



**BlueCross BlueShield**  
of Oklahoma

WHITE PAPER

# Driving progress in a new mental health landscape.

**We've made great strides.  
But there's still more we  
can do together.**

We're here. With more connected,  
more accessible and more integrated  
behavioral health support.

# Navigating and supporting a cultural shift.

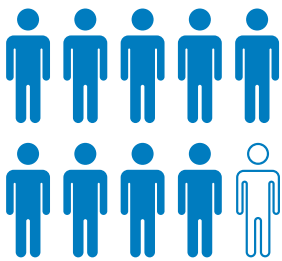
We've reached a new era in behavioral health. According to a recent poll, 74% of full-time employees in the U.S. say it's appropriate to discuss mental health concerns at work<sup>1</sup> — a sign that, in some ways, long-standing stigma surrounding the issue is decreasing. But that doesn't mean our work is over.

Despite the progress we've made, 1 in 2 employees reports being burned out.<sup>2</sup> While burnout isn't a mental health condition in and of itself, it's closely tied to the development of several mental health conditions.<sup>3</sup> For example, employees who experience burnout have a 180% increased risk of developing depressive disorders and a 57% increased risk of workplace absence due to illness.<sup>4</sup> And a study from 2023 estimated that depression alone cost the U.S. \$333.7B in 2019 (\$382.4B in 2023 dollars).<sup>5</sup>

These costs and challenges are part of only one small snapshot of behavioral health today. It's crucial that employers remain aware of the impact of both the progress being made around behavioral health and the struggles that still require ongoing support. To effectively support the full health of your people, provide employees with access to resources, care management and treatment that's connected to their full benefits — because mental health is vital to one's overall health. We can help.



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## Knowing the scale of impact.

Since 2020, there's been an increase in people using behavioral health services. At the same time, behavioral health challenges are still increasing in prevalence. In fact, there's been a three-fold increase in depression and anxiety since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and 90% of adults in the U.S. believe the country is facing a mental health crisis.<sup>6</sup> These challenges are all the more difficult to address when employees struggle to access care in the first place.

A compounding issue is the shortage of behavioral health providers nationwide. By 2025, we will be short about 31,000 full-time-equivalent practitioners.<sup>7</sup> These rampant shortages can lead to delays in receiving care, which can mean developing more complex health challenges down the line. Today, the average wait time to access behavioral health services is six weeks, and for specialists, that time can jump up to months.<sup>8</sup> When those struggling don't get the care they need, things like presenteeism and absenteeism at work go up, which can lead not only to higher costs of care, but also higher performance costs to organizations.

So, where do you focus your efforts? We can help you connect the dots between your workforce's health challenges and the benefits your workplace offers. Many employees struggle with lack of resource awareness, navigation challenges, cost concerns and provider fit — just to name a few. Comprehensive benefits that include robust behavioral health coverage, communicated clearly and simply to your workforce, can make the difference between them suffering in silence and feeling empowered to take action.

## Moving past stigma to support.

One positive trend coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic is that there is more open communication surrounding behavioral health struggles. Today, 87% of adults in the U.S. think having a mental health disorder is nothing to be ashamed of.<sup>9</sup> We're more open about these issues than ever before. But stigma certainly hasn't been eradicated, which is evidenced by how many people still need to address their behavioral health issues. It's estimated that as many as 50–70% of those living with a mental health condition don't receive treatment.<sup>10</sup>

A powerful way to combat stigma is by offering and promoting an employee assistance program. One that is integrated with your medical plan is particularly valuable, as these programs give members access to an allotted set of counseling sessions at no cost to the employee and enable them to maintain continuity of care after their allotted sessions have been used. Be visible and vocal in your support of these programs.

Combating stigma doesn't stop at 5 p.m. To truly support the behavioral health of your employees, you have to take their entire household into account. Benefit-carrying employees tend to play a crucial role in supporting the household, and stressful

circumstances that arise within the family tend to reverberate and affect everyone. This can often lead to the benefit-carrying employee taking time off to address these issues. When these employees have the additional value of an EAP, their mental health is that much more supported by concrete tools, such as counseling, financial services and crisis intervention. Furthermore, various household members are sometimes eligible to receive the same services. By extending care to your employees' families, you're demonstrating your support of everyone in their lives and optimizing the health and success of your business.

Each person's mental health journey is unique and equally important. This is an opportunity to recognize the multiple types of stigmas your workforce may be encountering, whether social, cultural or personal. Drive awareness about these differences. Encourage employees to use time off to tend to their mental health and reassure your team that you are a safe resource for them to communicate with. Regularly remind employees of all resources that exist and that they're all in place specifically for them.

# 87%

**of adults in the U.S. think having a mental health disorder is nothing to be ashamed of.**  
**This is how far we've come.**



## Integrating holistic benefits. Because mental health is vital to overall health.

Integrating behavioral health coverage is the best way to provide easier access to care, preventive strategies and whole-person support. This kind of approach can lead to significant savings. In fact, employer groups who carved in their medical and pharmacy benefits saved an average of \$360 per member per year more for those members who had chronic behavioral health conditions, compared to those who had a fragmented, carve-out model.<sup>11</sup>

The reason for this is simple: behavioral health is connected to every aspect of overall health. So much so that comorbidities of behavioral and physical health conditions are very common and costly. For instance, the cost of treating members with both diabetes and depression diagnoses is more than double the cost of treating members with only diabetes.<sup>12</sup> These issues cannot be addressed in a silo. Integrating access is the most seamless and effective way forward for both you and your employees.

Another key area to focus on is social determinants of health and how they impact your workforce. About 90% of these determinants are derived from the social and physical environment throughout our lives.<sup>13</sup> Creating environments in which employees have easy access to mental health and self-care resources will help them thrive.

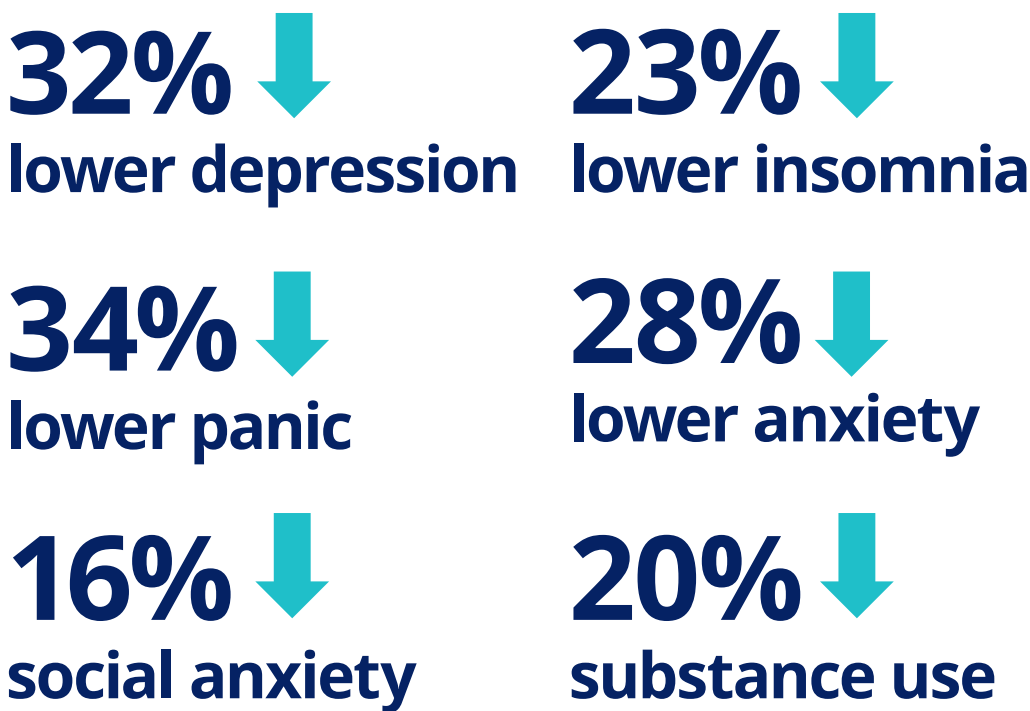
### How to Bolster Employee Engagement

- Bring providers on site for check-ups and screenings.
- Hold company-wide events (such as lunch-and-learns) to walk them through how to use these resources step-by-step.
- Utilize provided resources, communications and learning materials (emails, brochures, handouts, etc.) to drive a culture of use within your organization.
- Repeat this process to encourage regular use. Aim for at least twice a year, and when onboarding new employees.

# Providing support that works.

Take a look at the member experience after engaging with our Digital Mental Health program. Numbers from a 2023 quarterly results report show just how huge a difference a digital cognitive behavioral therapy program can make in addressing the symptoms of prevalent behavioral health conditions.<sup>14</sup> These conditions are highly impactful and complex.

## Reduction in member psychometric scores:



Take a look at our latest [infographic](#) for a snapshot into how these lesser discussed conditions may be affecting your workforce and how the strength of integration can help.

# We're here for you. So you can be there for them.

It's important to acknowledge what we're doing right as a society when it comes to behavioral health. We've made great progress in many ways, but we still have more to do, together. We're here to make it easier for you to do more for the full health of your employees — with integrated, adaptive support. For you, and for them.



**For more information,  
call your account  
representative today.**

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