mental health.



53%

of working parents missed work at least once per month to deal with their children's mental health.

off to pre-pandemic norms, that's not what has happened."

IDENTIFYING WARNING SIGNS

Recognizing the early signs of mental health struggles and substance use in teens and young adults can be challenging, as many symptoms can mimic normal adolescent behavior. However, according to Townes, potential warning signs may include:

- **Behavioral Changes:** Withdrawal from family and friends, loss of interest in activities (without replacing them with a new one) or sudden shifts in mood.
- **Academic or Work Struggles:** Declining performance, frequent absences or loss of motivation.
- **Physical Symptoms:** Unexplained weight loss or gain, frequent illness or neglected personal hygiene.
- **Secretive Behavior:** Hiding phone use, lying about whereabouts or unexplained financial problems.
- **Substance-Related Clues:** Smell of alcohol or drugs, possession of paraphernalia or evidence of intoxication.

If you notice any of these signs, Townes recommends starting by asking questions.

"I'm a mental health first aid instructor, and we spend a lot of time teaching observation and listening skills. If, as a parent, you are concerned about your child, ask open-ended questions. Don't be argumentative or accusatory – simply provide a safe space to talk," Townes suggests. "And while you can and should set appropriate boundaries and expectations, threats aren't helpful in these situations."

A common thing Townes sees in her work is parents who want to address concerning behavior by taking away their child's cell phone or device – and she cautions against it.

"I've dealt with many calls where parents taking a child's cell phone has triggered suicidal thoughts or ideation because, for a lot of youth, that is their lifeline and source of connection," she explains. "Instead of removing that connection from

them, consider a compromise where the child can use the device for a set amount of time – and encourage them to use their device to access resources or apps that support their mental health."

One of the most important things parents can do to improve outcomes, Townes says, is to create a safe, supportive and non-judgmental home environment – and model appropriate behaviors you want to see your child mirror.

Steps include:

- **Open Communication:** Encourage honest discussions about feelings and experiences without fear of punishment or judgment.
- **Education and Awareness:** Learn about mental health conditions and substance use to better understand what your loved one is going through.
- **Setting Boundaries:** While support is crucial, it's also important to set clear and healthy boundaries to encourage responsibility and accountability.
- **Modeling Healthy Coping Strategies:** Demonstrate positive stress management techniques, such as exercise, mindfulness and healthy social interactions.
- **Managing Workplace Stress:** Professionals should also seek support for themselves, whether through employee assistance programs, therapy or peer groups, to ensure they are equipped to provide meaningful help without burning out themselves.

SEEKING PROFESSIONAL HELP

While family support is an important first step to addressing youth mental health challenges and substance use issues, there may be a time when professional help is needed. Reaching out to your pediatrician or family doctor, or your child's school social worker or counselor, are both good options to access resources and support, Townes explains.

Another important thing to consider is normalizing mental health within the family before something becomes

MENTAL HEALTH TRAINING FOR EMPLOYEES AT EVERY LEVEL



A survey of U.S. workers showed that 1 in 5 rate their mental health as fair or poor, resulting in four times more unplanned absences. When employees feel that their employers care about their overall well-being, they are three times more likely

to be engaged at work. Create healthier, more engaged employees with the Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) at Work program. For information about MHFA at Work, reach out to Triangle-based trainer Ruby Brown-Herring at www.rubybrownherring.com or scan the QR code to find a trainer in your area.

an issue.

"I'm a parent myself and I make a point a couple of times a year to have conversations with my children to check in and see how they're doing. I also ask if they feel like they'd like to talk with someone outside our home about things they may be struggling with," Townes says. "By having those conversations, my children know getting mental health support is not something to be embarrassed about."

And if your child is struggling and refusing to get help, getting therapy for yourself is extremely beneficial, Townes continues.

"The fact is, we cannot come to work and be at our best when things are going on at home. There is a direct correlation between financial, spousal, family and health stressors and our ability to be productive in the workplace," she says. "If you have an HR director at work, make sure to check and see what EAP (employee assistance programs) options are available to you. And I'd encourage all employers to create the type of work environment that prioritizes mental health and support. It's in your business's best interest to have healthy, productive and present employees."

Learn how to respond with the Mental Health First Aid Action Plan (ALGEE):

- A** ssess for risk of suicide or harm.
- L** isten nonjudgmentally
- G** ive reassurance and information.
- E** ncourage appropriate professional help.
- E** ncourage self-help and other support strategies.

Source: Mental Health First Aid



CULTURE CHECK: HOW THE OFFICE ENVIRONMENT CAN SHAPE – OR SABOTAGE – EMPLOYEE WELL-BEING

BY CAROLINE BARNHILL



PATRICK JEFFS
The Resiliency Solution

In today's fast-paced work environment, organizations often underestimate how much their daily operations, leadership behaviors and company policies influence employee mental health. But the reality is clear: the way work is structured – what is prioritized, how leadership communicates and whether employees feel valued and supported – can either protect well-being or contribute to chronic stress, disengagement and burnout.

Workplace burnout is a prevalent issue affecting a significant portion of the American workforce. A 2024 report by Aflac revealed that nearly 60% of U.S. workers are experiencing moderate to high levels of burnout. This issue is particularly pronounced among millennials (ages 28-43), with 66% reporting burnout – compared to 55% of Gen Xers (ages 44-59) and 39% of baby boomers (ages 60-78).

Furthermore, research from the American Institute of Stress indicates that 83% of U.S. workers experience work-related stress, a primary precursor to burnout. This stress not only affects job performance but also has significant implications for personal well-being and organizational productivity.

“We’ve worked with organizations of all sizes to help leaders design work environments that foster resilience,” says Dr. Patrick Jeffs, founder and owner of The Resiliency Solution. “In a world that keeps accelerating, resilience isn’t about bouncing back – it’s about knowing when to slow down, when to push forward and when to recalibrate. The ability to adjust, not just recover, defines lasting success.”

But what are some of the most overlooked workplace dynamics that impact mental health – and what organizations can do to fix them? Jeffs shares his insight.

HOW ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR IMPACTS MENTAL WELL-BEING

The Chaos of Poor Prioritization

One of the biggest stressors in any workplace is the feeling of constantly chasing moving targets. When employees are overloaded with tasks but given little clarity on what truly matters, it leads to reactive decision-making, unnecessary stress and ultimately burnout.

On the flip side, clear prioritization gives employees a sense of control. Leaders who establish a rhythm – through daily huddles, structured check-ins or simple “stoplight” priority lists – help their teams confidently focus on the work that moves the needle. Even a single word, “deprioritize,” can be transformative in a fast-moving environment, offering



permission to let go of low-value tasks.

THE HIDDEN COST OF SKIPPING RECOVERY

High performers don’t operate at full capacity 24/7. In any other high-stakes field – sports, aviation, military operations – rest and recovery are deliberately built into the system. Why should business be any different?

Micro-breaks, protected lunch hours and scheduled “think time” shouldn’t be viewed as luxuries – they’re productivity boosters. At the organizational level, integrating monthly innovation sprints or quarterly off-site days helps teams step back, recharge and return to work with sharper focus and fresh ideas. Companies that honor the natural cycle of effort and recovery don’t just see better mental health, they also see sustained high performance.

“Uncertainty isn’t going anywhere, but burnout doesn’t have to be inevitable. Organizations that rethink resilience as a long-term capacity, rather than a short-term response, will define the future of work,” Jeffs says.

SUCCESS WITHOUT A SCOREBOARD IS STRESSFUL

Nothing creates workplace anxiety faster than unclear expectations. Employees want to succeed, but when success metrics are vague or constantly shifting, they feel like they’re shooting at a moving target. This erodes confidence, stifles creativity and leads to decision paralysis.

The simplest fix? Co-create success

measures. Leaders who involve their teams in defining what “success” looks like, and keep those expectations consistent, build a culture of trust and accountability. Regular check-ins should focus not just on results, but also on what’s working, what’s not and how adjustments can be made without upending expectations.

MICROMANAGEMENT: A FAST TRACK TO STRESS

Few things drain morale faster than a leader who can’t let go. Micromanagement sends an implicit message: “I don’t trust you.” It chips away at autonomy, slows decision-making and makes employees second-guess themselves – sometimes to the point where they stop taking initiative altogether.

Great leaders set direction, provide resources and then get out of the way. When employees feel ownership over their work, they’re more engaged, more innovative and less stressed. The best managers don’t control every detail; they create an environment where people can thrive without constant oversight.

HOW ORGANIZATIONS CAN BUILD A HEALTHIER, MORE RESILIENT WORKPLACE

1. Establish a Culture of Prioritization

- Use simple frameworks – like daily huddles or weekly planning – to clarify what matters most.
- Give employees permission to deprioritize tasks that don’t drive meaningful results.

- Avoid reactive, last-minute work cycles that create unnecessary stress.

2. Build Recovery Into the Workweek

- Encourage micro-breaks and ensure lunch breaks aren’t just theoretical.
- Introduce “think days” or quarterly off-site sessions to foster innovation.
- Recognize that sustainable performance requires intentional downtime.

3. Provide Clear Success Measures

- Co-create performance metrics with employees to reduce ambiguity.
- Keep expectations consistent – don’t change the rules mid-game.
- Regularly revisit goals in one-on-ones to ensure alignment and clarity.

4. Empower Instead of Micromanage

- Give employees full ownership of their projects, with clear support structures.
- Trust people to make decisions without excessive oversight.
- Encourage a culture of experimentation and learning, rather than fear of failure.

5. Foster Open Dialogue Around Decision-Making

- Implement feedback loops – whether through check-ins, surveys or roundtable discussions.
- Make it easy for employees to voice concerns before they become problems.
- Create an environment where collaboration, not hierarchy, drives decision-making.

According to Jeffs, workplace well-being doesn’t happen by accident. “It’s a product of intentional leadership and a commitment to building a culture where employees can do their best work without sacrificing their mental health in the process. Leaders who take these steps don’t just improve retention and engagement – they future-proof their organizations against burnout, turnover and performance decline.”

THE MENTAL WELLNESS CHECK

COMPANIES ARE SEEKING ROI ON MENTAL HEALTH BENEFITS AS PROGRAMS EXPAND

BY CONNIE GENTRY

The right thing to do for your people may also be the right decision for your profitability. That's what advocates of expanded mental health benefits hope to prove.

A survey of more than 500 human resources professionals found the vast majority, 87 percent, believe that demonstrating the return on investment of mental health care is critical. However, more than a third of those surveyed also have trouble believing the ROI claimed by their mental health vendors, according to the annual Workforce Mental Health Trends Forecast published by Lyra Health, a provider of mental health benefits that serves more than 20 million people.

HR professionals said tracking their firm's recruiting metrics as well as employee retention, productivity and absenteeism are among the key measurements that can be indicators of ROI.

Notably, employers with comprehensive mental health benefits are 17 percent more likely to experience increased employee engagement and 13 percent more likely to report higher employee productivity, according to the 2025 forecast. The most critical data to monitor, according to many of the benefits leaders surveyed, are costs versus savings in the organization's health claims.

With or without quantifiable evidence on the books, businesses that believe in the value of mental health are expanding their benefits packages and taking resources and health care to the next level.

"In today's competitive job market, investing in mental and emotional well-being resources is not just a benefit; it's a strategic imperative," said Patrick Chanod Jr., principal of well-being at Edward Jones, adding that by prioritizing associates' mental



SARAH PLUMMER TAYLOR
DPR Construction

health, a company will foster resilience, creativity and loyalty.

"Offering robust mental health support enhances associate engagement and significantly reduces turnover, turning workplaces into nurturing communities where individuals feel valued, respected and empowered to contribute their best," he said.

Two years ago, while their organization and associates were still dealing with post-pandemic issues like isolation and burnout, Edward Jones established a well-being center of excellence and embarked on a multi-year endeavor to improve the health outcomes and workforce experience of its team.

"Starting with mental and emotional well-being resources, we identified providers that could better meet the needs of our associates and their families," Chanod said. The company launched an Enhanced Employee Assistance Program, which began "solving critical gaps like prevention, access, service and reporting," he said. "Our associates and their families deserve more than just the basics. Investing in an enhanced EAP was the

next logical step."

Employees also benefit from workplace cultures that are open and transparent, where historical stigmas associated with mental illness no longer exist. To that end, mental health has become a common topic of conversation within company settings.

That's certainly true at DPR Construction, which was recognized in 2024 by Newsweek as one of "America's Greatest Workplaces for Mental Well-Being."

"I've been a firsthand witness to that conversation at all levels of the company, in private conversations and in project teams," said Sarah Plummer Taylor, DPR's talent advocate for the Southeast region.

She recalls one example during a suicide awareness event when one of the company's superintendents shared his story of "feeling challenged in that regard," and how his candor opened the door for others to express their feelings.

"There are lots of examples across the company where [conversations] are encouraged, received with empathy, and folks are supported as they share personal, or family and friend,

examples of what they're bringing to work with them. It's that whole person model that DPR supports," Taylor said.

ILLUMINATING DARKNESS

Likewise, a key component of Edward Jones' strategy is communication and education, with a focus on holistic well-being. At the company's "signature events," both senior leaders and associates speak openly and honestly about their personal struggles.

"We take 'dark' topics like anxiety, depression and suicide awareness and prevention out of the shadows and disempower them on stage through brave storytelling, while also shining a great big spotlight on all the resources available to associates and their families," Chanod said.

"Senior leaders sharing their journeys display the dichotomy of leadership — [it says] you can have trust and confidence in me as your leader, but I do not have all of this figured out, and I struggle just like you. This creates a culture of 'Being OK, not to be OK.'"

An overarching culture of support and "bring your whole self" to work is what ultimately attracted Taylor to DPR. A U.S. Marine veteran who deployed twice to Iraq, she is also the author of two books about mental wellness and resiliency: "Just Roll With It: 7 Battle Tested Truths for Building a Resilient Life" and "Stopping Military Suicides: Veteran Voices to Help Prevent Deaths."

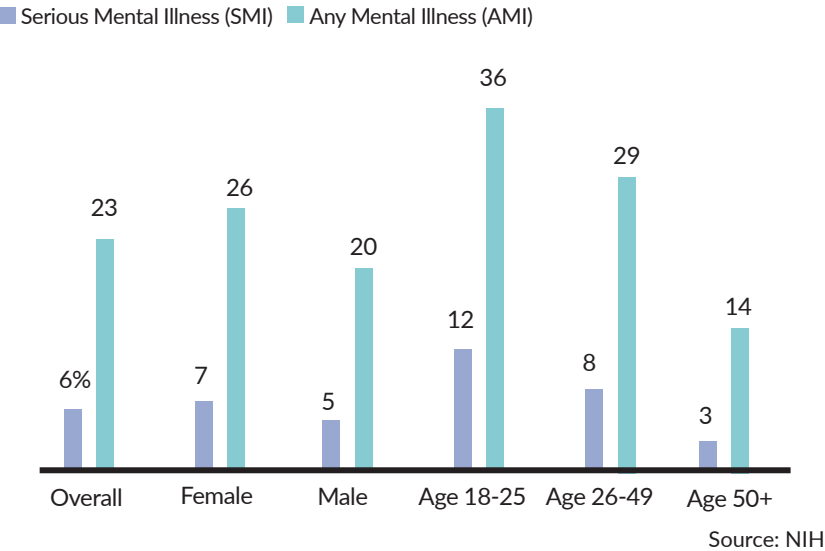
Mental health issues are prevalent in today's workforce.

85 percent of HR leaders believe it is essential for companies to offer mental health care benefits for the entire family

81 percent of HR leaders are increasingly concerned about the rising rates of serious mental health conditions

61 percent name AI as the top emerging

PREVALENCE OF MENTAL ILLNESS IN U.S. ADULTS IN 2022



trend expected to shape mental health benefits over the next five years

Taylor was initially reluctant to join a corporate construction company because of the parallels of rigid hierarchies that she saw between military culture and other construction companies. DPR has proved to be the antithesis of that rigidity, she says, adding that she typically finds herself working with her employer's leaders, teaching them not only how to build resiliency for themselves but also how to share it with others.

"It's great to work at a company where a consistent core value is for folks to mentor others, where if someone is nearing burnout and needs a break, they can use PTO, or take a sabbatical," she said.

After five years at DPR, every employee is entitled to take three consecutive weeks of "sabbatical leave" and the benefits package reflects that "taking care of people" is the top priority at DPR.

The company provides lunch-and-learn workshops to improve employee well-being, with meals catered and topics ranging from sleep health to resiliency to chair yoga. All employees have free access to confidential professional counseling, flexibility for time off and a host of wellness benefits that are both preventative and proactive.

It's like the outreach Janellae Escobar received after the birth of her third child.

"My maternity leave was completely

paid for by DPR for this baby, and you can imagine how having that covered really helped my mental health," said Escobar, who leads communications and brand management at DPR. During her first two pregnancies, Escobar worked in corporate communications management at two other Fortune 500 firms, neither of which had benefits that compared with DPR, which also offered her and her husband parental coaching classes.

"I had never been offered parental coaching," she said.

What Escobar really liked is that she didn't have to look for a coach, it was all arranged for her.

Similarly, the Enhanced EAP at Edward Jones is free for all employees, including part-time associates, their spouse/partner and up to five dependents, whether they are on the Edward Jones medical insurance or not. Eight virtual or in-person therapy sessions are included (per mental health issue, per year) and over 50,000 in-network providers are available in the plan.

"We hold our vendors accountable to a lightning-fast 2.2 days to [provide] care," Chanod said.

"And our Enhanced EAP provided us with a clear focus on prevention, including 2,000-plus hours of meditation and mindfulness content and unlimited text-based chat available at more than 1,500 certified mental health coaches."

Through the EAP, employees also have

access to traditional work/life services, such as referrals for legal and financial services or child and elder care, and resources are available to support the well-being of children and teenagers.

NAVIGATING UNCERTAINTY

In the survey for Lyra's 2025 forecast, financial stress surfaced as the leading factor impacting workforce mental health. Job insecurity and economic fears have escalated since that survey was conducted in September.

Forbes reported early this year that more than 152,000 jobs were cut in Q4 2024, a significant 30 percent increase over the last quarter of 2023. And hundreds of layoffs and furloughs are announced almost daily as a result of frozen federal budgets. Uncertainty abounds.

Mark Simon, executive director of NAMI Wake County, which is the local affiliate of the National Alliance on Mental Illness, was working with a large business to engage with the company's employee resource groups when unexpectedly the company announced layoffs. "We had to pause the original initiative and quickly pull together resources for employees navigating the stress of layoffs," he said.

That's something NAMI is equipped to do, and Simon's recommendation for stressful times is: "Be proactive in naming this — acknowledging that this uncertainty exists and validating employee concerns can be helpful."

It can feel overwhelming for company leaders as well as their associates, but to create a sense of psychological safety, he suggests providing as much transparency as possible. "Sometimes that's tough to do, but anything you can do to address some of the uncertainty, even though you may not have all the answers, can help build trust," Simon said.

If there's an opportunity to host open dialogue, he encourages doing so. "Whether it's a town hall meeting with upper management or check-ins from individual managers with their direct reports, creating a feedback channel can be helpful."

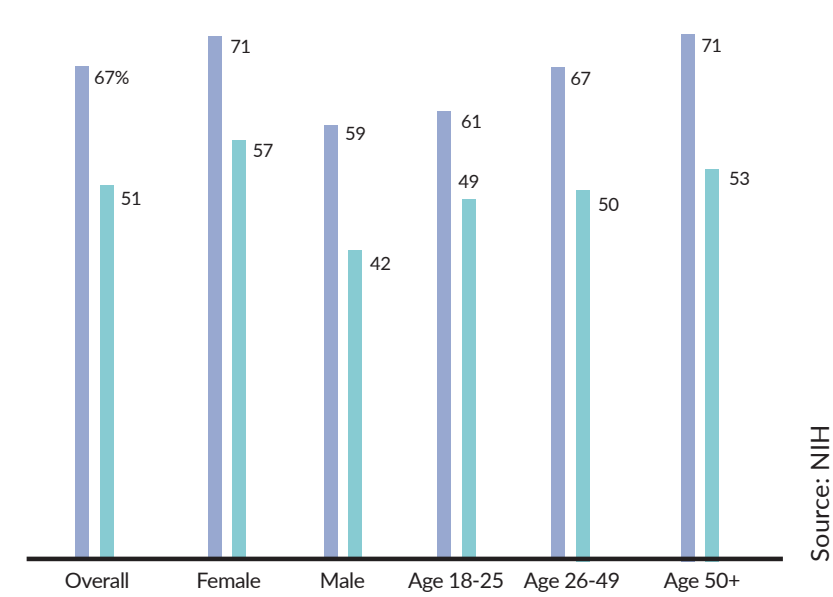
Ultimately, Simon's advice is to lead with compassion and give as much notice as possible for any changes that may happen.

As needs for mental health care grow — one in three HR professionals said providing support for parents and caregivers is their top well-being priority for 2025.

Looking ahead, the Lyra 2025 forecast reports 83 percent of HR professionals believe artificial intelligence could be the answer.

AI is expected to play a big role in improving and shaping mental health care in the coming year, helping facilitate more accessible, effective and sustainable options for organizations and their employees.

PREVALENCE OF MENTAL ILLNESS IN U.S. ADULTS IN 2022





NORTH CAROLINA
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North Carolina Treatment Connection

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A campaign to help people find reputable sources for substance use treatment in North Carolina.



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