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Mental health decline poses workplace hazard: Experts

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Employees who feel unsafe on the job are more likely to report symptoms of work-related depression and anxiety, and those who study worker mental health have discovered a relationship between anxiety and increased work injury rates, industry experts say.

“There is more and more data coming out showing just how inextricably intertwined mental health and physical health are in the workplace,” said Dennis Stolle, senior director of applied psychology at the Washington-based American Psychological Association.



Psychological safety, a concept defined as a belief that workers won't be punished for raising concerns or making mistakes at work, is also on the radar for workplace safety researchers, said Shanna Tiayon, a social psychologist and CEO of Yes Wellbeing Works LLC, a Washington-based organization that focuses on employee wellbeing.

Ms. Tiayon and Mr. Stolle were among several experts who spoke about the relationship between worker mental health and workplace safety during the virtual SAFER Summit hosted by the National Safety Council in December.

There's a workplace correlation between psychological safety and stress, Ms. Tiayon said, and workers should be able to feel they can make mistakes without fear of retribution.

This is especially applicable to the high-risk manufacturing and construction sectors, she said, where not disclosing mistakes could potentially lead to injuries or death.

Many workers surveyed recently expressed a preference to work for an organization that values their emotions and psychological well-being, and that, “psychologically, a healthy workplace is critical for overall population health in the workplace,” Mr. Stolle said during the summit.

Researchers also found that one in five workers describe their workplace as “toxic,” with those employed in customer service, patient services and client services reporting the highest levels of workplace toxicity, he said.

Stress and psychological issues outside the workplace could also affect employment, Mr. Stolle said. Workers experiencing mental health issues may suffer from insomnia, for example, and exhaustion from sleepless nights at home could pose a workplace hazard.

Some experts say a decline in workplace mental health could be attributed to an ongoing crisis of social disconnection, something exacerbated by the pandemic and which continues in an era of remote work.

Data suggests that high levels of social isolation and loneliness experienced in communities nationwide have negatively affected people's health and working lives, experts say.

Mental health issues such as stress and anxiety are now considered to be a top workplace injury, according to an August study by Los Angeles-based law firm Atticus Law P.C.

Redesigning the workplace and considering policies that promote employee flexibility and autonomy, as well as placing a greater emphasis on employer interventions, are considered promising approaches to improving employee well-being, Abigail Barth, research and innovation program manager at the Washington-based Foundation for Social Connection, said at the SAFER Summit.

The foundation recently issued a report on the employment sector, focusing on the role that labor plays in overall societal health.

The organization, Ms. Barth said, is working to raise awareness of and destigmatize social isolation and loneliness to help workers struggling with mental health issues, especially younger workers.

“The current state isn’t supporting young people,” Ms. Barth said. “We have a future challenge to work towards.”
