



The Case for Prioritizing Mental Health for Part-Time Employees

Turbulent times have taken a toll on everyone — especially part-time employees, who faced the dual stressors of mass layoffs and frontline work during a pandemic. This guide provides straightforward solutions to make it easier to support your entire workforce, including this vital segment.





Let's get started

Unprecedented stress doesn't fully capture this moment. More than 40% of Americans reported symptoms of anxiety or depression at the start of this year — a nearly fourfold increase over early 2019, according to a Kaiser Family Foundation survey.¹

Political uncertainty, civil unrest, and the health and economic fallout from COVID-19 have pushed mental health into the national conversation. Employees are craving guidance and support — no matter how many hours a week they may work.

Many employers focus their health and well-being efforts on full-time employees, but part-time employees may be even more vulnerable and in need of help. The stress and anxiety of recent events may be compounded by financial fears, the need to work multiple jobs, or the impact of social factors, such as transportation challenges or housing insecurity.

While part-time workers cut across all demographics and industries, it's clear that those people (younger, women) and positions (retail, food service) that tend toward part-time work are also those reporting some of the highest levels of mental distress.

1. Panchal N, Kamal R, Cox C, Garfield, R. *The Implications of COVID-19 for Mental Health and Substance Use*. Kaiser Family Foundation. February 10, 2021. Accessed August 25, 2021.

2. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Table A-9. *Selected employment indicators*. Updated August 06, 2021. Accessed August 25, 2021.

3. Bahn K, Cumming, CS. *How the coronavirus recession is impacting part-time U.S. workers*. Washington Center for Equitable Growth. June 5, 2020. Accessed August 25, 2021.

4. Gurchiek, K. *SHRM Research: COVID-19 Takes a Toll on Employees' Mental Well-Being*. Society for Human Resource Management. May 11, 2020. Accessed August 25, 2021.

5. Maye, A. *Why We Need the Part-time Worker Bill of Rights*. The Center for Law and Social Policy. March 4, 2021. Accessed August 25, 2021.

6. Bush DM, Lipari RN. *Substance Use and Substance Use Disorder by Industry*. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. April 16, 2015. Accessed August 2021.

1 in 3

One-third of the decline in employment since the pandemic is tied to part-time workers, despite making up less than one-sixth of the US workforce.² In the early days of the pandemic, unemployment among part-time employees surged to 19.7%. As the Washington Center for Equitable Growth points out, more volatile employment for part-time workers comes with higher stress.³

29%

29% of Gen Z employees have reported feelings of depression or hopelessness during the pandemic — the highest rates of any generation, according to a survey by the Society for Human Resources Management.⁴ Like younger workers, women are historically more likely to work part time, and 51% of them reported similar feelings.

1 in 6

1 in 6 workers report having a variable job schedule, according to the Center for Law and Social Policy.⁵ Work schedule instability has been linked to psychological distress and poor sleep quality, and it can also amplify stress and anxiety when transportation and child care coverage are in flux.

12%

12% of part-time workers reported a substance use disorder, according to a 2014 Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration report.⁶ The average for full-time workers was 9.5%.



Why employers should invest in part-time employees' mental health

The health of your employees impacts the health of your business. It makes sense, then, that employers typically offer full-time employees health coverage. And supplemental benefits can be an easy, affordable way to take a comprehensive, "whole-person" approach to employee well-being.

But that focus on full-time employees obscures the fact that part-time employees can play an outsize role in how efficiently and effectively your company runs. And addressing the emotional well-being of this critical work segment doesn't have to mean providing full health coverage. Rather, low-cost, supplemental benefits can have a real impact.

Here are a few reasons that paying more attention to the mental health of part-time employees just makes sense.

Improve Customer Interactions



From restaurant workers to retail employees, customer service representatives to delivery drivers, part-time employees are often the face of your brand, interacting directly with customers. You'd never argue that an employee who works 40 hours a week at company HQ shouldn't get the mental health resources they need. Why not also prioritize the part-time workers who interact with dozens of your customers each day?

Retain Top Talent



Finding and keeping top talent often means adapting to younger workers' openness about mental health needs. Many employees say they'd consider leaving their position for a new company that focused more on mental health.

As the job market rebounds and more employers struggle to fill part-time positions, companies are responding by offering and promoting more mental health services. A 2020 Gallup survey of 200 chief human resources officers found that many are expanding access to employee assistance programs (EAPs), and building awareness of the benefit.⁷

More Present, More Productive



Mental health issues can get in the way of getting a job done. Depression, for instance, reduces cognitive performance about 35% of the time and interferes with a person's ability to complete physical job tasks about 20% of the time, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).⁸

Research shows that good mental health is correlated to higher productivity and engagement, and lower absenteeism. On the other hand, 1 in 10 Americans called in sick or missed work in the past year because of feelings of anxiety and stress from witnessing unfair treatment in their workplace based on race or ethnicity, the SHRM survey found.⁴

7. Maese E, Emond L. [Employee Wellbeing & Mental Health: 5 Strategies From Top CHROs](#). Gallup. December 8, 2020. Accessed August 25, 2021.
8. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. [Mental Health in the Workplace](#). Last reviewed April 10, 2019. Accessed August 25, 2021.



Make employee mental health a top priority

When employee demand for mental health support combines with a clear business case for providing it, taking action is the next logical step. But if you've largely focused on full-time employees or health insurance coverage, getting started can feel a bit squishy. Here's how to make mental health a top priority — across all workplace demographics.

Survey and listen

Without first understanding the mental health needs and stressors of your employees, creating targeted resources can feel like a shot in the dark. For a better chance at hitting the mark, start by asking them.

Caregiving demands are a top driver of employees' mental health concerns. If that's true for your workforce, how can you ease that stressor? Maybe it means reminding employees about your work-from-home flexibility or how to make scheduling

changes. Maybe it means pointing them to the EAP, where they can get hands-on help finding backup child care. Maybe it means partnering directly with local providers so employees have multiple options to explore.

Surveys needn't be time-intensive or intrusive. Work with your HR department to set up an anonymous online survey, and consider whether segmenting by full- or part-time employees might better inform which well-being strategies you deploy. Don't get lost trying to build the perfect format. Starting the conversation and collecting data is crucial.

Build an organization-wide well-being strategy

Savvy employers know that health doesn't begin and end with health insurance benefits. A truly effective well-being strategy spans all of those moments outside the clinician's office: bike racks to encourage cycling to work, healthy options at catered events, on-site biometric screenings, workshops on better sleep or managing stress, a communications plan for annual flu shots and other vaccinations.

Mental health is a crucial component of any well-being strategy, and mental health

resources would ideally be part of your global minimum benefits standard for all employees. And no matter how robust or nascent your workplace well-being offerings, make it a point to communicate that these resources are available to all employees — full- and part-time.

Train managers on mental health

A manager can have an incredible impact on how supported employees feel. That's why mental health training can't stay siloed in the HR department or only as a c-suite priority. It must extend throughout the ranks.

Research suggests this approach works. In a study that looked at nearly 5,000 managers, researchers found that those with access to workplace mental health training had an improved understanding of mental health overall, and that they were more actively engaged in preventing and addressing issues in the employees they managed.⁹

Another study, in the journal *BMJ*, found that when employees work in an environment where managers feel comfortable offering help and support — rather than avoiding employees with depression — absenteeism was significantly lower.¹⁰

9. van de Voort I, de Rijk A, Hensing G, Bertilsson M. *Determinants of Managerial Preventive Actions in Relation to Common Mental Disorders at Work: A Cross-Sectional Study Among Swedish Managers*. *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*. October 2019;61(10):854-862. Accessed August 25, 2021.

10. Evans-Lacko S, Knapp M. *Is manager support related to workplace productivity for people with depression: a secondary analysis of a cross-sectional survey from 15 countries*. *BMJ Open*. 2018;8:e021795. Accessed August 25, 2021.

Reduce stigma and start an ongoing conversation

Policies on paper are a starting point. But culture can bring those policies to life. Even the most robust mental health resources won't mean much if employees feel fear or shame about seeking support or worry about being their true selves. Here's how to create a work environment that shines a light on mental health — for all employees.

Create a culture of caring

When employees feel connected to their teams and their work, it shows. But when punching the clock stirs feelings of emptiness, or employees mask their mental health, that can take a toll on their well-being.

Research shows that lonely workers take twice as many sick days. They also demonstrate less commitment and weaker performance and — perhaps most surprisingly — their emotions can influence those around them, creating a negative ripple across the broader team.¹¹

Making connections can be even harder for part-time employees, who spend less time with coworkers and may have fewer opportunities to interact with managers. But by fostering a culture of caring, companies can help all employees feel connected and comfortable at work.

Creating a culture of caring doesn't mean turning managers into therapists or doing deep dives into every employee's emotional issues. It can be as simple as starting

shift meetings with small talk, to help coworkers find common ground and show that managers see part-time employees as individuals, and a valuable part of the team. Create opportunities for feedback so employees feel heard. Invest in team-building activities and celebrate life events, such as a "workiversary" or a birthday. Proactively check in with employees and promote well-being resources to all team members.

A culture of caring matters now, but it will even more as younger generations become a larger part of the workforce. Gen Z and millennials are already reshaping expectations around mental health.

Build a network of mental health champions

Nothing cuts back stigma quite like moving mental health conversations from the abstract to real life. At the biotech firm Roche Genentech, for example, senior leaders opened up about mental health in a series of videos that were shared on the company's intranet. Leaders then tapped "mental health champions" — a network of employees

trained to help build mental health awareness — to make their own videos.¹²

Mental health employee resource groups (ERGs) are another powerful option and are becoming more common. When Mind Share Partners launched a community of mental health ERG leaders, the group quickly ballooned to more than 250 companies.

Mental health ERGs may center around identifying and adopting best practices, creating learning opportunities within the group and the organization as a whole, and raising awareness for mental health issues and available resources.

During this time of renewed focus on racial justice and the systemic oppression of marginalized groups, it's also essential to recognize that many communities of color are experiencing dramatic upticks in anxiety

and clinical depression.¹³ For some companies, mental health ERGs also work hand in hand with other cultural ERGs (such as Black or Asian) to support those employees.¹⁴

Develop a comprehensive communication strategy

Gone are the days when a flier in the company break room would cut it. Today, employees expect company communications to be tailored to them, whether that means regular emails, messages over an internal Slack channel, text communications, town hall meetings, or — ideally — a combination that spans multiple channels.

Reaching all employees also requires a communications strategy that features diverse voices. Don't limit well-being messages only to HR broadcasts. Involve senior leadership, mental health champions, and direct managers. Remind employees that some benefits, such as an EAP, may also be available to their household members.

Promote mental health resources often, and make your communications as actionable as possible. The difference between an employee taking a step and pushing it off can often come down to how frictionless the experience is.

Share these actionable reads :

- [Curious About Text Therapy?](#)
- [3 Ways to Become More Stress Resilient](#)
- [Mental Health Resources for Black Women](#)
- [3 Ways to Exercise for Better Mental Health](#)

11. Barsade, S. [No Employee Is an Island: How Loneliness Affects Job Performance](#). Wharton Ideas Lab. Accessed August 25, 2021.

12. Greenwood K, Krol N. [8 Ways Managers Can Support Employees' Mental Health](#). Harvard Business Review. August 7, 2020. Accessed August 25, 2021.

13. Fowers A. [Depression and anxiety spiked among black Americans after George Floyd's death](#). The Washington Post. June 12, 2020. Accessed August 25, 2021.

14. Porter J, Wong B, Greenwood K. [How to Form a Mental Health Employee Resource Group](#). Harvard Business Review. Updated May 21, 2020. Accessed August 25, 2021.



Power your efforts with the right partners

You don't have to go it alone. That's one of the biggest messages to broadcast to employees who may be struggling with mental health issues. And it's also the biggest message for time-strapped companies who may be wondering how to address this urgent need.

Partnering with an outside expert or vendor can sometimes be the smartest solution, allowing you to cost-effectively leverage greater insights and more tailored interventions. Here's how to make a powerful partnership part of your mental health ecosystem.

Know your needs

Benchmarking your organization's mental health offerings against the competitive landscape is a straightforward exercise that can reveal both shortcomings and strengths. Combining that competitive benchmark with the internal surveys about your employees' emotional well-being can yield a road map for both near-term and long-term goals.

Evaluate vendors

The mental health needs of a full-time, middle-age mom in the back office and an early-20s weekend worker trying to juggle shifts with school can be incredibly different — and you need a vendor who can address the diverse needs of your entire employee population. When evaluating vendors, drill down into how they tailor approaches for all employees, and make it clear that you're as interested in serving your part-time population as you are in serving those who are working full time.

When sizing up partners, it's also important to look through several lenses: Do they have strategic alignment with what your organization is trying to accomplish? What are their tech capabilities and where are they lacking? How do they handle data and analytics, and what insights are they able to mine and use to drive greater engagement and ROI from any mental health

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programming? Not every company will be seeking the same answers, but an open and transparent conversation — to make sure there's a fit on both sides — should be table stakes.

Scan the horizon

Mental health isn't a set-it-and-forget-it endeavor. Addressing the dynamic needs of your employee population means both regularly surveying how those needs may have shifted, while also keeping a finger on the pulse of new offerings and innovations. A proactive partner can shoulder some of this burden, by sharing timely updates and recommending new ways to measure employee needs. But it may be worth formally integrating this into a specific department or position, so there's ongoing ownership around these tasks.



5 questions to consider before selecting an EAP

An EAP is a cohesive, cost-effective way to support your employees' emotional well-being and signal that they are valued. Extending this benefit to part-time employees is also one of the most powerful ways employers can make it clear that mental health is a company-wide priority — and help all employees address the underlying stressors and life events that seem so overwhelming. But not all EAPs are created equal. Here are five questions to ask before making a selection:

1. Who will answer when my employees need help?

Referrals are the lifeblood of some EAPs. When a distressed employee picks up the phone they're often greeted by someone with little to no clinical training, who will simply take down their information and then point them in the right direction — often with days' worth of lag time. That's a real impediment to employees who are in distress or need help now. Instead, look for an EAP that gives employees **24/7 access to masters-level clinicians**.

2. How are services tailored to fit employee preferences?

For one employee, the phone may be a lifeline. For another, chatting by phone feels downright painful. Rather than force all employees into a one-size-fits-all approach, look for an EAP that offers a broad range of options to support employee preferences. For someone seeking mental health support, that might mean access to **in-person appointments, as well as telehealth and text-based therapy options**.

3. How easy is the interface?

When employees are asked to juggle multiple log-ins for different sites and apps, it creates a landmine of potential frustration. To more effectively move employees from initial outreach to actually getting the support they're seeking, prioritize an EAP that has a streamlined interface and a **concierge-like experience**. Employees know to come to one place, for access to all of the support they may need. Optum's WorkLife services, for instance, is a tool that gives employees quick assistance on everything from backup child care to finding an after-hours vet to booking a hotel or a moving van. And because it's embedded directly within the EAP, accessing the tool is hassle free for employees.

4. Can employees take the reins themselves?

Self-directed options may be a better fit for unpredictable work schedules, as well as those employees who may not require immediate support, who want to learn on their own. Instead of forcing every employee to interact with someone for support, look for an EAP that offers **self-directed mental health tools**. Sanvello is one such option: Employees can access clinically validated exercises on demand to help them better manage stress, anxiety, and depression.

5. How robust are the financial and legal offerings?

Mental health doesn't happen in a vacuum. It's shaped and amplified by life events, whether that means trying to save for a down payment on a first home or figuring out how to file for bankruptcy. An effective EAP is built with this understanding in mind — stretching beyond mental health issues like clinical depression and substance use disorder to also help employees navigate life stressors and milestones. When assessing EAP vendors, look for both complimentary sessions with a financial or legal adviser, as well as access to tools and educational resources that can help empower your teams.

Pressing. Pervasive. Personal.

The mental health needs of American employees are all three — and addressing those needs is a clear business imperative. The benefits of extending those efforts to all employees should be just as clear.

Let's get started!

Visit the [Optum](https://www.optum.com) site for more information on how the [Optum EAP](https://www.optum.com) can cost-effectively meet the needs of your employee population.

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