University Tackles Depression in the Workplace: Kent State Collaborates with EAP to Provide Resources to Employees

Depression can be Unbearable

As seen with many employers, mental health is one of the top drivers of health and disability claims at Kent State University (KSU). While further examining its top claim drivers, KSU found the following:

- Depression is frequently cited as a serious medical condition necessitating family and medical leaves.
- Risk for depression was significant when reviewing online health risk assessment data.
- Antidepressants ranked in the top 5-10 medications utilized in the KSU health plan.
- More than $2 million annually was spent on depression-related treatment for employees, and their families.

“KSU recognizes depression is one of the most common chronic conditions among the population, and, if left untreated, can cause disruption in the workplace including loss of productivity, absenteeism and presenteeism,” said Mark McLeod, manager, University Benefits at Kent State University. “We saw a unique opportunity to implement an initiative to address mental health in the workplace – we are vested in our mission of providing assistance to our employees and their families dealing with depression.”

Founded in 1910, Kent State University (KSU) is a public research university located in Kent, Ohio. Kent State is one of the largest universities in Ohio, employing more than 6,000 academic and administrative staff members.

The Cost of Depression: A Look at the Impact of Depression in the Workplace

The two primary symptoms of depression are persistent deep feelings of sadness and loss of interest in activities, but can extend to a number of other symptoms including weight or appetite changes, trouble sleeping or sleeping too much, loss of energy, feelings of worthlessness, or difficulty thinking, concentrating or making decisions. These symptoms can have a significant effect on performing routine activities, both personally and professionally.

According to the Impact of Depression at Work Audit (IDeA), a survey evaluating the societal and economic burden of depression in the U.S. workplace, 64 percent of respondents with depression reported cognitive-related challenges. These challenges were defined as difficulty concentrating, indecisiveness and/or forgetfulness, and respondents indicated these challenges had the most impact on their ability to perform tasks at work.
KSU reached out to Marcas Miles, senior director, marketing and communications at Employers Health, to learn how to integrate Right Direction with its existing EAP, provided by IMPACT Solutions. The customized initiative was then presented to KSU senior leadership and there was an immediate interest. This led to the development of an implementation plan detailing the roll out of Right Direction and a communications plan to spread the word to employees and their families.

“The Right Direction initiative can work in tandem with the efforts of an employer’s EAP vendor to provide education to managers on what depression looks like, and how to connect with resources that guide employees and their families in addressing this issue,” says Miles.

“We knew we needed to go further,” said McLeod. “We recognized the importance of expanding our mental health offerings to not only raise awareness, and reduce the stigma of depression in the workplace, but to also direct employees to treatment resources.”

Launching Right Direction to Employees

After securing approval from senior leadership to implement the initiative, KSU worked closely with IMPACT Solutions to rollout Right Direction to its employees. Prior to execution of the initiative, KSU trained its managers on how to recognize depression and how to support employees affected by the disease. Once managers were equipped to address depression, KSU rolled the initiative out to all staff members.

Execution included a number of tactics to raise awareness. At the onset, KSU and IMPACT Solutions determined that on-site education was extremely important to the success of this initiative.

- IMPACT Solutions provided **36 education and training sessions** across all campuses that reached more than 400 managers and employees.
- The Right Direction initiative and IMPACT Solutions were included in 10 open enrollment fairs serving **800 people** and at an employee appreciation event attended by **1,600 employees**.
- KSU **customized, displayed and distributed** the Right Direction materials including posters, flyers, coasters and newsletters, which were co-branded with IMPACT Solutions. For example, KSU added the IMPACT Solutions

A Step in the Right Direction

Beginning in 2012, KSU began launching its five-year strategic employee wellness program, taking a more holistic approach to health management including a focus on personal well-being, work-life balance and mental health. One such initiative was rolling out **Right Direction**, a first-of-its-kind, free depression awareness campaign designed to provide employers with the tools needed to address and manage the effects of depression for employees.

Right Direction was developed through a collaborative effort between the Partnership for Workplace Mental Health, a program of the American Psychiatric Association Foundation, and Employers Health, a national employer coalition based in Ohio, with support from Takeda Pharmaceuticals, U.S.A., Inc. and Lundbeck US.

The objectives of the communication tools provided by Right Direction include:

- **Raising awareness** about depression in the workplace and its effect on productivity.
- **Promoting early recognition of symptoms** and reducing the stigma surrounding mental illness.
- **Increasing help-seeking** behaviors among employees.

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**“Depression is a disease that is manifested in different ways depending on the individual, and it touches all facets of life,” said Dr. Joel Gecht, president and CEO of IMPACT Solutions, a behavioral health care and people development consulting firm, specializing in employee assistance program (EAP) services, which partners with KSU on its EAP. “It’s important for employers to understand the complexities of depression in order to adequately address the disease in the workplace and provide a foundation of assistance to reduce its potential stigma.”**

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telephone number to several awareness materials including the signature Right Direction bear-shaped stress ball, which was distributed to nearly 3,000 employees, making it clear where to go for help.

- The communication strategy for the initiative launch included a monthly management update, wellness newsletter articles, and monthly wellness emails featuring Right Direction and IMPACT Solutions branding.

“While senior leadership always supported mental health awareness at KSU, Right Direction provided customizable resources that gave us a simple approach to tackling depression at work,” said McLeod. “Using these tools, we trained managers early on so that they felt equipped to recognize and address depression amongst their employees.”

Measuring Success: Demonstrating the Benefits of Increased Awareness

Aside from employee interest in participating in the initiative, KSU has seen success by implementing Right Direction, including:

- An increase in the number of people calling into the KSU EAP with mental health as their primary claim (15 percent to 17.44 percent in first year post launch).
- An increase in traffic to the EAP website surrounding mental health issues.
- An increase in EAP utilization rates (percentage of EAP utilization over a six-month period went from 13.22 percent in year one to 14.91 percent six months post launch).
- A 10 percent increase in web hits with mental health information.

Factors that led to successful implementation of Right Direction at KSU:

- Gaining support from senior leadership early on.
- Partnering with their EAP, IMPACT Solutions.
- Developing a comprehensive implementation and communications plan.
- Training managers in advance of raising awareness of mental health issues to employees.
- Developing metrics to assess the success of the initiative.

“We commend KSU for taking action to address mental health,” said Clare Miller, director, Partnership for Workplace Mental Health. “Employers have a unique opportunity to educate and provide resources to employees with mental health conditions, and KSU is setting a solid example for others to model.”

Are You Ready to Move in the Right Direction?

Taking the first step doesn’t have to be UNBEARABLE.

When you’re dealing with depression at work, it can feel like you’re lost in the woods alone. But there’s help, and you can find your way out.

If you’re an employer and want to learn more, visit: www.RightDirectionForMe.com/ForEmployers.html

If you’re an employee, visit www.RightDirectionForMe.com to learn more about this important topic, and what you can do to get your employer involved.

If you’re a member of the media, visit www.RightDirectionForMe.com/for_the_media.html for more information on Right Direction.

“Since its launch, Right Direction has made an important impact on KSU employees,” said Lisa Kirby, account manager at IMPACT Solutions. “The initiative has been essential in creating a cultural shift to normalize mental health issues and bring them out in the open, and we are excited to see additional results down the line.”
REFERENCES


