

Technology Is Just Part of Mental Health Management

By Nicole Lewis

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Employers and HR managers should look for vendors that provide a holistic solution—not just technology—that addresses employees' many needs, advised Patrick Kennedy, a mental health advocate and former congressional representative.

Kennedy, who co-sponsored the 2008 Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act while serving as a Democratic representative from Rhode Island, believes the coronavirus pandemic will lead to more awareness of the best ways to support good mental health.

"You need care in health care, and technology is great at facilitating that. But as someone who is in recovery myself, I can tell you firsthand that technology is no substitute to the human connection," he said. "People need the human connection because these illnesses are illnesses of isolation, of shame, of marginalization, and technology does not do anything about those things."

Pandemic Takes a Toll on Mental Health

Americans are experiencing higher rates of depression, substance abuse and thoughts of suicide because of the pandemic. Social distancing, unemployment, stay-at-home orders and worries about sending children back to school have escalated employees' stress and anxiety.

Data from global advisory firm Willis Towers Watson shows that 92 percent of employees report some level of anxiety from the pandemic, with 55 percent indicating a moderate or high degree.

To tackle the crisis, mental health solutions like Quartet Health, Ginger.io, Lyra Health and Wellthy are providing new features and improving their platforms as on-demand services and telehealth sessions become increasingly popular. This is occurring as companies are reworking their employee assistance programs to give better mental and emotional support.

Data from Rock Health, a full-service seed fund that supports startups working in digital health, shows that in the first half of 2020, digital behavioral health companies received \$588 million from investors. That's more than the \$539 million the segment received for all of 2019. Rock Health's midyear report on the digital health market also showed that funding has been channeled to companies with a range of product features, from fully automated chatbots to video chat platforms with additional tools that augment patient/clinician interactions.

Gaps in Mental Health Care

Technology isn't a panacea, though. Kennedy said employers and employees struggle with inadequate reimbursements for mental health treatment; poor training that doesn't equip organizations to respond appropriately to employees with mental health issues; and corporate cultures where managers don't listen, employees don't have a chance to express their pain and treatment isn't personalized. He added that technology can be a great asset to address the fragmentation that exists in the mental health care system and can provide useful care-coordination templates, but that's not enough.

"We'll have to employ evidence-based treatments because right now the people get a one-size-fits-all mental health treatment, and the mental health and addiction world really has not caught up in terms of the personalized medicine approaches. That means employees are often very dissatisfied with the kind of treatment they get because many providers are not skilled in the type of treatment that the person is seeking based upon their unique set of needs," Kennedy said.

Employers' Options

While these challenges exist, employers are savvier about recognizing the need for a comprehensive mental health solution than they used to be, said Joe Grasso, clinical director of partnerships at Lyra Health, a Burlingame, Calif.-based provider of technology that connects its clients' employees, spouses and children to therapists, mental health coaches and personalized medication prescribing.

"There is this need to address the full spectrum of mental health needs from day-to-day stress all the way to suicidality and that in between you need access to specialists who address conditions like race-based traumatic stress, for example," he said. "There are very real mental health consequences from racial injustice that manifest in mental health systems, so you want to have a network that has specialty providers who are trained to deal with specific issues like race-based traumatic stress or post-traumatic stress disorder."

Grasso said Lyra also partners with employers to challenge the stigma surrounding mental health.

"We've developed programs that are specifically designed to counter the shame and stigma attached to mental health. We also recruit leaders at companies who are willing to stand up and say 'mental health matters,'" he said.

One company that takes the stress out of managing chronic illness is Wellthy, a New York-based concierge service that helps employees manage the complicated health care system by scheduling appointments, finding the right specialists, researching treatment options, managing insurance and organizing records.

At Medica, a health insurance company, 1,700 employees and their family members have access to the Wellthy platform. According to Lisa Stahnke, senior director of total rewards and talent at Medica, 70 percent of employees are women and the average age is 43. She noted that these women are in the "sandwich generation," taking care of both their parents and their children.

Stahnke said prior to the pandemic, most employees used the Wellthy platform to manage the care of their elderly parents who suffered from illnesses like Alzheimer's disease, memory loss or depression. The pandemic changed that. Today there's been a 30 percent increase in use of the platform among Medica employees tapping into Wellthy's child care support features, which help parents find nannies and teachers who can come into the home to provide extra support.

As companies look for technology platforms to manage employees' mental health issues, Lindsay Jurist-Rosner, CEO of Wellthy, said she's noticing more employers are conducting surveys because they want to understand how the coronavirus is impacting employees.

"HR leaders need to understand the barriers that employees face to bringing their best selves to their work," she said. "They also need to know about the causes of mental health issues. Are people experiencing complicated family care needs? Are they struggling to balance kids and working from home? Or is the problem loneliness, isolation or financial stress?" Jurist-Rosner said.

As employers seek to know more about their employees, companies that deploy technology platforms to manage their workers' mental health are going to want more evidence that these platforms help their workers, said Chandni Mathur, senior industry analyst covering digital health at research firm Frost and Sullivan.

Mathur said there are three key items companies are looking for when they choose a mental health management platform:

- **Quantification of performance.** Whether it's clinical performance that reveals the effectiveness in controlling the mental health disorder or economic performance in terms of saving money, companies will want to know if these systems are performing well and whether the return on investment is worthwhile.

- **Interoperability.** Mental health platforms can't work in silos and will have to integrate with other health care systems like electronic health records and electronic prescription systems so that the provider can have a complete view of the patient's medical history.
- **Analytics.** Psychiatrists, therapists and other clinicians will require analytical data on patients so that they can identify the most vulnerable patients, follow treatments that work and take actions that provide preventive care immediately.

"It costs a tremendous amount of money to manage patients with mental health and substance abuse problems. Preventive care is going to become more important, and precision medicine and personalized care are concepts which are real. This is where we are headed in the near future," Mathur said.

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