

WHITE PAPER

Behavioral Health Reimagined

Seven Behavioral Health Trends for Employers to Watch in 2022

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As the pandemic continues to take its toll around the globe, historically high rates of anxiety, depression and other behavioral health disruptions continue as well. 2022 presents another opportunity for employers to reassess and refine their behavioral health approach.

The statistics around mental health are staggering. Consider the following:

- Prior to the pandemic, [nearly 50 million American adults \(19.86 percent of the population\)](#) experienced a mental illness in 2019, yet more than half of did not receive treatment. By late June of 2020, the percent of U.S. adults struggling with mental health and substance use increased to [40.9 percent as reported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#).
- In the last decade, [CDC](#) data shows dramatic increases in rates of mental health and substance use disorders in youth—and suicide is listed as the second leading cause of death among adolescents aged 15-19 years old in the U.S.
- According to preliminary [CDC estimates released in November 2021](#), overdose deaths in the U.S. exceeded 100,000 over a 12-month period and doubled the number recorded in 2015.

[A more recent study published in The Lancet](#) indicates that COVID-19 increased global rates of anxiety and depression in 2020 by 26 percent and 28 percent, respectively. These worsening trends indicate that many stakeholders (governments, health care delivery systems, employers, etc.) remain ill-prepared to handle the crisis. Stakeholders should take action to address this crisis as we enter 2022.

For these reasons, Brown & Brown is committed to promoting mental health as a part of our overall well-being solutions. We have identified seven key trends and opportunities for employers to address in 2022.

1 Digital and Virtual Health Solutions Will Be Transformative

In response to pandemic-driven increases in depression, anxiety, substance use and even suicide ideation, many employers have adopted or expanded digital and virtual solutions for behavioral health. According to [The Kaiser Family Foundation's 2021 Employer Health Benefits Survey](#), 31 percent of employers expanded the way workers get mental health or substance abuse services, such as through telemedicine. We also witnessed a flood of venture capital investment in this area as mental health remained the top-funded therapeutic focus area for digital health investors as illustrated in an [October 2021 report released by Rock Health](#). The emergence of new virtual and digital solutions has made mental health treatment more accessible, convenient and affordable.

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Going forward, emerging digital modalities will enhance in person care, increase efficiency and potentially help reduce the costs of providing mental health care. While this transformative period for virtual care has numerous positive effects, it also means the average employer's behavioral health vendor ecosystem in 2022 will include an expanded universe of options (for example, a digital resiliency application, tele-behavioral counseling, virtual mental health point solution, etc.). As a result, employers may need to evaluate the effectiveness of existing solutions simplify the member experience, integrate complementary solutions, resolve duplicative services and improve navigation support.

2 Navigation Support for Behavioral Health Will Be Essential

With multiple virtual care solutions, a shortage of behavioral health providers and high demand for behavioral health services, many patients face the reality of navigating a complex, disjointed and confusing mental health delivery system without much support. This is especially critical for behavioral health patients with complex conditions (substance use disorders, eating disorders, schizophrenia, etc.) who may need to access care in outpatient, partial hospitalization, residential or inpatient settings.

The need for effective navigation and advocacy support for behavioral health patients has never been more acute. Behavioral health navigation provides personalized care and connects those seeking services to resources that help improve an individual's lifestyle. For example, a behavioral health navigator could educate on proper relaxation techniques, sleep health and self-care to manage depression or irritability and improve relationships. Enhancing navigation support could also take the form of steerage to high-quality network providers or the integrated delivery of mental health care in primary care settings. In the months ahead, we will likely see more employers implement behavioral health navigation solutions staffed by clinical social workers or nurses with specialized training.

3 Adoption of the Collaborative Care Model (CoCM) Will Increase

Any analysis of data on behavioral health and other chronic disease usually reveals a troubling connection—those with chronic illness such as hypertension, diabetes and cancer [are more likely to have or develop mental health conditions](#). Despite this reality, many patients with co-morbid behavioral health and physical health conditions do not have access to the desired level of integrated care. The [Collaborative Care Model \(CoCM\)](#) advocates for the integration of behavioral health and general medical services with the objective to help improve patient outcomes by eliminating gaps in care. CoCM can improve care management and ensures continuation of care for those who are diagnosed with mental health conditions in a primary care setting.

[Primary care providers \(PCP\) prescribe 79 percent of antidepressant medications.](#) Unfortunately, [less than 10 percent of patients](#) referred to specialized mental health providers from their PCPs actually complete the referral. Encouragingly, there's growing interest among some employers, Third Party Administrators (TPAs), health plans and some health systems to reinvigorate the adoption of CoCM. In the months ahead, we expect to see more instances of these stakeholders coming together to support CoCM and address gaps around mental health access and equity.

4 Demographic Inequalities Will Make Mental Health Equity a Priority

While the impact of pandemic distress has been felt across all segments of the population, young people, racial and ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ individuals and people with disabilities have been disproportionately impacted. [According to CDC data from June 2020](#), 40.9 percent of all U.S. adults reported having at least one adverse behavioral health symptom compared to 74.9 percent of young adults in the 18-24 age group. In addition, Black and Hispanic Americans were 17 percent and 39 percent, respectively, more likely to suffer from an adverse mental health condition than White Americans. More recent data released by the CDC in [October 2021](#) continues to show that Americans who are Hispanic, LGBTQ+ or disabled were at higher risk of reporting symptoms of anxiety or depression.

Employers can make mental health equity a priority by driving awareness about these disparities and increasing access to behavioral health care—beginning with an understanding of how these systemic challenges manifest within their own populations through data analysis or surveys. A baseline assessment should be followed by a strategic review of how existing benefit programs and resources, along with workplace culture, impact the mental health of each population segment. These analyses can inform actions around equitable benefits design, implementing culturally responsive programs and building a workplace culture that supports and promotes positive mental health for all.

5 C-suite Sponsorship Will Enhance Workplace Culture and Behavioral Health

[According to the Fall 2021 Fortune/Deloitte CEO Survey](#), 65 percent of CEOs report their organizations have increased emphasis on employee well-being and mental health. This reflects a growing sentiment in many boardrooms that managing behavioral health is more than just a health and safety priority—it is a business, workplace culture and talent imperative. Increasing mental health awareness through corporate culture can curtail the negative effects of stigma, making it easier for people to confront and manage their challenges.

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Companies with visible C-suite support for behavioral health will likely invest in additional resources. These investments could be additional programs and benefits—but could also include mental health workplace trainings, peer-to-peer support networks, executive sponsorship of mental health champion networks and employee resource groups. It's also likely that we see more executive-level focus on building positive workplace cultures to help curb high talent attrition rates, especially [as record numbers of American workers continue to quit their jobs](#). Leaders can support positive mental health by building workplace cultures based on transparency, integrity, empathy, flexibility and psychological safety, in addition to competitive total rewards.

6 Agility Will Be Needed to Navigate Regulatory and Legislative Environment

Employers will no doubt continue to keep an eye on the behavioral health compliance landscape in 2022. An important area of focus is ensuring compliance with the recent [Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021 \(CAA\)](#), which expands compliance requirements for group health plans under the [Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act \(MHPAEA\)](#).

Due to the heightened need for action, we expect an increased level of advocacy activity from some public health and policy stakeholders pushing for changes that include increasing provider reimbursement, improving the number of diverse behavioral health providers, encouraging provider practice across state lines, implementation of reimbursement incentives for the Collaborative Care Model and other efforts to improve access to (and quality of) care.

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Employers should monitor and respond accordingly to the regulatory and legislative landscape as it relates to behavioral health. Employers committed to advancing mental health should also seek out and publicly support behavioral health advocacy efforts aligned with their business and total reward philosophies.

7 Global Employers Will Localize Proactive Behavioral Health Approaches

While the pandemic had a negative impact on behavioral health across the globe, it's important to note many of the systemic global challenges predate the pandemic. [The World Health Organization's new 2020 Mental Health Atlas](#), for example, reveals mental health across the globe continues to be underfunded, understaffed and lacking the desired level of governance and oversight. These deficiencies are made even more severe by the lingering stigma that persists in many countries and cultures.

In 2022, we will likely see leading global employers adopt a more proactive behavioral health response that includes a mix of globally consistent guidelines and locally relevant tactics. For example, guiding principles around expanding access and eliminating stigma can be globally consistent while the practical application of those objectives will need to be customized to align with local laws, governance and customs. This is especially relevant as employers consider global implementation of virtual and digital health technologies to support mental health.

Behavioral health will remain a top priority for employers in 2022. Addressing the complex realities of persistent stigma, poor access, confusion over how to navigate resources and mental health inequities requires a sophisticated, holistic and strategic approach by employers seeking to effectively navigate these trends.

Each organization should develop a strategy that reflects their priorities and objectives. The Brown & Brown team can help facilitate a complimentary discovery workshop with your organization's stakeholders to serve as a foundation for developing your behavioral health strategic plan.



Contact Brown & Brown to learn about our solutions for workforce mental health and well-being.

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About the Authors

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Dr. Axler is a board-certified Child, Adolescent and Adult Psychiatrist. He has a wealth of experience addressing mental health and substance abuse issues that face employer groups and has a passion for helping employers develop innovative solutions to improve behavioral health access and quality of care. Dr. Axler has experience building effective integrated physical-mental health care solutions and developing and deploying innovative strategies to enhance member engagement and motivation to improve adherence with treatment, leading to better quality of life for employees and their families.

Dr. Axler is a Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association and serves on the executive committee of several national organizations, including the National Council for Behavioral Health, the Georgia Psychiatric Physicians Association and the Georgia Council on Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.

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Abinue Fortingo is a population health/well-being consultant and strategist. He recently joined Brown & Brown as Principal, Population Health Consultant. His areas of expertise include benefits design, well-being, clinical strategy, behavioral health, virtual care technology, digital health technology, health advocacy, navigation, employee engagement, and health care consumer experience.

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