

EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE REPORT

supporting EA professionals

Mental Health and COVID-19 Sierra Tucson CEO Addresses Key Issues



The COVID-19 pandemic is affecting each of us differently, some more than others. For those already suffering from mental illness, the pandemic may be enough to push someone “over the edge” – and assistance from a mental health professional may be in order.

and marijuana use are skyrocketing as folks shelter at home.

In addition, with 16-million-plus Americans losing their jobs and filing for unemployment, losses in the stock market, the depression, grief, and loss from this pandemic are going to be with us for a while. We saw this in behavioral health to a much lesser extent in 2008 with the financial crisis. At the time, we were treating an influx of very successful people who were becoming addicted to drugs and alcohol for the first

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Consider: For those with depression, hearing so much talk about death is difficult and may increase thoughts about suicide; for those with anxiety: to see so many people getting very tense can make their anxiety a lot worse. And that’s just for starters. *It’s likely that the coronavirus pandemic is proving to be a game changer for the mental health profession.*

Employee Assistance Report (EAR) had the opportunity recently to interview **Jaime Vinck**, Group CEO for the Arizona-based mental health treatment center **Sierra Tucson**. (The issue is also particularly timely as May is Mental Health Awareness Month across the US.)

EAR: *Would you say that earlier statement that the coronavirus pandemic is proving to be a “game changer” in mental health is accurate? If so, in what way?*

Jaime: I feel that the awareness of mental health in everyday life has grown immensely, and ideally will reduce the stigma in the “world after Covid-19”. [Conversely] We know that alcohol

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Coping Strategies for People Suffering from Mental Illness

By Lynn Jonen



Mental illness presents unique challenges during times of stress. All mental illness carries a degree of stress. Outside stress can, in turn, worsen anxiety, depression and emotional dysregulation. People with mental illness are often more vulnerable to the negative effects of stress, with external stressors compounding

those associated with mental illness. It can become a vicious cycle of ever-increasing stress and psychological distress. It is essential to address and interrupt this cycle with adaptive coping strategies.

The overarching goal of all coping strategies is to calm the “fight-or-flight” response that is activated to manage stress. When we are in this activated state, we have more difficulty thinking clearly and we experience problems regulating our emotions.

The best coping strategies actively work to calm the nervous system and promote feelings of safety, including: self-affirmations or positive self-talk, practicing gratitude, getting good sleep, creativity, staying in the present moment, and practicing optimism.

Negative thinking and emotional symptoms of mental illness tend to worsen in isolation. We are social creatures at our most basic level, and we need meaningful connection. We can take advantage of technology to stay connected with professional appointments with medical providers, therapists, and support groups.

Many religious services and educational opportunities are available virtually. We can stay connected with loved ones via telephone and virtual meeting spaces. Regularly connecting with nature’s sights and sounds, whether in life or virtually, offers many calming benefits.

At a time of high, pervasive stress like the one we are collectively experiencing now, it is imperative that each of us make a conscious effort to engage in as many healthful habits and coping strategies as we can.

Lynn Jonen, PhD, is Clinical Director with Sierra Tucson.

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time in their 40s and 50s. Marriages were shattered, and families were navigating their lives from a different income level. It was quite devastating.

On a positive note, I’m seeing a renewed sense of gratitude, faith, appreciation, and enjoyment of the simple things.

EAR: *Have you seen an increase in admissions at your facility?*

Jaime: We haven’t seen an increase in residential admissions, primarily because the majority of our patients travel from other geographic areas for treatment, both nationally and internationally. Given current travel restrictions, and an overall fear of airplanes and airports, we have seen a decline in patients, especially from the New York area, Texas, Michigan, and California.

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We have had an *increase* in our Outpatient Services/Partial Hospitalization Program as many of our residents do not want to return home to areas where there may have been a substantial spread of the coronavirus in the community.

EAR: *With the increase in isolation, depression and suicide would seem to be a particular concern. Would you say that is accurate? Have you seen an increase in the number of people attempting suicide?*

Jaime: Yes, isolation is a key contributing factor to both depression and suicide. There is also an increase in alcohol sales of 55% since social distancing and sheltering in place began. Substance use, especially alcohol use, is another key contributing factor in suicide attempts, even for those who may not have an alcohol use disorder or be an “alcoholic”. Alcohol causes a reduction in impulse control and increases depression. This is a “perfect storm” when people are isolating.

We have seen an increase in overall acuity of our patients, including suicide, paranoia, depression, and anxiety.

Isolation and fear are also difficult for people with post-traumatic stress disorder, and create an exacerbation of symptoms such as nightmares, panic attacks, anger outbursts and at times disassociation.

EAR: *What advice would you have for EA professionals who have to straddle the line between employees and employers?*

Jaime: The EA professionals that I have worked with are such incredible clinicians. They know the importance of having a solid group of external clinicians at treatment centers to collaborate with – especially at the residential level of care. Things can go south quickly, so having folks that you trust on speed dial will help the employees stay safe and the employers by taking care of their most important resource. Also be sure that you’re getting the family involved – knowing about the recovery environment is a key to success and there is also that opportunity to get the loved ones some help as well.

EAR: *What is the best way for employee assistance professionals to collaborate with treatment centers?*

Jaime: The most effective way to collaborate is to visit centers and find one that’s the best cultural fit for your

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Editor's Notebook

No one delivers casseroles to people with mental health conditions. What does that mean, you ask? When someone undergoes surgery for a cyst, tumor, or other medical procedure, it isn't unusual for a good-hearted neighbor to drop by with a casserole or other hot dish so the recovering person can focus on getting better instead of cooking.

That's great! But what about someone with a mental health diagnosis? Does anyone bring *them* meals when they are *mentally* depressed? Having panic attacks? Maybe, but probably not. I readily admit the COVID-19 pandemic has had untold *physical* health problems stemming from infection for a LOT of Americans. I get the social distancing and stay-at-home orders to keep the virus from spreading.

But what about the mental and psychological pitfalls of asking people to remain cooped up in their homes for such extended periods of time? Isn't that “health” also? In this month's *EAR* cover story, Sierra Tucson CEO Jaime Vinck points out that extended periods of isolation is a key contributor to depression and suicide. Throw in someone who already suffers from alcohol abuse and you have a “perfect storm” of mental health problems.

Why aren't we hearing more about *these* health issues? I think it goes back to the stigma surrounding mental health; that if it isn't a physically noticeable problem or condition, then it isn't a health issue – or at least not a big one compared to physical ailments.

As EA professionals you know that isn't true, so let's all do our part in seeing that the pandemic sheds light on the need for greater mental health awareness.

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Combating Presenteeism during a Pandemic

Today's workplace culture has many workers feeling the pressure to show up to the office at all costs, even when ill; however, the global pandemic COVID-19 has shown it is more critical than ever for businesses to tackle the widespread challenge of "presenteeism" at work.

Previously defined as "showing up to work when one is ill" the concept of 'presenteeism' has evolved to include a wide range of detrimental behaviors relating to *how* we work.



This includes employees who arrive early and stay late to show commitment, those who work during annual leave and those who respond to emails at all hours, mistaking an unhealthy attitude towards work as a strong work ethic, often to the detriment of their personal well-being.

Although those working from home are generally more productive than in an office, remote workers are, on average, working an extra 1.5 days a week, as they feel it is easier to finish a task as they don't need to think about commuting.

Measurements such as the use of tools that help manage remote working are just two ways businesses are attempting to deal with the pandemic.

As with anything new and unknown, there is a level of uncertainty that comes with a pandemic. Keep an eye on the news, and reiterate decisions that could affect their job/ability to work as quickly as possible to reassure people.

Ensure employees know that they are able to work from home

Although it may not be possible for all roles and industries, companies where staff are able to carry out

tasks outside the office, should let employees know this is something they can do as soon as possible.

Encourage senior managers to lead by example

By managing their own absence and presence and encouraging a healthy work-life balance, line managers and senior members of staff can act as better role models for the organization, inspiring their teams to do the same. Ensure employees are 'online' during working hours and encourage them to log off at the end of the day as normal.

Enable flexibility

Employees who adjust their working hours and environment are less likely to fall into the cycle of presenteeism. By offering options such as flexible working options or hours, employees can feel more in control and still maintain their work.

Source: John Williams, Head of Marketing at Instant Offices.

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Mental Health Days are Crucial

Many employees are afraid to call in sick when they're feeling emotionally ill. Typically, this is not the company's fault but rather a personal struggle; sometimes, workers believe they should push or distract themselves. But there's a fine line between "giving in" and looking after oneself.

Mental health should be treated with as much importance as physical health. If you'd call in sick because you have a fever, why not for a panic attack? Here's how employees can benefit from mental health days.

Acknowledge thoughts and emotions

"A common reason why many refuse to take mental health days is because they feel guilty, ashamed, weak, and a million other overwhelming emotions," she said. "Their thoughts convince them that they're giving in, playing victim, being dramatic, when really, it's quite the opposite," said Vicki Salemi, a career expert at Monster.

By taking a mental health day, you are choosing to help yourself get better. If you woke up with a migraine, would you force yourself to follow the routine of your day when you can barely keep your eyes open without vomiting? (I hope not.) Odds are, you'd acknowledge the pain, call in sick, and do whatever it took to feel better.

Give yourself what you need

Admitting you're struggling, and being aware of your struggle, is the first step. From there, be your own best friend, and do only what you think will ease your emotional strain.

Ask yourself what will make you feel better in this moment. Is it rest? A good book? A shopping spree? Lunch with your sister or an old friend? Whatever it may be, focus on what you need and how you can fill that void in a healthy way.

"There's no right or wrong answer on what you do with the time," Salemi said. "The point is, you are taking one, and you're recharging your batteries."

Don't worry about judgment

You might be concerned about what your colleagues or managers might think. Do they believe you're slacking on a project? Do they

think you used your mental health day as an excuse to skip work?

No one can fully understand what you're dealing with except you. Be willing to accept that, and be willing to accept yourself. "Normal" is not universal; it is unique to every individual.

Additionally, you don't need to label your day off. If you're uncomfortable calling it what it is, simply tell your employer that you're feeling under the weather (because you are!), and treat it as you would a physical illness.

Mental health days are efficient and encourage overall health and wellness, helping to maintain work-life balance. Taking advantage of them will help both you and your company in the long run, so don't let anyone (including yourself) convince you that you're making a poor choice, according to Salemi.

"If you're reluctant to take a mental health day, just know it's highly unlikely you will ever regret taking one," she said. "Go for it, and realize that your employer also reaps the benefits when you return to work feeling more clearheaded, less stressed and more refreshed."

Implement a mental health policy

Many of us spend more time at work than we do with our loved ones. As a result, the workplace can be a place of connection and inclusion, or it can be a place that has negative effects on your mental health. Workplaces that have mental health policies care for everyone's well-being and provide a place where everyone feels supported. *The EAP can be of great assistance in this area.*

Summary

Mental well-being is just as important as physical well-being.

Employees are less likely to stay home to care for their mental health than they are for their physical health.

Employers, with the EAP's help, can improve employees' well-being by creating a mental health policy.

Source: Business News Daily

Prioritizing Mental Health during COVID-19

More than 4 in 10 adults (45%) responding to a recent Kaiser Family Foundation Health poll said worry and stress related to COVID-19 has had a negative impact on their mental health, up from 32% in early March. Mental health wellness must be a priority in the workplace during these challenging times, according to experts, and technology can play a role in increasing employee access to care.

“One in every 5 American adults experience some form of mental illness — over 43 million Americans,” William Kassler, chief medical officer at IBM Watson Health, told *HR Dive*.

It’s not too late for companies in a time of crisis to implement mental health strategies, Kassler said. However, they will be in response mode. During this time, following the recommendations of local and

national public health authorities regarding mental health is essential, he said.

Limeade CEO Henry Albrecht told *HR Dive*: “A lot of people don’t realize that even before this COVID-19 pandemic, there’s also been this quiet epidemic of isolation and loneliness in this country,” he said.

Limeade, which brands itself as an employee well-being platform, seeks to increase physical distancing *between* employees but also *reduce* social isolation, Albrecht said. The company provides tools for managers to check in on their teams and has social events such as a virtual happy hour.

“What we found is that it’s been a really positive experience for a lot of people,” Albrecht said. “I get to learn things about colleagues that I didn’t know.” ■

Quick Ideas

Keep Your Phone OFF!

Why do so many people find smartphone use in work meetings to be inappropriate? When you take out your phone it shows a:

❖ **Lack of respect.** You consider the information on your phone to be more important than the conversation at hand, and you view people outside of the meeting to be more important than those sitting right in front of you.

❖ **Lack of attention.** You are unable to stay focused on one thing at a time.

❖ **Lack of self-control.** You are like a modern-day Pavlovian dog who responds to the whims of others through the buzz of your phone.

❖ **Lack of self-awareness.** You don’t understand how ridiculous your behavior looks to other people. If



none of these strategies work, place a basket by the conference room door and leave your phone there! ■

Sources: Kevin Kruse, best-selling author; Travis Bradberry, co-founder of Talent Smart; and USC’s Marshall School of Business.

Pandemic = More Virtual Mental Health Care

The coronavirus pandemic is causing unprecedented levels of stress and grief. As a result, companies providing virtual mental health care say they're seeing a strong surge in interest—which means they're scrambling to meet that demand by introducing new services, accelerating launch timelines, and bringing more staff on board.

According to *Stat Reports*, COVID-19 could prove to be a breakout for these businesses, which had been trying to address the shortage of in-person mental health care by offering virtual coaching, monitoring, and educational information long before the coronavirus outbreak. If the firms can bring in more users and corporate customers *now*, they might convince them to stick around after the pandemic is over. But that depends on whether the firms can handle the upsurge in demand.

The demand for mental health services has long been higher than the supply of available sit-down appointments. The coronavirus pandemic has only exacerbated this dynamic, by making in-person counseling nearly impossible, while also intensifying existing symptoms of depression and anxiety for some people and causing new symptoms for others.

Virtual mental health services could fill part of that gap, but the format also creates new challenges. People sheltering in place with family members or roommates for weeks on end, especially in a cramped living space, may lack a private space where they can do a video or audio chat with a therapist without being overheard. That may be fueling demand for smartphone apps that allow users to chat via text messaging and to access educational content.

At Kaiser Permanente, a health insurer that operates 39 hospitals and has medical groups around the country, more than 90% of mental health visits are now occurring virtually, according to Don Mordecai, a psychiatrist who serves as the system's national leader for mental health and wellness.

"We had been pushing telehealth options for a long time," Mordecai said, but the rapid uptake over the past few weeks "is something that would have taken years, under normal circumstances."

Earlier this month, Kaiser Permanente started offering its members access to a smartphone-powered behavioral health program from Livongo, a company that offers diabetes coaching. That deal was already in the works before the crisis. Thousands of Kaiser Permanente members downloaded Livongo's app in the past week, Mordecai said.

Read more here <https://www.statnews.com/2020/04/13/remote-mental-health-livongo-omada/>. ■

Mental Health Awareness Month

Mental Health Toolkit Available

Since 1949, Mental Health America and its affiliates across the country have led the observance of May is Mental Health Month by reaching millions of people through the media, local events, and screenings.

In 2020, the theme of Tools 2 Thrive offers practical tools that everyone can use to improve their mental health and increase resiliency regardless of the situations they are dealing with.

Help spread the word that mental health is something everyone should care about by using the May as Mental Health Month toolkit materials and conducting awareness activities. Download the toolkit by completing the form at <https://www.mhanational.org/2020toolkit>. ■

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organization. Each treatment center has a certain “feel” and it’s important that as an EA professional, you connect with the clinical and leadership team. For example, I’m from Detroit and spent the first 10 years of my career at Chrysler in Detroit. I “get” the UAW culture, and am able to effectively navigate our world and theirs. This manifests with impeccable communication to the Union EAP, and even making myself available to go to Chicago to talk with the EAP reps on Compassion Fatigue.

If the goals of a treatment center are not in alignment with the referring employers’ goals – it’s not going to work to the benefit of your employees. Ask to meet the leadership team and have outcome data!

***EAR:** What other mental health conditions are you treating people for at Sierra Tucson that a typical employee assistance professional/reader of this newsletter might not be aware of?*

Jaime: At Sierra Tucson, we treat mood disorders, substance use disorders, chronic pain, and of course trauma. All of our programs are trauma informed, as we believe that often untreated trauma is the “fire in the basement” that creates maladaptive coping strategies such as substance use disorder, self-harm, disordered eating, etc.

***EAR:** Could you describe some of the treatment methods used at Sierra Tucson – with particular regard to innovative strategies that others in the field might not be doing?*

Jaime: Sierra Tucson uses an integrated model of care treating the whole person, mind, body, and spirit. Our healing includes experiential therapies (equine and art) as well as physical activities such as yoga, nature walks, and other movement groups. The cornerstone of our program is a 4-day family program, which includes family members working through any communication issues and creating an informed, safe environment.

***EAR:** What is your facility learning about mental health as a result of this pandemic that it might not have otherwise? How might it help Sierra Tucson and other mental health treatment centers going forward?*

Jaime: Our patients are demonstrating that when someone is ready for help – they will go to any lengths to get it.

In terms of our staff, we’re learning to be dynamic, nimble, and resourceful. I always knew that we were

all of those things, however, now what I’m seeing is teamwork, leadership, and commitment like never before. In addition, we’re utilizing the tenets of true servant leadership, with the goal of making our teams, from the receptionists to the physicians, feel safe and appreciated as an essential worker.

For example, we have a daily employee communication call, have opened the Sierra Way Café, where we offer a daily complementary meal (at a social distance of course); and created a Sierra Market where we provide essentials at cost. This not only makes it more convenient for our employees, it keeps them safe and out of grocery stores. We also had “essential worker” bracelets made – that also have our logo and the date of the Executive order that explains Essential workers. This also creates a solidarity and source of pride for being on the front line.

The resilience of human spirit is humbling and a lesson every day.

Successfully operating Acadia Healthcare’s Flagship behavioral health facility, Jaime Vinck, MC, LPC, NCC, is the second female CEO at internationally-renowned Sierra Tucson and serves as the Group CEO for Sierra Tucson, Sierra by the Sea, and Sunrise Ranch. Jaime speaks nationally and internationally on trending topics including: suicide, addiction and depression, provider resilience, and collaborative care. In addition, as an industry advocate, she serves on the Board of Directors of the National Association of Addiction Treatment Providers and 10,000 Beds.

For more information on Sierra Tucson, visit: <https://www.sierratucson.com>

Resources

State-by-State List of Coronavirus Hotlines

Go to <https://careconnectusa.org/coronavirus-hotlines-usa/>

In addition to hotlines, the site also includes information about financial stress and disaster relief. The SAMHSA Disaster Distress helpline is **800-985-5990**.

Source: CareConnect USA. Since 2005, CareConnect USA has published free helplines for families to receive financial assistance. They are currently listed on thousands of government, educational, and civic association websites.