

TABLE of EXPERTS

MENTAL WELLNESS

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING STRESS & DEPRESSION IN THE WORKPLACE



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MODERATOR



Stacie Prosser
PUBLISHER/
MARKET PRESIDENT
**Kansas City
Business Journal**

In her role as Market President and Publisher, Stacie Prosser leads the KCBJ team to execute our mission of helping local executives and entrepreneurs grow their businesses, advance their careers and simplify their professional lives. She has been with the KCBJ for more than 20 years and served in both sales and management roles prior to being named to her current position in 2014.

PANELISTS



Astra Garner
VICE PRESIDENT
OF CLINICAL
ADVANCEMENT
KVC Hospitals

Astra Garner, LPC, LCPC, RPT, leads clinical operations in KVC Hospitals' three inpatient and residential facilities in Kansas City, Kan., Kansas City, Mo. and Hays, Kan. Garner brings strong clinical knowledge and expertise to KVC Hospitals, a private, nonprofit organization providing innovative, compassionate psychiatric treatment to children, adolescents and adults. She is also leading KVC Hospitals' new diversity and inclusion initiative.



Tom Herzog
DIRECTOR OF
OPERATIONS
Netsmart

Tom Herzog is responsible for leading solution and technology strategies focused on person-centric design to optimize workflow and outcomes. His teams collaborate with both clients and partners to deliver comprehensive solutions for the behavioral health, social services and post-acute communities. He has been recognized for his ability to create innovative approaches that deliver results through vision and building strong teams.



Dr. Doug Nemecek
CHIEF MEDICAL
OFFICER –
BEHAVIORAL HEALTH
Cigna

Doug Nemecek, MD, is the chief medical liaison for behavioral health integration, quality and clinical operations at Cigna. He helps ensure network access and availability, patient safety, compliance with clinical guidelines, customer and provider satisfaction, and utilization management. He works with Cigna customers to establish operations that provide clinical expertise in behavioral health and integrated program development.



Dana Streck
SENIOR VICE
PRESIDENT, PEOPLE
& TALENT
WellSky

Dana Streck leads the people and talent organization at WellSky, a technology company advancing human wellness worldwide. She is responsible for developing workforce initiatives that support growth and innovation while improving the value employees deliver to WellSky's 10,000+ clients — including the largest hospital systems, blood banks and labs, home health and hospice franchises, government agencies, and human services organizations.



Terry Trafton
PRESIDENT & CEO
CommCARE

Terry Trafton, MS, LPC, NCC, ACHE, is president and CEO of CommCARE, an innovative network health care for people with mental health and substance use challenges. CommCARE's subsidiary Alternatives EAP delivers wellness solutions to employers. A civic leader, Trafton actively advocates in multiple roles, including board chair on the Missouri Mental Health Foundation.

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Depression costs the U.S. economy an estimated \$210 billion annually, with 50 percent of the costs covered by employers, according to a Psychiatric Clinics of North America journal article. Because only 4 in 10 adults with mental health disorders seek treatment, this estimate is considered low.

Perhaps because of statistics like these and others that show the deleterious effects mental illness has on workplace productivity and an array of other business metrics, more employers are incorporating mental health initiatives in their overall employee wellness programs. The Kansas City Business Journal gathered several area experts to discuss practical ways employers can address mental wellness in the workplace. Publisher Stacie Prosser moderated the discussion.

Stacie Prosser of the Kansas City Business Journal: Why is behavioral health garnering so much attention now? What's changed?

Doug Nemecek of Cigna: Mental health and substance use disorders are getting more attention for a variety of reasons. The opioid epidemic is impacting people. Legislation, such as the Mental Health Parity Act and the Affordable Care Act, has brought attention to mental health issues.

Employers also are starting to recognize that mental health and

behavioral health issues affect the workplace through employee productivity and presenteeism as well as total health care costs. All of those factors together have really increased the attention to the effects mental health has on total health and wellness.

Tom Herzog of Netsmart: If we were to have had this conversation a few years ago, we'd still be talking about how to address the stigma of mental health. Employers were still saying that this is somebody else's challenge — not a workplace concern. In 2011, we started to see significant movement in the willingness to have the conversation — to not only talk about what it is but also what it isn't.

This generation is also much more transparent and open to talking about these things. They recognize the challenges in their own generation. The suicide rates continue to go up significantly in middle schools and high schools. In our area, we are seeing grassroots student initiatives, like Zero Suicide, which start to facilitate that conversation. When I was growing up, those conversations weren't being had at school or at home.

Now we're talking about mental wellness, mental well-being, and are being more candid and honest about it. It's one of the top areas of focus for Netsmart because it is not only part of the communities we serve, but also part of the wellness, retention and attraction



ADAM VOGLER

Dana Streck of WellSky

of talent at our workplace.

Terry Trafton of CommCARE: Because of the suicide epidemic that's happening with our young kids, you're seeing more people interested in learning about suicide prevention efforts. More parents are engaged in what's happening. Employers also have become acutely aware of what's happening within our workforce. You're also seeing professionals come out and speak about their own struggles with depression and suicide ideation, and that normalizes it to some extent.

Dana Streck of WellSky: I agree. Work-life balance is at risk, but there is a positive trend toward acknowledging all of the stresses that are present in employees' lives today. There is also a growing understanding of the impact loneliness has on employee engagement. While we're more connected than ever before through social networks, fewer people feel they have meaningful relationships that they can rely on when in need. This loneliness epidemic serves as a dire threat to public health, exceeding that of obesity and smoking, and increases the risk of an early death by 14 percent.

Employers have to proactively create a workplace environment that allows people to feel safe, provides outlets that encourage face-to-face connection and encourages balance in employees' lives. I expect we will see policies and programs start to change quite dramatically.

Astra Garner of KVC Hospitals: Adding to what Terry said, we've also seen an increase in celebrities disclosing their personal struggles with mental health. At KVC, we often blog about celebrities to help reduce stigma. In recent years, we've written about Logic, Demi Lovato, Janelle Monáe and Selena Gomez to name a few. These celebrity disclosures are particularly helpful in our field as these are the individuals who a lot of the youth we serve look up to.

Prosser: We are expecting more out of our employees every single day. How do leaders and managers start the conversation around behavioral health and managing stress within the workplace?

Trafton: That's a great question and a struggle that's happening in a lot of industries. Because business

moves faster and faster and technology changes all the time, there are more opportunities for toxic stress to occur.

The first step is to start a conversation with employees. Figure out what is important to them. How do they want to be appreciated? What wellness initiatives are important to them? From those conversations, you can develop unique strategies that will work for the people in your workplace.

For example, how do you create opportunities for breaks? Just the pressure of productivity and the constancy of social media and technology mean we're "on" all the time. How do we disengage from email or unplug from our phones? The strategies are not going to be the same across the board. For some companies, stress relief could be offering ping-pong breaks; for others, it will mean developing other types of self-care plans.

Garner: It's hugely important to get to know your employees. This is a delicate balance, especially for managers in the social services field, as we don't want to blur lines and leave room for misperception of a dual relationship.

However, when employees feel a professional level of comfort with their supervisor, they're more likely to disclose feelings of stress, inability to manage workloads, any interpersonal issues on the team that may impact productivity, etc., which then allows that manager the opportunity to partner with their employee and offer solutions and support sooner.

The assistance from the manager can take many forms, like providing physical support on getting tasks completed or allowing that team member the option of working from home a day or two to get caught up and reduce workplace distractions.

Streck: Educating your managers to recognize the signs and to not shy away from the conversations is important. They have to approach it appropriately and with sensitivity. By simply checking in with an employee to see how they are doing, they may find out a little bit more about the employee that may help the manager steer them to the appropriate resources. If an employee is more guarded, managers can direct them to places where they can access support.

Managers have to figure out what within their team or within their environment is causing some of those stressors and how they can mitigate them, if possible. Is it a balance of the workload or is it something else? Maybe it's a project at a specific point in time, and we know we just need to get through this period. How do you help the employee see the light at the end of the tunnel?

Prosser: Astra, what are ways KVC Hospitals help employees manage stress?

Garner: Overall, supervisors try to be supportive of their employees and recognize when times are stressful. For example, they may show their support by increasing one-on-one meetings to help the employee manage the workload, shift the workload or encourage the employee to take a "mental health day."

Additionally, we've increased employee engagement strategies aimed at supporting self-care, such as

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having a massage therapist available onsite a few times throughout the year, offering healthier snacks in the vending machines, providing fresh fruit for snacking and water bottles to promote drinking water, and organizing daily walks when weather permits. We have even brought in an expert on mindfulness, which is proven to reduce stress and increase focus.

A lot of these strategies are in place because we understand the connection between the mind and body. Often, if we're busy at work, the first thing we skip is lunch, but if staff members know they can go downstairs to the kitchen and get a protein pouch or a fresh sandwich, they get the fuel they need and feel supported. Cardio is very important and can help relieve stress, which is why we started the walking groups.

Last but not least, we also offer an employee assistance program (EAP) for all employees. So, I'd say we are utilizing interpersonal support as well as offering physical interventions to help our employees manage stress.

Prosser: Dr. Nemecek, what tools are available to people for whom there is a stigma and who may not want to see a provider in the traditional office setting?

Nemecek: We've done a lot of work at Cigna over the past couple of years to try to make sure that people have access and availability to mental health resources and supports. One of the ways we've done that is to make a tele-health network part of Cigna's standard behavioral health network.

We now have over 13,000 providers across the country who offer mental health visits virtually. We also are starting to provide online coaching programs and online cognitive behavioral coaching and therapy resources for individuals. This gives people access from home or from their own device at their convenience. We certainly do a lot to promote EAPs as well.

Then, we're also working with primary care physicians in pilot programs that integrate mental health and behavioral health resources into the primary care clinic. Employees may be more comfortable talking to their primary care physician and accessing support there as opposed to being referred to a therapist or a psychiatrist.

Prosser: Tom, in what ways can businesses encourage that open conversation to make sure that people are getting the help that they need?

Herzog: We have to go beyond awareness. Awareness helped break down the stigma and that was the first step. Now we need action, and that action is equipping and training our employees and associates with the tools they need to be able to identify signs of mental stress and then to be able to help.

I'll give you an example. At Netsmart, we've trained over 50 percent of our company now in Mental Health First Aid (MHFA), an eight-hour course that teaches individuals how to help someone who may be experiencing a mental health or substance use challenge.

Many of us probably grew up getting trained in CPR. Seldom do we have a need to use that training. But think about the number of times we've come



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Dr. Doug Nemecek of Cigna

across someone who has lost a loved one, someone who's anxious, someone who's under a lot of stress or someone who is lonely. With MHFA training, we're more likely to engage in that conversation. What a great opportunity for us to be able to help.

We have to disrupt the status quo. We've all grown up in the open-door-policy era. Quite honestly, an open-door policy isn't good enough. It really needs to be what we call a walkabout practice. At Netsmart, you'll see us walking around the campus having conversations with associates. An open door says you come to me when something happens. A walkabout says: "How's it going? How can I help? What's working? What isn't working?" It creates a much more engaging environment.

Because we're more distracted now than ever, the more engaged we are in conversation the better. Earlier this week, Mike Valentine, our CEO, had a leadership meeting. Before the meeting started, he passed around a basket and said, "We'd love it if you would volunteer to put your phones in the basket so that we can be present and have a conversation."

Prosser: I'm sure some people were anxious about being without their phones for that time. But it raises the issue of managers setting up small, manageable goals to help alleviate stress. Removing distractions may be a good step. What are other ways managers are doing this?

Trafton: Sometimes people don't realize that taking a mental health break can really help your creativity and revive your ability to reengage in a project or task. At CommCARE, we encourage employees to figure out what helps them recharge and how we can incorporate those methods into their day.

We also use tools like Strengthscope that help you assess and figure out your top strengths. By identifying specific strengths, we can ask ourselves how do we build upon those strengths? How do we utilize those strengths? Likewise, if you know that you are not very good at a particular skill, it helps to know that you can get help from a coworker who is good at something you are not.

It is important to create a culture where it is OK for employees to not

know the answer to everything. There's so much pressure today that some employees feel like they will get fired if they don't know every answer. That kind of fearful expectation is never healthy; it is stressful.

We have to create environments that are healthy and a culture in which it's OK to say: "I don't know that. So let's figure it out. Maybe I can get some help with that. Who can help me figure out that strategy?"

It is critically important to engage employees in developing a self-care plan that takes into account everyone's unique differences.

Herzog: I couldn't agree more. We're made up of many different personalities and backgrounds, and we have different strengths and weaknesses. Creating an environment in which people are comfortable having those conversations is a game changer. It's exactly the disruption we need. The more willing we are to be disruptive and to help equip people, the more change we'll see.

EAPs aren't enough. We've got to evolve the tools. I'll be candid. When we rolled out the tool, myStrength, I thought we'd get minimal adoption. I thought 10 to 15 percent adoption across our associate base would be good. To date, we've had over 50 percent adoption of that tool. It's mobile, it's personal, and it's private. But as an employer, I want associates to feel very comfortable about their overall wellness

and that includes the mind and the body. I think the more employers lean in on those types of things, the more we're going to see progressive results in the conversation.

Garner: Our managers incorporate a lot of self-care planning. We especially strive to be trauma informed not only for the children and families we serve, but also for the staff who help us serve them every day.

We know that vicarious trauma is real, and our employees are constantly hearing some pretty horrific stories. So we've implemented a staff debriefing in which we have a manager follow up with a staff member once we know they've been exposed to a potentially traumatic situation. During that time, we review the self-care plan and identify what the employee can do and what leadership can do to support that employee.

Prosser: Dr. Nemecek, what kind of adoption rates of those newer tools are you seeing among your clients?

Nemecek: We're seeing fantastic adoption rates and even push from clients who want even more. The demand is absolutely there. Many different tools and vendors are available, which is really important because one tool doesn't work for everybody.

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Streck: That is an excellent point. As you review your employee offerings, it's important to consider your entire population. The way people engage is very individualized. We have an EAP at WellSky, as well as a tool called Health Advocate, which provides employees with a live person who is available to help them navigate our benefit offerings, the health care system, claims, referrals and scheduling appointments. These activities can increase stress and deter employees from getting the help they need.

We also offer Teladoc for both physical and behavioral health needs. Teladoc allows our employees to access care at a time and setting that is convenient and comfortable for them. These are just some things to consider, but I do agree that we should include many different components within our programming to support today's diverse workforces.

Prosser: Let's talk about how mental health affects productivity and even the profitability of a business.

Streck: Depression is one of the most common mental disorders in the world, affecting an estimated 300 million people. That's an incredible number of people.

As an employer, we are in a unique position to recognize when employees

are struggling since people spend more of their waking hours at work than anywhere else. This provides us with the opportunity to offer support to our employees.

Depression can lead to a lack of focus, lower productivity and strained relationships, which then can cause the workplace to feel unhealthy. Increasing the awareness of mental and behavioral health issues throughout our workforce — including among our managers — positions us to help an employee cope with their stress or stressful situation. Effective employer strategies are available and have been shown to be instrumental in lowering medical costs, increasing productivity through reduced presenteeism and absenteeism, and decreasing disability costs.

Another game changer is that now employees are looking to their employers to be proactive partners in mental wellness. Employees expect companies to have these programs available and to create an environment in which they can feel productive and supported.

Garner: I'm a huge proponent of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Most people first hear of this in general education psychology courses, but it's very relevant and applicable to most issues I encounter professionally and personally.

This concept was introduced by Abraham Maslow in his 1943 paper,



ADAM VOGLER

Tom Herzog of Netsmart

"A Theory of Human Motivation." Basically, it tells us that people prioritize based on their basic needs. If, as an employee, I'm struggling to make ends meet and pay my rent, my stress is likely to increase and impact job productivity.

Or from an organizational perspective, if I don't have a sense of psychological safety (the feeling that I can bring my "whole self" to work) and don't feel that I fit in, I might not feel safe enough to be vulnerable in sharing my ideas, which can stifle innovation and creativity, in turn impacting the bottom line.

Prosser: Some of the research said that 4 in 10 adults with mental health disorders do not seek treatment. That leads to another disrupter in the workplace: presenteeism, when employees are physically present but not mentally engaged.

Herzog: Each year, being unwell at work costs the U.S. economy \$2.2 trillion — 12 percent of GDP, according to research from the Milken Institute. Of that, \$550 billion is related to just work engagement. You can be at work physically but not be engaged.

Another \$300 billion is related specifically to work-related stress — that's productivity. It could be not calling in, struggling to be successful or requiring a lot of coaching.

I don't like just looking at those scare statistics. When you look at what happens when employers are willing to think out of the box and engage in a different way, you're seeing the positive statistics — retention, quality of life and satisfaction have increased 20 to 40 percent. Even using a tool as simple as a net promoter score can help. It's not only about whether I enjoy my job, but also whether I'm at a place that helps me be the best me.

Trafton: Some examples of presenteeism in the workplace could be somebody not on point or not as engaged in the project as they need to be. If someone looks disengaged at work, you could have a conversation with them that is exploratory — "Hey, what's going on?" — instead of accusatory — "What's wrong with you?" Make conversations supportive rather than punitive. Ask: "What can we do to help? Is there something that we can do to help you more?"

As an employer, you do have to walk a fine line. We have a responsibility to support our employees as well as to support the business that we're running. There are deadlines and tasks that have to get done and revenue that has to be produced. You have to balance all of that. But, as you do, it may help to remember that it has been proven that the more engaged employees are, the more productive they're going to be.

Nemecek: We do have to stop and remember that our employees are moms and dads, single parents and caregivers for elderly parents. We know that caregivers get sick more often, have higher health care costs and are three times as likely to go out on disability themselves because of the stress that those life challenges cause for them. Paying attention to those things and offering support are really important.

Garner: We could research depression and other mental health diagnoses, and each would have symptoms that alert others that something may be going on. However, one of the things I rely on most is my relationship with the individual and observations of any changes over time. For instance, if someone is typically pleasant but begins to present as irritable in meetings and day-to-day interactions, then we need to initiate a conversation with that employee about this observation.

This same scenario holds true with timeliness. If we have an employee who is usually timely in their attendance and meeting deadlines, and we start to see this change over a period, instead of moving directly to corrective action, we should have a conversation about what's causing the tardiness.

It could be that the person has always struggled to meet deadlines, but lately they're having problems more often or missed a major deadline. This is an indicator that stress, whether professional or personal, is mounting, and we need to have a discussion and offer support.

Prosser: Let's talk about what prevents companies from implementing these types of mental wellness programs. What would you say, Terry, is the biggest barrier for employers to take action?

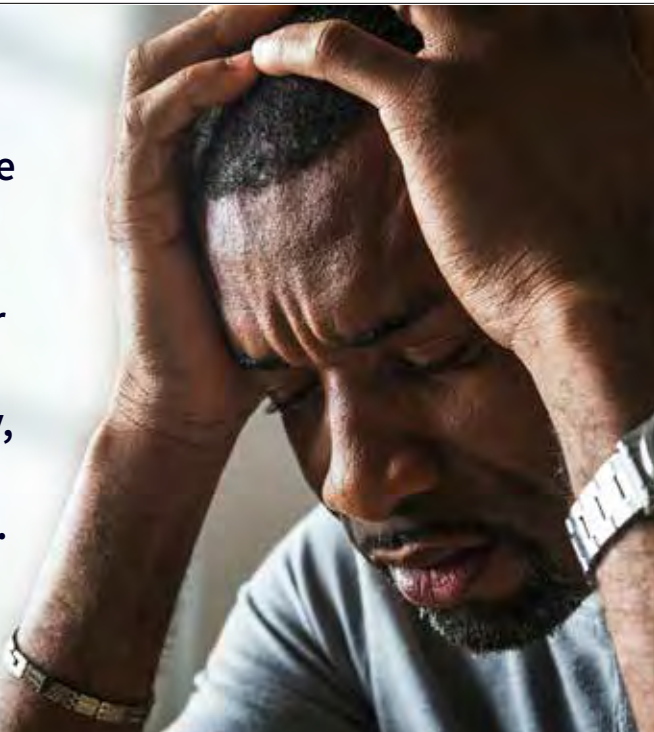
Trafton: It can be difficult to clearly wrap your arms around the essence of what mental health really is all about. What's happening on the inside of someone emotionally or psychologically can be difficult to understand and measure. It's easier to talk about physical health. Physical health can be measured with X-rays and blood tests and visual signs that we can all see.

Earlier, we were talking about depression and how we identify that in the workplace and activate strategies to support employees. Investing in strategies around mental wellness in the workplace is going to pay dividends to the company. Studies show that mentally well employees help improve your bottom line.

Nemecek: I've been at Cigna 17 years now. For the first several years, employers didn't focus on mental health because behavioral health benefits accounted for only 3 to 5 percent of their total medical costs. Instead, they focused on diabetes, heart disease and other illnesses that accounted for a greater portion of their total health care costs.

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that 30 to 40 percent of employees who have a chronic illness also have a mental health diagnosis. And of those with a mental health diagnosis, two-thirds have a medical diagnosis of some kind. Health care costs are two to three times higher for those who have the behavioral health diagnosis as well.

Those financial perspectives of mental wellness along with the other business metrics like productivity are garnering more attention from employers.

Herzog: Doug is right. We're looking at the causation and correlation of events and determining potential risks in advance. For example, if someone recently had major heart surgery, that person is at high risk for depression. Looking at the challenge or a problem an associate might have rather than just focusing on the symptom is a game changer. As employers, we didn't do that before. Now we're standing up and saying, "We want to help you with that physical challenge, but we also want to help with the mental one as well."

Garner: Being in the nonprofit sector, I'd say a big hurdle is finances. The cost of health care overall is increasing, for the employee and the employer. We know that an employee who is experiencing mental wellness will be more physically, mentally and emotionally present and productive.

Ultimately, I think companies are doing more to find the money to invest in people so that we can help the business grow and keep staff healthy. It's been a long time coming to that conclusion for a lot of places.

Streck: The good news of where we are today is that some of the barriers, such as the stigma, have gone or are going away. That helps employers move forward.

Since managing mental wellness is individualized, it can feel overwhelming to start a program that will provide opportunities to meet the varying needs across your organization. But, my recommendation is to start somewhere and do something. Even if you don't have the budget to take on a large endeavor, you can positively impact your employees through lower-cost offerings.

I cannot stress more the importance of gaining leadership commitment prior to implementing a mental wellness program. Without leadership buy-in, your efforts will feel forced and create a bigger divide for employees.

Prosser: We're hearing more about bullying in the workplace, not just in schools. How are companies addressing that issue?

Streck: This is crucial that this is addressed in the workplace as bullying can lead to depression or other mental health concerns. First, you need to have effective strategies for combating harassment or bullying within your business so that employees know they can voice concerns without fear of retaliation later on. You have to provide a safe and confidential environment for that conversation, and then you have to take action.

Harassment or bullying can often go unreported. It is important to build a culture of leaders who really support their teams and ensure employees know bullying has no place within your organization. Providing a culture of collaboration and inclusion will go a long way.



ADAM VOGLER

Terry Trafton of CommCARE

Herzog: It goes back to intentionality. You have to make a declaration of your values as an organization so it ultimately becomes your compass. Culture is an expression of something you want to be. Every day, our words and deeds measure how well we're doing on that front.

At Netsmart, we refer to our values every day, because if we don't, then they're just words that are hanging on a wall. If we do it right, they become our guide and they shape us in who we want to be, and we revisit those with some frequency.

Streck: I couldn't agree with you more. That is a huge part of how you create a culture in an organization and get everyone aligned as to how we expect to treat each other. It's very important that when you see your values not being upheld, that is addressed and coached in a way that fosters collaboration and connectedness. If you don't live those values, then they are just words on a wall.

Trafton: The base of a healthy culture is trust. Do your employees have trust with each other? The trust factor is not just about trusting that the supervisor or the leader will somehow hold others accountable. The trust factor is about everybody holding everyone accountable.

You have to own your work environment. You need to be able to engage in difficult conversations when conflicts occur. The truth is handling conflict is not easy for most people. So having those conversations may be very difficult. The most difficult conversations are not one-shot talks. Often there needs to be a follow-up conversation to a difficult conversation so that a situation doesn't turn into bullying or so that somebody doesn't feel dehumanized or demoralized from an interaction.

Garner: We have a zero-tolerance approach about reports of workplace bullying and hostile work environments. Our leadership team has been taking more accountability for what we used to primarily identify as "HR issues;" it's the leadership who really needs to set the tone and ensure that people feel safe and are held accountable when others don't feel safe.

In addition, we've also focused on reinvigorating our culture and making

sure that all employees know what is expected, their rights and who to talk to (free of retaliation) if they feel their rights have been violated.

Prosser: The #MeToo movement put a spotlight on sexual harassment in the workplace. Are employers asking their insurance partners for more tools for addressing workplace harassment issues?

Nemecek: Absolutely, we've seen many more requests from employers around various tools and resources for all types of workplace harassment issues, including bullying, domestic violence and sexual harassment. We're starting to see more requests around loneliness and social isolation as well.

Cigna's EAPs offer lots of webinars and training programs and educational resources to help bring some of those tools to clients. They also help them incorporate some of those tools into their own wellness programs and engagement surveys and activities.

Prosser: Research indicates loneliness can significantly affect well-being and long-term health. Tell us about Cigna's research in this area.

Nemecek: It has been fascinating. About a year ago, we recognized that many customers were calling and making comments like, "I don't know who to ask" or "I don't have anybody who can help me with this." We noticed

that the literature was showing an increase in the prevalence of loneliness and social isolation.

Literature also showed a correlation between those issues and depression, substance abuse and suicide as well as diabetes, heart disease and dementia. An important study even showed that chronic loneliness is as deadly as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

So we did a survey of 20,000 American adults and nearly half said they felt lonely or isolated. What was probably most surprising was that people in Generation Z — 18- to 22-year-olds — actually said that they felt the loneliest.

Those are the people coming into our workforce. We want to find out how loneliness and social isolation impact the workplace. So we're starting to have conversations with employers to look at what tools we can provide.

In a world in which technology is allowing us to be more flexible and to work remotely, employers want to make sure people are still engaging with others. How do we do that? Having face-to-face conversations is very important in decreasing loneliness and isolation and helping everybody be healthier and more engaged.

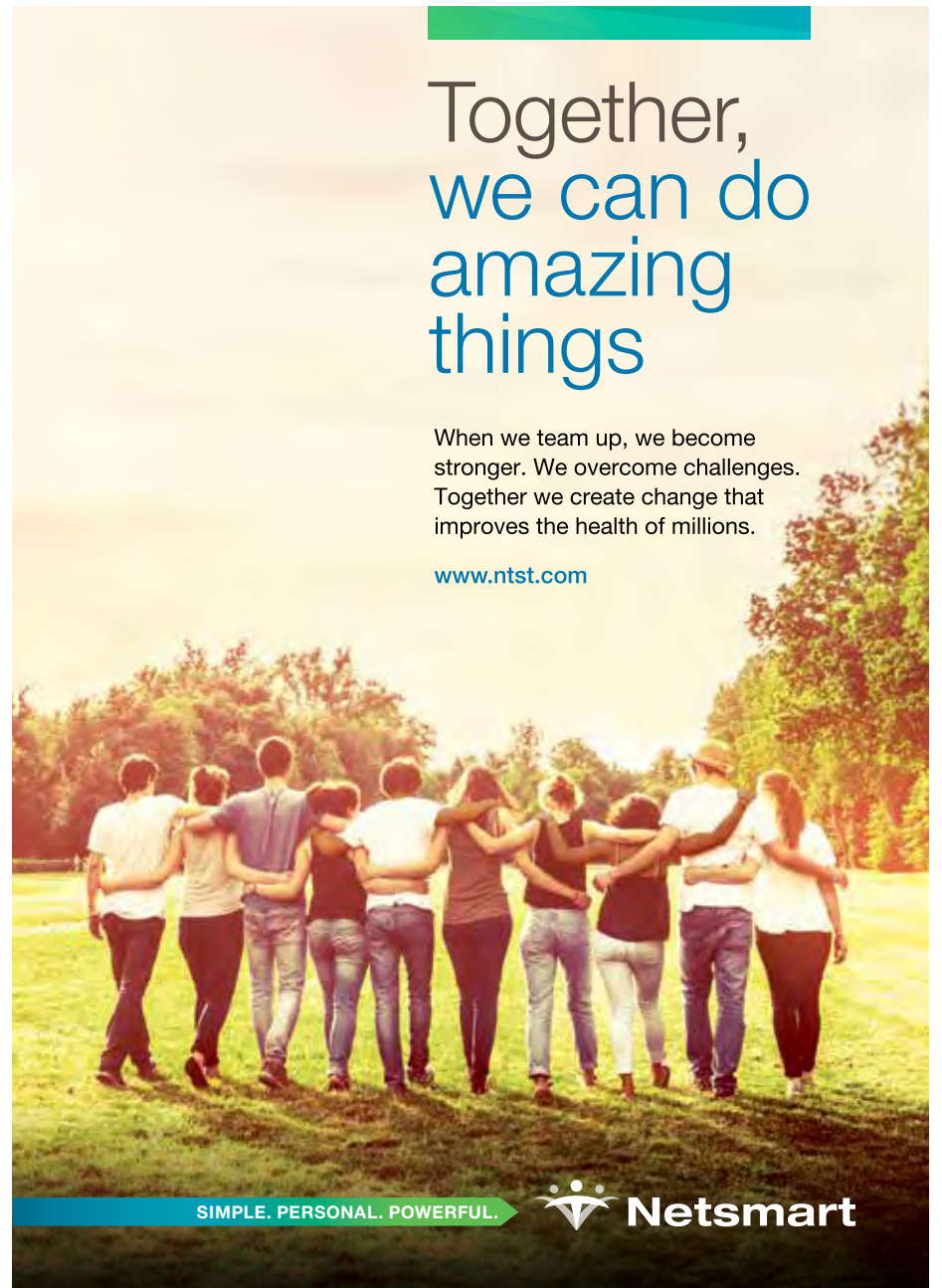
Garner: A recent posting on PsychologyToday.com talks about the similarities of suffering from

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loneliness and physical pain. In an experiment, body scans showed that lonely individuals who were given acetaminophen had reduced activity in pain receptors in the brain. The article also went on to explain the link between loneliness and the fight-or-flight response and that this response becomes heightened, which can lead to irritability and anger.

Unfortunately, when faced with the opportunity for connection, these individuals sometimes lash out in anger. This has a huge implication for the workplace.

Prosser: As it relates to the workplace, I've heard that the open-office concepts have actually decreased collaboration between people.

Nemecek: It seems those open concepts haven't fostered that collaboration. We do know from our research that having conversations is important. Stop and talk to the person in the cubicle or the office next to yours. Ask them how they're doing and find out about their kids and their family. Create a workplace culture that allows and promotes people doing that so that they're not just walking in, sitting at their computer and then walking back out.

Herzog: This is the debate between form and function. You can design an

area to be open and collaborative. But if your processes don't provide for that collaboration, then you are just pretending that openness is happening.

At Netsmart, we created collaboration areas inside and outside. These areas were created so people can get up, walk around and have some of those breaks. We want associates to be consistently inconsistent so that it is not the same and that you're challenging and stimulating thought. The reality is life runs on the rails of relationships, and we can't let technology master us. Facebook connections and Instagram followers are not relationships.

Generation Z is realizing that and they're challenging us on it. We have to go back to not only the design of the workplace, but also the practices — how to work together as a team, how to bring different roles together and how to work together in collaboration spaces rather than individually at your desk. At some point it may include having no tables and just chairs or maybe the novel idea of putting our devices away.

We're seeing the course correction. We're all hungry for more authenticity. Employers, health care providers and insurers are all working together. This approach has a direct impact on not only the cost of health and wellness, but also the benefits and the values that we receive.

Trafton: Because of technological advancements, some companies are



FILE

Astra Garner of KVC Hospitals

doing away with physical office spaces and having employees work remotely to be more cost-effective. Some of those companies that telecommute are seeing increases in that loneliness factor because now you're at home and you're not talking to other people. People miss camaraderie and the ability to get together and celebrate or work on projects together. People are seeing there is a benefit to being in the same room together and working on something.

Herzog: Working collaboratively creates an energy, too. In common spaces, you see teams working together. You hear them laughing and having a good time.

I asked our associates to think through some of the best moments they've had in their careers at work. Those moments were not in planned meetings. They were in the unplanned. They were in the random conversations. They were at a moment when somebody was there when they needed them. We have to create opportunities for those experiences to happen more, not less.

And I couldn't agree with you more. Everyone's making this turn and coming back to that idea. The real power of the business is not just the word teamwork. It's when we work together as a team.

Streck: I learned early in my career from a very senior leader that relationships matter. I started a meeting with this individual and jumped right into business, thinking that this senior vice president's time was precious. That individual stopped me and said: "No, this is our first meeting. We need to spend some time getting to know each other because that is how we're going to foster a great working relationship."

That has stuck with me throughout my career. I have to remind myself and others that the personal connection is extremely important, and it can help create a great environment to foster all the things we've talked about, such as collaboration and walkabouts. Authenticity really drives a great culture.

Trafton: That's a great example, Dana, of people feeling like they just don't have the time to stop and have that human conversation. So maybe you just take a couple minutes at the top of a meeting and check in with everyone or ask them to share something so that

team members get to know one another.

As an employer, you do need to foster a relationship with your employees and have one-on-one interactions. It makes a difference to the individual when someone takes the time to know how many dogs or cats or kids they have and what's going on in their lives. That caring camaraderie is going to help people come together in the workplace to get things done.

Prosser: Then, when you do have those difficult conversations, people know you care, which may help them take it a little better.

Herzog: Yes, it's about earning the right to have the difficult conversations. It's not just about the head or the heart; it's about both.

When we are more engaged, we're more creative, more excited and have more energy. Feeling engaged is not only going to add to the productivity of the business, but also our overall happiness in what we're doing. At the end of the day and when we measure our lives, we're going to look back and remember the moments that were fun, enjoyable, when we felt like we belonged and that our contributions mattered. Employers play a big part of that in each of our lives.

Garner: This conversation is spot on. Within the diversity and inclusion space, getting to know your team and letting yourself be known to that team are crucial. If we need to have difficult conversations with others on our team, having more knowledge about them as a person serves as a springboard. We can then tailor their performance improvement plan, or whatever protocol is identified as necessary, to something that will be most effective for them.

I always remind people that the goal of progressive discipline is to correct a behavior and hopefully retain that employee. Our human resources VP always reminds us that feedback is a gift, and the more personalized that gift is, the more it's likely to be appreciated. It's impossible if you don't know your employees and are addressing their areas for improvement with a cookie-cutter approach.

Trafton: Companies are living organisms that live for many years. How will your company be remembered? As a brand, of course, you want to be known for that thing that you do, but you also want to be known as a great employer. You want to be known for being that healthy organization that attracts talent, not the monster company that people are fleeing from.

Those are important points to take away when you're creating a healthy culture and value system. You want to reinforce what you want Generation Z to carry on as you onboard them. They'll help change the conversation from work-life balance to a healthy work environment — some place they really enjoy going to and calling their employment.

Prosser: What advice would you give to somebody who is just starting from scratch with this?

Garner: My biggest piece of advice is to find balance. We want to provide our employees with all the tools they need to be happy and successful, but there's a price tag associated with that. There's also a price tag associated with doing nothing.

We must find the right balance by

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frequently asking our employees for feedback. They are the ones who can tell you what would be most helpful to them. Then you can begin with the low-hanging fruit and work up toward filling more complex needs.

Communication is also very important. You should consistently communicate with your workforce so they understand why you're starting to implement new initiatives, how it will impact them and their work, and the expected outcomes for the organization.

Also, this can't just be a C-suite effort. It's critical to educate middle management and provide them with training so that they can successfully explain the purpose and will know how to respond to employee stress, illness and wellness in a way that enhances your culture.

I recently read an article that pointed out that people don't leave their jobs because of the CEO; they leave because of their direct supervisor. I'm sure many of us have experienced this personally and understand why that is. So, we need to ensure that middle management and supervisors really understand how vital their role is to shaping the culture and overall business success.

Nemecek: It's important for employers to start by talking to their employees. Do an engagement survey. Work with your HR team to understand what's happening with your employees. What are the issues they face? What is important to them?

Then take that information and do something with it. You have to let them know you heard them. Start providing resources. We've talked about EAPs. While they are not the whole answer, they are an important part and often the first step. Consider providing not just a referral source for someone to go get counseling but also all of the other pieces of EAPs that can be available to the employees, managers and leadership. Enlist HR to help include mental health in the overall wellness strategy.

Trafton: As you continue to move engagement surveys forward and activate a plan, remember to communicate, communicate, communicate. There has to be a feedback loop. There are lots of great ideas and not all of them can be activated. Talk through that with people so they understand and feel valued — so you don't hear: "I gave input, but they didn't do what I said. So they don't really care."

We have to make sure we communicate that the bigger goal is to create the best strategy moving forward for the whole company so that it's owned by everybody. It's not just a top down solution. It has to be a bottom up solution. A lot of companies have discovered that developing committees to activate strategies for wellness in their workplace is helpful. As an employer, we need to make sure the tools are available, and then activate and communicate the strategy.

Streck: For employers who want to start some programming, they don't have to do everything right away. There are always budget and time constraints. But doing something is definitely needed.

It can be as simple as looking at their current programming. What do they have in place that supports

mental health? And how do they communicate and make sure people know it's available? How are their policies structured? Do they support a culture of health, collaboration and work-life balance? Start simple rather than thinking you have to take on the whole thing at once.

Herzog: One of my favorite poets, Maya Angelou, said it well: "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you

made them feel." Statistics tell us that 1 in 5 people are going to come across a mental health challenge or crisis this year. We've already come across five people this morning. We'll come across five people as we go to work. It's not if, it's when and what we do when we do interact with them.

To your question, employers have an opportunity to make people feel very important, feel like they belong and that their contributions matter. It's the opportunity to take this notion of

teamwork far beyond a single task.

There are simple things that can be done. Mental Health First Aid was a game changer at Netsmart. It provided benefits that we didn't expect because it challenged our own status quo.

It's also not just one thing. We've talked today about how all of these strategies together make a difference. But most important, it is a mindset, a will and the courage to challenge what exists today for something that it can be in the future.



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