



# Untreated mental illnesses hurt productivity

BY AMANDA MCGRORY-DIXON

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Although so many people are affected by mental illnesses, few receive the treatment they need, and if an employer fails to help its employees overcome these illnesses, it can expect to see reduced productivity and engagement, says Michael Klachefsky, national practice leader of The Standard's Workplace Possibilities program.

With mental illnesses, there are two situations that can negatively affect an employer, Klachefsky says. One is employees missing work because of mental illnesses, which are most often depression and anxiety, and the other is referred to as presenteeism, meaning an employee is still on the job but suffering from these mental illnesses.

Engagement is often defined as helping employees feel satisfied with their jobs, allowing them to connect their individual objectives with the company's strategic goals; however, that is unlikely to happen when an employee is suffering from a mental illness, Klachefsky says. When an employee is facing a mental illness, corporate goals are not the priority for that person.

"People who are depressed have trouble focusing on their jobs and certainly have trouble focusing on the company's goals," Klachefsky says. "It's my belief that helping decrease depression in the workplace and decreasing presenteeism and absenteeism due to depression will increase employee engagement."

To help employees battle their mental illnesses, the problem should be identified early, and those employees should soon seek treatment to determine whether they should take short-term disability or remain at work while undergoing therapy, Klachefsky says. Past studies have shown that presenteeism is actually more costly than absenteeism. Klachefsky attributes this to the fact that mental illnesses are usually more hidden when the employee remains at work and fails to receive the treatment he or she needs.

Klachefsky also recommends that employers use an onsite consultant to help employees with mental illnesses get back to work sooner. With mental illnesses, affected employees often find themselves at home for too long, and they lose the motivation to return to their daily routines, but an onsite consultant is there to guide employees through the process. By connecting employees to an employee assistance program, a consultant helps employees stay on track.

"One of the thoughts is people off work too long develop a disability mindset," Klachefsky says. "In other words, they get comfortable receiving disability payments, and they become fearful. They're fearful of returning to work because they're worried about the stigma of having a mental health condition. It becomes more comfortable to stay at home."

On average, Klachefsky estimates that 20 to 25 percent of an employer's work force is suffering from some type of mental illness. While some illnesses might be identified, others go untreated, which has a large impact on an employer's productivity. If an employer wants to keep its work force productive and engaged, it must take treatment and rehabilitation of mental illnesses seriously.