

A BRIGHTER

Here's how teletherapy is bridging the treatment gap and reducing employee burnout

By ALYSSA TUFTS

If you're tired, unmotivated, or simply not excited to go to work every day, there could be many factors that lead to those negative feelings. It could be personal issues or mental health concerns that may take up more of your focus at work than you realize.



OUTLOOK

And in Arizona, that could be a problem. The nonprofit Mental Health American ranked Arizona 42 out of 51 states for access to mental healthcare and a Kronos Inc. and Future Workplace study found 95 percent of HR leaders said burnout is sabotaging workforce retention. But a growing number of experts are beginning to tout the benefits of mental health teletherapy to combat burnout for workers in high-risk industries.

Teletherapy, or online doctor's appointments, is a \$6 billion industry and is estimated to reach about \$20 billion in 2025. The benefits of teletherapy include no commute time, privacy, accessibility and being able to conveniently speak with a mental health professional through video conferencing or a phone call.

Benefits of teletherapy

Jerome Lerner, MD, director of the Licensed Professionals and Executives Program at Sierra Tucson, says teletherapy bridges the treatment gap through affordability, convenience and privacy.

"If people can't physically get to a treatment center or a therapist's office without inconvenience, teletherapy makes it very convenient since it's a phone call or Skype visit away," Lerner says. "For employees, you eliminate time away from work that's required not only for the appointment, but commuting as well."

Teletherapy can also help people feel more comfortable communicating with a therapist because some people may feel embarrassed about going to a

mental health care provider. In addition, teletherapy is beneficial to a therapist who doesn't have the added responsibility of running an office and waiting area, and there are fewer cancellations with teletherapy compared with in-person therapy, Lerner says.

"Technology has opened a new frontier in mental health: support, data collection and treatment," says Chad Snyder, clinical director of MeMD, which provides minor medical care and behavioral health services virtually through licensed medical providers and therapists.

"Consumers can utilize our services by audio or video, so they can call MeMD or look on the website and see what counseling services we offer, what providers they might be interested in based on their bios, and schedule a time to talk with a professional," Snyder says. "We have a diverse range of professionals — from licensed counselors, social workers, nurses and family therapists that can help."

Employee burnout in the workplace

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), about one in five adults in the U.S. experiences some type of mental illness in a given year.

"If those people are not helped, they will not be productive," Lerner says. "They also often lose work time if they're struggling with a mental health issue or an addiction. Those people will be more productive if they can process their stresses and difficulties and have support and some help in creating



Chad Snyder



Jerome Lerner, MD

a healthier, more balanced lifestyle, which also helps them be a better employee.”

Employee burnout can be a precursor to an employee seeking teletherapy. Whether they're overwhelmed with too much work, feel unsupported by their boss or colleagues or are dealing with personal concerns that carry over into the workplace, it can take a toll on an employee's professional productivity and enthusiasm.

“For example, if you have accelerated the work pace and increased work hours and there's a huge false sense of urgency or lack of identified priorities from leadership or management, it contributes to stress and feeling overwhelmed,” Snyder says. “Burnout is often described as having factors that negatively contribute to work ethic and productivity due to severe exhaustion, lack of motivation, lack of satisfaction from work and emotional depletion.

“When experiencing burnout, people have a perception of diminished personal or professional accomplishments which can lead to a cycle of feeling more burned-out and manifest in employees overall having a more negative and less professional attitude, which can have a contagion factor for other employees,” Snyder says. “It can impact the work environment on many levels.”

Addressing burnout with options

Snyder says the first step in addressing and alleviating employee burnout is to acknowledge and recognize signs,

such as not meeting deadlines, lack of communication or initiative, or a change in normal behavior or professionalism. An employee might notice their unwillingness to discuss work in social or family circles, reluctance to check emails or that they are easily frustrated at work, Snyder says.

“Communicate to employees the organizational commitment to the importance of a good work/life balance,” Snyder says. “Research demonstrates that healthy employees are productive employees and healthy isn't just confined to physical health.”

In addition, Snyder says employers can include teletherapy in benefit plans to minimize the stigma associated with needing personal time, such as an employee who uses a sick day for a “mental health day.” Burned-out workers are 63 percent more likely to take a sick day, according to a Gallup study.

“A lot of times, companies and employees don't equate mental health with a sick day,” Snyder says. “Instead, they think sick days are for physical illness or injuries, so a lot of employees opt out of using the sick days. However, if they use their vacation days, they're already burned-out so it's not really restorative or valuable.”

To address these concerns in employees, Snyder says it's important employers make sure employees are aware of teletherapy options.

“There's evidence that shows teletherapy boosts efficiency, reduces costs and

improves clinical outcomes,” Snyder says. “It gives employees an opportunity to work with a counselor who can help them develop coping strategies, such as taking breaks or walks during work, or self-care strategies like unplugging from social media, engaging in hobbies or exercising.

“Teletherapy also gives people opportunities to be heard, which is very cathartic for someone to feel validated and supported. Working through treatment can help individuals to develop reasonable limits and boundaries between work and their personal life,” Snyder says.

What's next

Lerner thinks teletherapy is going to continue to expand, as it's helpful for both the employee and the employer.

“There's not going to be any end to the shortage of mental health professionals that we are experiencing, so any way that we can make it more efficient, available and accessible for people to receive these services, the better the person is, as well as the employer for whom that person is working,” Lerner says.

“One of the biggest things that helps individuals deal with burnout, stress or mental health is having good support networks, and work is no different,” Snyder says. “We spend a great deal of time in our work environment, so creating environments that contribute to social connectedness and belonging and being supportive are really advantageous.” **AB**