



# Behavioral Health **LESSONS FROM A PANDEMIC**

**Greater barriers to access and tremendous mental health challenges may illuminate a new way forward for companies and healthcare.**





**E**mployers know that behavioral health issues can have a tremendously negative impact on worker performance, wellness, and healthcare costs. One in four Americans has a mental or substance-abuse disorder,<sup>1</sup> and per-person spending on mental health hospital admissions and outpatient spending on psychiatry have risen steeply over the past five years—and that was before the Covid-19 pandemic,<sup>2</sup> which only increased mental health concerns.

Of workers interviewed in a recent study, 78% said that the coronavirus pandemic was a significant source of stress and named 2020 as the most stressful year ever.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, those who have survived Covid-19 infections are at a higher risk of developing mental illness.<sup>4</sup> And for people who had existing mental health or substance abuse issues, the pandemic and the resulting economic disruptions have created additional challenges.<sup>5</sup> Problems cited include difficulty sleeping and eating, as well as increases in alcohol consumption and substance use, which, like other behavioral health challenges, often worsen chronic medical conditions.

Even as the pandemic has increased the need for behavioral health services, employees may be hard-pressed to find appropriate help. “Demand is going through the roof,” says John Neal, chief growth officer of HMC HealthWorks. “People may not know where to go for help, and even if they do, their access to good behavioral health support can be spotty.”

Yet getting timely help can be crucial. Behavioral health concerns that aren’t addressed early on can be more difficult and expensive to treat later, affecting and exacerbating other health issues and leading to ever-increasing costs for companies and health insurers.<sup>6</sup>

**78%**  of employees name 2020 the most stressful year ever

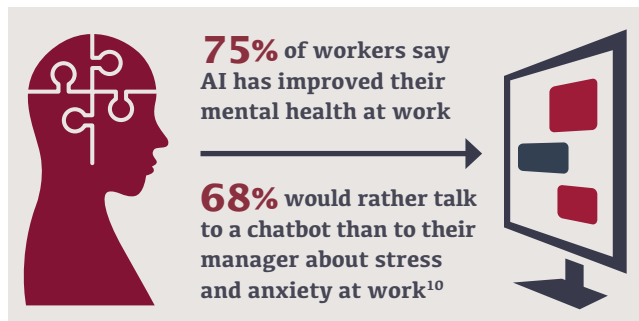
**85%**  say mental health issues are causing sleep deprivation, poor physical health, reduced happiness at home, isolation

**76%**  say mental health should be an employer priority<sup>7</sup>

1 [https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/reports/rpt29392/Assistant-Secretary-nsduh2019\\_presentation/Assistant-Secretary-nsduh2019\\_presentation.pdf](https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/reports/rpt29392/Assistant-Secretary-nsduh2019_presentation/Assistant-Secretary-nsduh2019_presentation.pdf)  
2 [https://healthcostinstitute.org/images/pdfs/HCCI\\_2018\\_Health\\_Care\\_Cost\\_and\\_Utilization\\_Report.pdf](https://healthcostinstitute.org/images/pdfs/HCCI_2018_Health_Care_Cost_and_Utilization_Report.pdf)  
3 <https://www.oracle.com/human-capital-management/ai-at-work/>, <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2020/report-october>  
4 [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpsy/article/PIIS2215-0366\(20\)30462-4/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpsy/article/PIIS2215-0366(20)30462-4/fulltext)  
5 <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/the-implications-of-covid-19-for-mental-health-and-substance-use/>  
6 <https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/national-guidelines-for-behavioral-health-crisis-care-02242020.pdf>  
7 <https://www.oracle.com/human-capital-management/ai-at-work/>

## SILVER LININGS

While the pandemic has devastated so many peoples' lives and challenged the healthcare industry, there is hope. The sheer number of people struggling with mental health challenges now may lead to an easing of the stigma often associated with these issues. In addition, the realities of the pandemic—in which so many people have been working remotely and may be unable to make in-person visits to healthcare providers—have accelerated the adoption of technological tools that can reduce barriers to care. Psychologists have developed new ways to use technology to connect with patients, giving rise to mobile apps, text chats, and other innovations that have the potential to allow more access to behavioral healthcare at early stages of patients' issues, when it can have a powerful effect.



Many of these options incorporate evidence-based techniques such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and mindfulness, which have proven to be effective in reducing stress, anxiety, and depression.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, employees are embracing these approaches to behavioral health. Workers may feel less stigma attached to and embarrassment at confessing their concerns to an artificial intelligence (AI)-powered “chatbot” than to a person, and indeed, 68% of employees in one survey said they were more open to discussing stress with a bot than with their managers.<sup>9</sup>

The challenge now is to connect people with the help they need. “One of the biggest obstacles in providing behavioral health is getting the message to employees about the resources they have—letting them know that they do have a place to turn,” says Janis DiMonaco, founder and former president and

CEO of HMC HealthWorks and strategic adviser to IBH/HMC HealthWorks. To improve worker awareness and increase participation, HMC has developed a new Virtual Mental Health Care Hub, which gives employees easier access to an enhanced menu of tools and services, helping address their behavioral health needs while reducing employer costs. “Providing these options to do online chat, or to have a behavioral health concierge or a care manager you can pick up the phone and talk with—companies are really starting to recognize that this is something they need to provide,” DiMonaco says.

“One of the biggest obstacles in providing behavioral health is getting the message to employees about the resources they have—letting them know that they do have a place to turn.”

—Dr. Janis DiMonaco,  
founder of HMC HealthWorks

## WORKING TOGETHER

The HMC HealthWorks hub weaves together a series of approaches to treat behavioral health concerns early and effectively, helping to reduce companies' long-term healthcare costs and improving participants' health and workplace performance. “To help people with behavioral health issues, whether depression, anxiety, or substance abuse issues, it's key that they have access to an immediate response,” says Neal. “And this response has to meet them where they are.”

The hub features a variety of resources designed to reinforce each other in reducing barriers to early, effective care, and in creating greater access to care.

**1 in 5 adults in the U.S. has a clinically significant mental health or substance use disorder, but many don't get the help they need because of a lack of integrated healthcare<sup>11</sup>**



<sup>8</sup> <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32338522/>

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.fastcompany.com/90580177/mental-health-crisis-robots?partner=rss&utm\\_source=rss&utm\\_medium=feed&utm\\_campaign=rss+fastcompany&utm\\_content=rss](https://www.fastcompany.com/90580177/mental-health-crisis-robots?partner=rss&utm_source=rss&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=rss+fastcompany&utm_content=rss)

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.oracle.com/human-capital-management/ai-at-work/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.ama-assn.org/press-center/press-releases/integrating-behavioral-health-services-medical-practices-faces-barriers>



### ▶ BEHAVIORAL HEALTH CONCIERGE

Participants can also connect to trained experts who can help them find a clinically appropriate mix of solutions available to them. “People often don’t know they need support—but they may be eager to take advantage of it once they’re reminded what their options are,” says Neal. For participants who need help learning what care is available and what might work best in their situations, HMC’s coaches can help identify resources such as teletherapy, which has been an important tool during the pandemic.

### ▶ TESS

Tess is a text-based chatbot that participants can contact by text message to receive immediate support. Tess offers a way in for plan participants dealing with challenges and can remind them of additional, difference-making care options that they may not have known about. Using artificial intelligence, Tess responds in the moment, acknowledging a participant’s concerns, and can direct that employee to a therapist or a support group. Available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, Tess is monitored by psychologists who can provide further assistance with referrals to additional therapy, treatment, or peer support where appropriate. Sometimes just having a place to vent concerns helps.

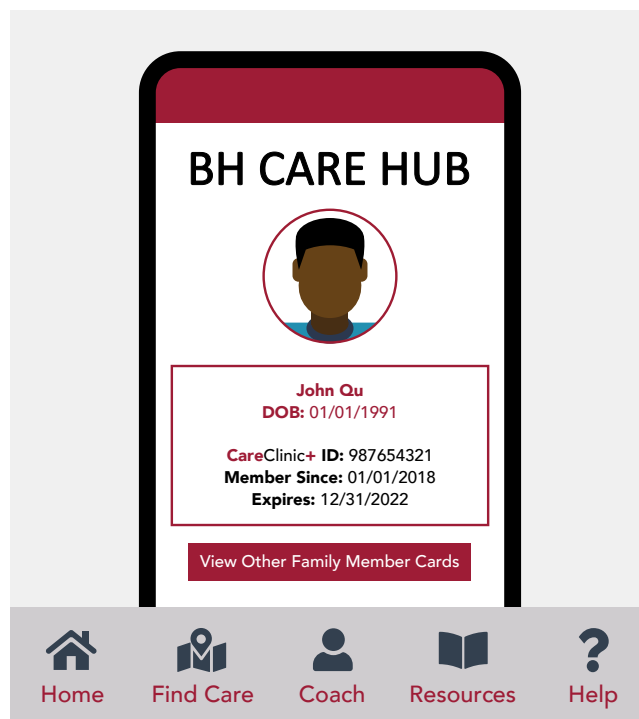
### ▶ COACHING AND SUPPORT

Human interaction is a critical component, and the HMC hub features a digital app with structured CBT modules as well as live coaching from a clinician via text. CBT is an evidence-based and clinically grounded treatment method that can give meaningful, effective support to participants with behavioral health challenges, who can also find self-help programs and other coaching help.

### ▶ SELF-CARE WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Work-life balance offers tailored support resources to individual participants. Participants can assess their own well-being through quizzes and online tools to measure health factors including sleep, stress, anger, and fitness. It can also connect participants to further support and offer practical, actionable suggestions for relief or further connection to employee assistance programs, community support, and financial guidance. It offers wide-ranging resources—from exercise classes to veterinary referrals.

**When HMC HealthWorks leaders saw the enormous impact of the Covid crisis on workplaces and employees, they recognized a clear need for just the kind of integrated healthcare management HMC provides.** “It’s all about access,” explains DiMonaco. “Now, more than ever, people need to know that it’s OK to need help and to ask for it. It’s vital to break the barriers to access, whether those involve stigma, cost, or convenience.” Unprecedented times call for new and innovative solutions, and HMC HealthWorks is putting together the tools and resources to support companies and their employees and help them survive and thrive. The goal is to offer everything plan participants need to move past challenges without being sidelined, helping them stay stronger and move ahead.



*HMC HealthWorks has been delivering improved health outcomes and ROI you can count on since 1976.*



Learn more about HMC HealthWorks and how we can help you reduce healthcare costs and improve the quality of life and well-being of your population.

**CONTACT**

Janis DiMonaco, Ph.D., LICSW  
Founder, Former President and CEO  
888-369-5054  
[jdimonaco@hmcebs.com](mailto:jdimonaco@hmcebs.com)

