



# Do You Mind? Exploring Our Willingness to Discuss Behavioral Health With Expatriate Employees

by **Damian Cornacchia, D.O.** | *GeoBlue*

For decades, mental health has been considered a taboo topic. For that reason, concerns were often dismissed rather than taken seriously. Feeling stressed? “Oh, you just need a drink.” Anxious? “Try sleeping it off.”

As a culture, we’ve matured on the subject, slightly. Yet, we still can’t seem to stomach the stigma of mental health. The current generation is more open to having dialogues around issues like anxiety, depression disorders and addictions. But there’s still an overwhelming majority that would rather white-knuckle their way through personal issues than endure an uncomfortable conversation. The fact is, while many people don’t want to talk about mental health, most people could probably use some help.

The most reluctant group to have conversations around mental health may be employers and managers who feel those types of discussions are just

too sticky to get into. However, most stress and anxiety centers on work. Apply that fact to employees who spend large amounts of time overseas, and the impact of that stress increases exponentially. And, oh yeah, there’s a global pandemic happening.

For these reasons, it’s more important than ever to understand how companies can better support expatriates

and recognize the unique challenges that expatriation brings.

## **Behavioral Health Versus Mental Health**

Because the term *mental health* carries some uncomfortable connotations, many have adopted a somewhat friendlier phrase—*behavioral health issues*. However, experts are careful to

### **AT A GLANCE**

- Many people’s stress and anxiety center on work, but employers and managers may be reluctant to discuss mental health with employees.
- Expatriate employees who might admit to feeling only minor levels of anxiety or depression at home may experience those same feelings at a much higher level when they are overseas due to issues such as missing their personal support networks and family unhappiness with the move.
- It may be difficult for expatriates to open up about struggles with mental illness. Creating an environment that promotes vulnerability and applauds workers’ courage to admit they are struggling can have a positive impact on the workforce.
- Employers should consider training managers to recognize the signs of employees who may be struggling with behavioral health issues. Telehealth services can provide an effective strategy for providing behavioral health treatment for expatriates.

explain that there are distinct differences between the two, despite the phrases being used interchangeably.

- **Behavioral health**—*Behavioral health* is the scientific study of the emotions, behaviors and biology relating to a person’s mental well-being, their ability to function in everyday life and their concept of self. The term *behavioral health* encompasses all contributions to mental wellness, including substance abuse, behavior, habits and other external forces.
- **Mental health**—*Mental health* covers many of the same issues as behavioral health, but this term only encompasses the biological component of this aspect of wellness.

For instance, anxiety is considered to be a mental health condition in which there are biological effects at play that impact a person’s mood. The external implications of that may result in sleeping more or less. Those are actions that contribute to a person’s overall behavioral health.

As companies begin to look at ways of supporting workforce mental and behavioral health, it’s important that they make the distinction between mental and behavioral health. And, even more importantly, understand how they coexist.

### The Impact of Poor Mental Health on a Global Workforce

Work-related stress and anxiety have been discussion points for years. However, they are now an even more necessary focus as the Millennial generation navigates expectations of long workhours, a highly competitive job market and an ever-thinning line between work life and home life—one that disappeared completely for much of the world’s workforce during COVID-19.

Expatriates, who have to endure the emotional stress related to life in a foreign country, are an even more tenuous group within the workforce. Some of these pressures can be anticipated, such as overcoming language barriers, learning how to navigate foreign roads or adjusting to a new cuisine. Others, however, are more difficult to predict. Some individuals will find it hard to adjust to a particular culture, or they may become overwhelmed by the sheer distance between them and their loved ones. These unique

triggers place immense personal pressure on an individual’s mental health on top of the typical stresses associated with workplace relationships and success.

Employees who might admit to feeling only minor levels of anxiety or depression at home may easily experience those same feelings at a much higher level when they are overseas. These issues can contribute to an individual’s poor performance or affect the performance and morale of an entire team. In many instances, this may cause extended absences or even drive employees to resign from their positions altogether.

In 2015, Internations conducted a major international survey, which identified the top stressors for expatriates (Figure). They ranged from 52% reporting that they miss their personal support network to 15% who said their loved ones are unhappy with the move.

### Managing the Effects of a Worldwide Pandemic

COVID-19 has taken an already growing issue of behavioral health and catapulted it into an entirely different stratosphere. In 2020, calls to the federal mental health crisis hotline were 900% greater than the prior year.<sup>1</sup> The pan-

FIGURE

#### Top Stressors for Expatriates



Source: Internations.

demic has impacted everyone, with 93% reporting at least one behavior change—from positive ones like more exercise and time spent with family to negative ones like increased alcohol consumption and smoking—since the outbreak began.<sup>2</sup>

The concern over physical and financial health coupled with prolonged isolation has had catastrophic effects on our global population's mental stability. As we struggle to adapt to our current reality, we also look ahead with uncertainty. What will life look like when it goes back to “normal,” and how will we support each other if that reality doesn't look like what we may have hoped?

As local stay-at-home orders and social-distancing practices were being enforced, it became more difficult for individuals to visit their local health care providers. That has led to an increase in usage of remote/digital medical services. This new technology has given millions of people around the world access to health care when they may have otherwise gone without it. From a behavioral health standpoint, telehealth services can help eliminate numerous obstacles that might prohibit an individual from seeking care. That is true under normal circumstances, but even more so during this unique time in history. It also provides unique advantages for the globally mobile who would benefit from counseling by someone who understands their language and their culture and is able to provide that care without requiring someone to leave their home.

## **Promoting a Healthy Global Workforce**

### ***Keeping the Conversation Going***

If the three most important factors in real estate are “location, location, location,” mental health's would be “awareness, awareness, awareness.” As mentioned in the beginning of this article, the world is moving in the right direction when it comes to embracing the subject of behavioral health. But we have a long way to go. Open and ongoing communication is the single most effective way to break down the stigmas associated with mental and behavioral health issues. The more we talk about them, the less power they hold over us. Managers should prioritize regular one-to-one meetings and catch-ups with their team. They should use this time to check how team members are feeling and talk through any difficulties at home or work. It might help to add well-being as a standing item on the agenda at team and/or individual one-to-one meetings. It's an opportunity to let staff talk about how they've been doing and anything that might be affecting their well-being.

Because expatriates tend to be the high performers and workers with great potential, there is an immense pressure to appear savvy and ever capable. The idea of opening up about struggles with mental illness seems to fly in the face of the persona many feel like they're expected to portray. However, creating an environment that promotes vulnerability and applauds the courage to admit that “I'm not OK” can have an incredibly positive impact

on the workforce, especially those who are miles away from home.

It's important to realize that behavioral health issues can be very slow-burning fires that often take years to grow large enough to identify as a problem. Individuals may drop subtle hints over an extended period of time that could be easily missed if you are not looking for indicators of mental or behavioral problems. Managers should understand some of the signs of poor mental health such as low mood, poor concentration, difficulty with making decisions, irritability and short temper/aggression. Seeing these signs in employees should prompt managers to check in and start a conversation about how the employee is coping right now.


Managers of employees who seem like they may be in need of support should reassure them that it is perfectly acceptable and even honorable to admit that there's an issue that needs to be addressed. Then they should encourage them to utilize services like telehealth, an employee assistance program (EAP) and other clinical interventions such as therapy. Making it as easy and emotionally safe as possible for them to seek care can create a sense of acceptance and understanding that can spur an individual to pursue help with confidence and peace of mind, which in turn may give them a better chance of making lasting, positive changes in their life.

### ***Supporting Healthy Behavioral and Mental Habits***

There's a clear connection between mental and physical well-being. In-

stead of approaching these two areas separately, we should recognize that they are intrinsically intertwined. Not only can the effects of stress, anxiety and depression manifest themselves in physical ways, they can also be managed using a combination of cognitive therapy and practical lifestyle changes.

Managers and executives should emphasize a healthy work-life balance and prioritize behavioral health and wellness. One benefit to consider is telehealth services, which can help equip individuals with the physical, emotional and mental tools necessary to endure the pressures of life, work, relationships and travel. These services, which can be provided via telephone or online video, can include emotional support services such as solution-focused counseling sessions; physical support services such as wellness coaching; practical support services such as work-life consultations; and referrals and clinical support ser-

vices such as remote doctor consultations (telemedicine). Telehealth, similar to telemedicine, includes a wider variety of remote health care services beyond the doctor-patient relationship, oftentimes including health education, social support, troubleshoot- ing health issues and more. 

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## Endnotes

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