



Covid19's Impact on the Wellness of the School Counselor and Other Educators

As the American workplace progresses through the second half of 2021, it has started to examine the coronavirus pandemic in the rear view mirror. This “return to normalcy” was reported by an Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research poll that indicated majorities of Americans were returning to behavioral routines they practiced pre COVID19. In every school and classroom, the U.S. educational workforce is taking deliberate, even cautious, steps to capture what was sidetracked or abandoned in 2020.

Most school counselors and their educator colleagues will be returning to in-person learning this fall after a year of experimentation and innovation, some aspects of which tested their adaptability and flexibility. This was true in schools across America where social distancing rules brought an end to mass in-person learning. Like most unexpected and forced change, remote learning became the “new normal” in education just as similar protocols and procedures were changing the manner in which the entire American workplace would function for the ensuing period that some degree of closure when effective vaccinations were discovered and used.

As steps toward a return to normalcy are taken, employees and employers across the world of work need to perform a mental wellness check to determine what individual and group needs will require attention in a post COVID19 world. *The Mind the Workplace* report from Mental Health America (MHA) is an excellent place to begin that assessment as that organization has monitored pandemic impact since day one in early 2020.

Using data which measured the perceptions of more than 5,000 employees across 17 employment sectors in the World Health Survey, the MHA 2021 report came to a number of broad conclusions or “takeaways,” including the following:

- A majority of workers were experiencing symptoms of fatigue and burnout
- Stress management support is seriously lacking
- Workplace stress is affecting the workers’ mental wellness

This report coincides with a growing concern regarding counselor wellness within the American Counseling Association membership (see ACA Counseling Today references) and by public organizations like the National Alliance on Mental Illness and Mental Health America. These organizations address: a) proactive measures aimed at improving overall workplace wellness, including Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) that include an employee counseling component and b) corrective actions that lead to the elimination of practices and protocols that result in a toxic workplace culture.

While COVID19 remains the “elephant in the room” in many work environments and decisions are being made about which COVID19 driven protocols and practices will remain a part of the

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“new normal” of the workplace. This ACA School Counselor Brief will dissect each of above “takeaways” from the MHA report and their implications for the educational workplace of tomorrow.

Fatigue and Burnout

Before worker adjustment was fully achieved for all of the COVID related changes required of employers, signs of fatigue began to appear for the worker who often found the added attention to detail and demand to learn new protocols to be an unanticipated time consumer. Confident, productive employees were suddenly faced with time management tests and having to function in an environment often fraught with the interruptions of distractions that didn't exist in their usual place of work.

Making matters worse was that these signals were not being observed supervisors and administrators who were themselves experiencing impactful modifications of their own. This fatigue sometimes affected personal wellness habits such as exercise, diet and sleep that upset performance and productivity for some and resulting for some in full-blown burnout for others.

Finally, some burnout grew out of the view that saw working remotely as working 24/7 instead of a defined shift or devoted time period schools were in session. Educators who have always found their work demanded attention away from school now faced greater demands on their time. Modern technology intensified this quandary by enhancing and encouraging student, parent and colleague communications at any time and from any location. The distance between work and life away from work had been dramatically reduced.

Stress and Anxiety Leading to Wellness Concerns

Not only did COVID19 call for adjustments across all educational setting, but it also forced teachers, counselors and related educators to perform their roles and meet their responsibilities via an entirely new remote learning arrangement Comfortable work habits were abandoned and new protocols and conventions were established that required an inordinate amount of educator adjustment.

All of these amendments to the way schools would be required to work during the coronavirus pandemic had to be accomplished simultaneously to the schools' ongoing operation. Like repairing an aircraft in flight, schools underwent structural and operational changes that demanded immediate efficiency and accountability. Often the result was belt-tightening or contraction that led from to redefinition of staff roles all the way out to furloughs and cutbacks.

Remote education also meant the disappearance of the camaraderie and sharing by teachers, counselors, educational specialists and administrators---collaboration and team cohesion that was lost when schools closed physically in 2020 and the new digital technologies took command. Gone also were and social and emotional supports that teamwork contributed to the wellbeing of the individual educator. Many educators never realized the degree to which they depended on these partnerships until they were suddenly and unceremoniously gone.

While continuing education and professional development were already seen as a contemporary imperative for career growth and mobility, meeting that challenge within the COVID 19 context added a measure of anxiety and stress to the equation. Performing existing tasks in a solitary environment, in and of itself, forced unwelcomed relearning and practice. While social distancing demands were being satisfied by a dispersed workforce, the ongoing personal, emotional and social needs of the individual educator were placed in jeopardy.

Fortunately, most took these work, worker and workplace adjustments in stride or with little or limited difficulty and did what they had to keep their career development moving

forward positively. Others, however, found these encounters daunting and began to display symptoms of stress, anxiety and then some of the more serious mental wellness challenges. Forced and immediate change, of the kind called for in the past year in American education has been found to bring out a range of emotions that include such emotional manifestations as anger, fear, apprehension, inconvenience, discomfort, and in some instances, paranoia. While many emotions of this type can serve as the motivation for the individual taking control and correcting any uncomfortable circumstances or protecting themselves from their occurrence, they can concomitantly play havoc with their mental wellness.

Conclusion

Recent circumstances and events have forever changed the American education workplace. Those seeking to enter, grow and move about this new world of work are going to be expected to display an ability to adapt to change like that never required this in the past and it's unfortunate that it took a global tragedy to get to this end. The coronavirus pandemic demanded of all educators a heightened adaptability and flexibility never before required, one that is likely to remain a critical hiring standard for years to come.

Current and future members of the American school workforce are going to ask that wellness concerns become an integral component in their quest for life-work balance and expect school administrators and governing bodies to design and deliver services (i.e., EAPs) that are responsive. Schools that meet those demands will be rewarded with a productive, engaged and happy cadre of educators

Suggested Reading

ACA Counseling Today "Wellness: Getting Beyond the Buzzword" article by Bethany Bray (11/20/2020) <https://ct.counseling.org/tag/topic-ct-wellness/>

ACA Counseling Today "Wellness Matters" article by Ashley J. Blount, Glenn W. Lambie and Daniel B. Kissinger (11/02/2016) <https://ct.counseling.org/2016/11/wellness-matters/>

AP-NORC Poll – Many Americans Resuming Pre-Virus Activities
https://www.stltoday.com/news/national/ap-norc-poll-many-americans-resuming-pre-virus-activities/article_9b40fd90-9431-56a9-bd10-5e1db5f46eb8.html

Mental Health America 2021 Mind the Workplace Report
<https://mhanational.org/research-reports/2021-mind-workplace-report>

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