



Defining the Intersection Between Behavioral Health and Employers

If you have followed healthcare for a while, like me I am sure many of you have wondered why people with diagnosed disease states do not follow care plans, do not adhere to medication, and generally lack motivation to live a better life? According to research conducted by organizations such as the American Diabetes Association and the National Federation for the Blind, people with diabetes can be 3 to 4 more times susceptible to depression and mental health conditions than those without diabetes. Think about it...if I am depressed and have a hard time even getting out of bed in the morning, then the likelihood of me listening about nutrition, exercise and care plan compliance will likely be an uphill battle.

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), mental and substance use disorders affect people from all walks of life and all age groups. These illnesses are common, recurrent, and often serious, but they are treatable and many people do recover.

What we have witnessed in the employer health insurance market for years regarding traditional disease management programs has generally not worked. I estimate over 90% of the large employers I have met over the past 15 years have complained about the lack of outcomes through their traditional disease management programs offered through their insurance carriers. Just using the example of diabetes with a higher rate of potential mental health conditions suggests that we are trying to treat people for one disease state while many other issues are happening in their lives that conflict with the well-intentioned advice of care managers, health coaches, etc. Until we take a more holistic view of the numerous issues afflicting an individual, our progress will be limited.

What is encouraging is to see some of the new programs and initiatives that attempt to uncover and help manage behavioral health needs, coupled with the open mindedness of employers to address these sensitive health issues. The diabetes program, DECIDE, developed at John's Hopkins and built on a behavior change platform is an example of a program with proven outcomes that focuses on addressing behavioral health concerns while concurrently managing the day-to-day challenges of diabetes. Johns Hopkins has been able to commercialize this program by putting it online with rich video content and interactive consultation between the patient and provider delivering remarkable outcomes.

I have also had the privilege of working with Dr. Allen Tien who is a Psychiatrist by training and currently the Chief Medical Officer for a company called BH-Works and an adjunct professor at Johns Hopkins University. Dr. Tien's development of a technology platform that assesses 14 different behavioral health domains that then provides guidance to the patient and provider has been built in a way that is not obtrusive and has had a 98% satisfaction rate across all of the individuals who have taken the assessment over the last decade. Dr. Tien has developed a version of his original provider-focused assessment for employers that is now being taken by employees in lieu of the traditional health risk assessment. This step towards digging deeper into what is truly afflicting employees within an organization in my estimation is where the intersection of behavioral health with traditional wellness initiatives and Employee Assistance Programs offered by employers has to go. Not only will the information help the individual, but imagine the opportunity for an employer to change its environment and culture based on the de-identified aggregate results of an in-depth behavioral health assessment. I personally think this is a game-changer and I commend the employers who are already using the BH-Works assessment to enhance the lives of their employees, which will ultimately lead to a healthier work place and a more productive, profitable organization.

About the author: Stuart M. Sutley is the President of Total Health Management, Inc. (www.totalhealthmgt.com). THM's goal is to align health systems with employers and employees to manage better health outcomes with a key focus on the coordination of health, disability and workers compensation benefits.