

The Behavioral Health Provider: Your New BFF

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Even though some executives disagree with the Accountable Care Act (ACA) on principle, it is likely here to stay, in one form or another. One of the prevailing arguments against it is the high initial cost associated with the law. Yes, the ACA may carry some costs to you and your employees in the early stages, but if crafted with a long-term vision in mind, the ACA can reduce personal and business-related expenses in significant ways.

While historically, a plan's

behavioral health component has been relegated largely to the sidelines, behavioral health has increasingly emerged as a vital and essential aspect of employee wellness. A well-designed health plan today features various appropriate behavioral health services, not just for the care offered to employees, but also for the protection of the employer's bottom line. Let's just say, then, that a well-developed behavioral health plan (or provider), may be your new BFF, i.e. Best Friend Forever.

How much does mental illness really cost employers?

It helps first to establish that untreated mental disorders in the workplace cost you money. Untreated mental illness represents the third most costly medical condition in the U.S. Treatment costs are roughly \$75 billion per year. The total costs (including late or absence of treatment) to the public and the business sector are over \$300 billion annually.

Behavioral health conditions (which include mental illness, anxiety, depression and substance abuse)

cost so much partly because of their prevalence. Nearly half of the population will need treatment for one or more mental health issues at some point in their lifetime. Since only one of every four individuals needing help actually receives appropriate treatment services, the indirect costs of such conditions mount quickly. Thus, it is easy to see how mental illness directly and indirectly contributes to the \$300 billion costs facing employers.

Countless studies show that early intervention offers the best chance for recovery for a majority of individuals with behavioral health conditions. However, very little effort is made to actually develop a robust mental health offering in many corporate health plans. Almost as important to offering access to quality mental health care is a clear and consistent message from management that these services are available and should be used when necessary.

Alter Certain Behaviors to Alter Your Bottom Line

Medical science informs us that 15 chronic health conditions are

responsible for 80 percent of medical expenses worldwide, afflicting employees across all industries. These chronic conditions are diabetes, coronary heart disease, hypertension, back pain, obesity, cancer, asthma, arthritis, allergies, sinusitis, depression, congestive heart failure, lung disease, kidney disease and high cholesterol.

Not entirely surprising is that only 8 specific, high-risk behaviors are at the root of these conditions. These are poor diet, lack of exercise, smoking, lack of health screening, inadequate stress management, poor standard of care, insufficient sleep and excessive alcohol consumption.

These behaviors and the state of mind of your employees are all rooted in mental and emotional health. Employers who recognize these issues and the link to their employees' mental health are in a better position to design health plans that more likely address some, if not many of the behavioral underpinnings. If only some of these behaviors are changed among a small number of employees, employers can save millions. If they can change many of those behaviors across a large contingency of their staff, employers will save much more.

So, why can a competent behavioral health provider be your new Best Friend Forever? Because such a provider is proficient in

understanding and helping to modify human behavior. Such providers have both the personality and the skills that can help others modify their behaviors in ways that can then positively impact their medical conditions.

What distinguishes competent behavioral health professionals from others in the healthcare profession? They usually possess a level of patience essential to handling the challenging concerns of a patient. They understand which behaviors need to change and how. Behavioral health professionals are able to educate the patient about how his/her behavior impacts health. They offer positive alternatives to self-defeating behaviors. They are specifically trained to motivate individuals to comply with their treatment regimen and to change those problem behaviors to positive ones. Mental health practitioners make themselves available as necessary to assist the patient throughout the change process. Finally, they have the persistence to continue encouraging and reinforcing positive behavioral change over time.

Blueprint for the modern health plan

Forward-thinking managed care companies and health plans get it. This is especially true of those that hold financial risk in full capitation contracts involving populations with serious medical and psychiatric

conditions that heavily utilize intensive medical services.

Such progressive companies may imbed a variety of behavioral health specialists into their patients' treatment teams. As a result, they likely have discovered that patients in such plans typically receive better health care and are more satisfied with that care than others. And these managed care firms save money.

Conclusion

For those executives still perceiving the behavioral health provider as just another specialist, it's time to reconsider their perspective. It's time to have a serious conversation with the right behavioral health provider, so the employer and its workers might discover they have a Best Friend Forever.

David Stone, Ph.D., is CEO of Sound Mental Health, one of King County's most comprehensive mental health services providers. With more than 30 years of experience developing and managing award-winning community mental health services, his leadership has enabled Sound Mental Health to grow to 80 + programs, supporting more than 18,500 people and generating millions in annual revenue. He received a B.A. in Psychology from Eckerd College, followed by an M.A. and Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from the University of Florida.

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