

THE MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS

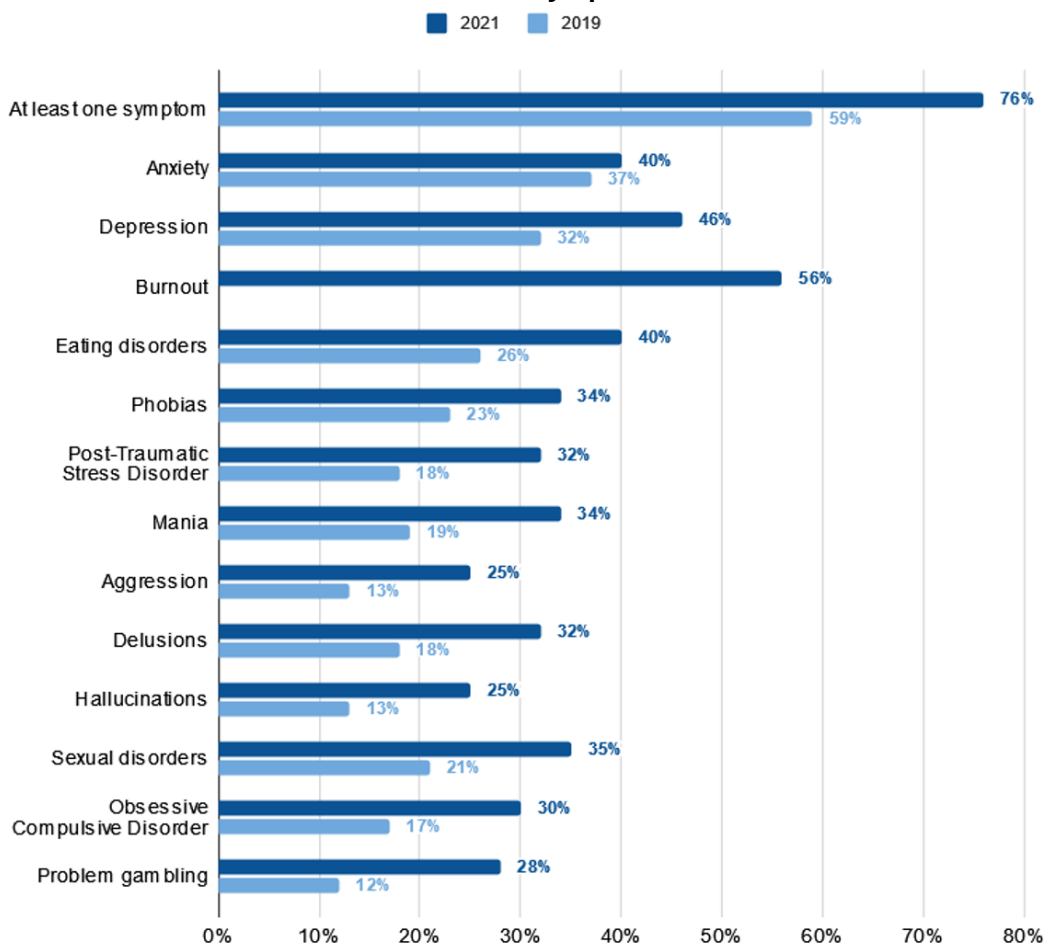
The range of risks stemming from the mental health problem is finally being understood. The future of the solutions, however, is largely in the hands of those who proactively seek to mitigate those risks.

By Edie Weiner

Mental illness, seldom the topic of serious discussion in C-level and Board corporate environments two decades ago, is becoming an unavoidable topic in the boardroom and for good reason.

Mental illnesses have been burgeoning around the globe, accelerated by the pandemic. They include PTSD, concussion, anxiety, stress, depression, suicides, substance abuse, burnout, eating disorders and sleep disorders among others. These illnesses are showing up in our homes, workplaces, communities and now boardrooms. The most famous celebrities and athletes have not been immune. We have reached a crucial moment when boards need to fully confront the challenges that mental health issues will pose for organizations and understand the cascading risks that will result.

Prevalence of Mental Health Symptoms in the Past Year



In fewer than 5 years, the hallmark of the entry level workforce will be a significantly heightened incidence of mental health symptoms. Teens today are suffering from mental illness more than ever before, some of it exacerbated by social media and competitive academic pressures, some by active school shootings. They are now also exhibiting high rates of “eco-anxiety,” fearful of climate change robbing them of a future [see [The Washington Post](#)]. And they are increasingly expressing “imposter syndrome,” a feeling of inadequacy so overwhelming that even if they get into a good college or secure a job, they feel they are still not good enough [see [The New Statesman](#)]. Suspected suicide attempts have dramatically increased among adolescents ages 12 to 17. Psychologists are reporting significant increase in demand for services for children under 13, and the shortage of available counseling is plaguing communities and schools across the country [see [The Washington Post](#)]. Many high schools and universities report that they are now as much in the business of emotional and mental counseling as education.

LOOKING OUTSIDE

Mental health issues have never been viewed as a core set of risks, materially threatening organizational performance. That’s changing, because the outside world is presenting mental health challenges that most organizations have not been prepared to face.

As the war for talent has heated up, we saw that a third of employers with 5,000 or more employees planned to offer on-site behavioral-health counseling last year, up from a quarter in 2019 and less than a fifth in 2018 [see [WSJ](#)]. This trend mirrors what is going on in schools and what is being sought in communities. If a lack of mental health support services is seen as a risk outside the workplace, it is certainly a risk inside. Mental health risks include, but are certainly not limited to, inattention to important signals and processes, theft, sabotage, excess absenteeism, conflict, declining morale, customer/client abuse, low tolerance for uncertainty, inability to recruit into critical positions, disinformation posted on social media...in short, a growing list of outcomes that could present greater risk to organizations.

Mental health never ranked in the same risk cohort as other headline issues: supply chain, access to capital, disruptive technology, climate change, or cyber attacks. Historically emotional, psychological and social well-being issues were often tucked away in Human Resources and often ignored by top management and the board.

Now, however, the emotional health of employees is becoming a key factor in ensuring corporate success. Risk managers face the same set of pressures as other employees, and enterprise risks will be magnified if organizations don’t have the people required to manage them. Hiring, retaining, and growing good talent is becoming a significant threat to optimal company performance. Employee stress and turnover has also been driven by coping with emotional issues within extended families: children, parents, significant others, close friends and neighbors. It’s time for boards to recognize that mental health permeates the entire organization, for better or worse, and requiring management to pay attention is the first line of risk mitigation.

Questions Boards Should Consider:

- Has your board ever had a serious discussion of the mental health crisis?
 - *Chances are, every board member is dealing with the issue at home or in his/her own organization, but never made the connection between their outside world and their organization.*
- Has your organization’s Human Resources team or CRO discussed mental health issues as a risk factor with your board?

- Has your board requested Human Resources to discuss mental health trends and the issues they raise in light of recent scientific and research findings, and to report what is occurring in the world at large?
- Has your board benchmarked mental health programs against best-in-class industry competitors?
- Does your organization provide a work environment that supports the magnitude of daily life pressures confronting individual employees so they can maximize their own performance and that of enterprise they support?

Organizations serve their stakeholders well when they openly discuss and advocate for mental health programs both inside and outside of the company. Employees care more deeply than ever about how their company addresses issues that matter to them. Some of the greatest risks companies now face are unhappy employees striking, spreading rumors, or otherwise undermining the organization. Aligning the company's public persona with authentic messages demonstrating that it cares about employee mental health could help mitigate risks and maximize employee productivity.

LOOKING INSIDE

Headline after headline [see [Bloomberg](#) and [Fortune](#)] makes it clear that it has become increasingly difficult to find willing and capable candidates to support key functions, and that situation may deteriorate further over the long run. Emotional well-being is now central to entry level employees. Managers are increasingly aware of the instinct of Gen Zers to protect their health and seek a divide between work and life. But they are often surprised by how open the younger generations are about their concern for their mental health, their disdain of workplace hierarchy, and the latitude they must be given as they, already, begin to drive corporate culture.

Women have dropped out of the labor force in alarming numbers as they face enormous stress with the demands of childcare and work, inadequate childcare options, and work-at-home interruptions as they attempt multiple roles simultaneously. Their sense of burnout has largely been seen as a jobs issue and not related to mental health. But dealing with all of this complexity while also being monitored remotely by technologies that serve management creates enormous stress. Reengagement requires that their mental and emotional health be central to any discussion of benefits and compensation. The same is true for positions requiring regular on-site presence without the luxury of working virtually.

Baby boomers who thought they would continue to work well past retirement age to afford longer lives and be relevant in their later years have been one of the largest segments to drop out of the workforce during COVID [see [Pew Research Center](#)]. Many cite the recognition that they are burned out, and no longer want full-time employment or commitment to work. They are reporting in large numbers that they have reordered their priorities and now value mental wellness more than more material returns. In their wake, these retirements leave behind significant institutional knowledge, posing additional risks for the organizations they exit.

Many firms have been shying away from hiring talented, younger individuals who have been diagnosed with ADHD or having the characteristics of an autistic spectrum disorder. Many are now at the age when they are entering the workforce in large numbers, and many of the organization's employees are their parents or, perhaps, even their supervisors. Those who are high-performing on the spectrum are generally known to be proficient analysts, but lacking in social and political skills. Increasingly, far sighted organizations are finding ways to integrate and grow employees with these characteristics.

Questions Boards Should Consider

- Does your organization understand how risk issues identified in your organization might be exacerbated by mental health problems? For example, is the board being made aware of:
 - Trends in employee conflict that can escalate into serious incidents?
 - An increase in careless accidents and injuries?
 - Critical departments with very high turnover?
 - Bullying or discrimination that may lead to lawsuits?
 - Incidences of customer/client behavior arising from mental illness, affecting the well-being of employees who must deal with them as well as the reputational and legal risks they pose for the company?
 - Does your organization needlessly sacrifice the output of potentially talented employees by avoiding the hiring of younger employees who have been diagnosed with ADHD and/or who are on the autism spectrum?
 - Are managers without appropriate training paying too much attention to interpersonal skills which are not necessarily linked to vital work that potential employees can easily handle in the right setting?
 - Is your organization structured to optimize outcomes for employees requiring special mental health consideration?
 - Is there a risk that many highly skilled people will not be slotted into available positions?
 - Does your organization have a program to train managers to be sensitive to the rising mental health crisis, and to know how to deal with troublesome issues as they arise?
 - Does your organization have people in Human Resources who are professionally accredited to deal with mental health issues?
 - Are your organization's employee assistance programs paying enough attention to the recent upswing in employees' personal and family mental health issues?
 - Have your organization's programs been updated to address the recent upsurge?
 - Have employees been informed of the programs available?
 - Is the Risk Committee or the board receiving regular updates about which risks have been or may be heightened by emotional health issues, and how those risks are being addressed?
 - Is your organization clearly signaling to its younger staff members that it understands the world they are living in, and is open to accommodating to their emotional issues?
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LOOKING AHEAD

There has always been a percentage of the public with personal or familial mental health issues. Even before the pandemic we've seen an upsurge in these issues, poised to not only afflict the current workforce, but also be a hallmark of the emerging workforce of the next decade and generation. Employing technology to constantly manage and monitor remote workers, causing heightened employee stress, is an example of a quickly growing practice that may exacerbate emotional issues. As pandemic restrictions loosen workers have been hesitant to return to work because they need to care for parents or children with special needs and those stresses, too, are bearing down.

Because of the increased incidence of mental health issues, healthcare costs are very likely to mount, and to the extent that those costs are passed along to employees, more mental health issues will go untreated. That outcome will only exacerbate the problem and the risks. The strains will increase on taxpayers, insurers, employers, health care systems, social services, judiciaries, families and communities. That's one

among many reasons that, in his recent State of the Union address, President Biden called for full parity between physical and mental health care:

"And let's get all Americans the mental health services they need. More people they can turn to for help, and full parity between physical and mental health care if we treat it that way in our insurance." (see [NYT](#))

Multiple new wellness paths are emerging. The last few decades have advanced our knowledge about the brain, the impacts of diet on the human biome affecting our choices and behaviors, the benefits of meditation, and even the ways virtual gaming can aid or worsen various aspects of mental health. *The Wall Street Journal* recently reported that, after two years of remote work, Salesforce shed half of its office space in San Francisco and created a 75-acre wellness retreat in the Northern California redwoods for its 70,000 employees [see [WSJ](#)]. It will send thousands of employees each year to retreats that combine work and training with wellness activities such as hiking and yoga. This is one of the newest and most ambitious examples of using mental and emotional wellness as a foundation of corporate culture in an age of remote and hybrid work. Moving forward it will be imperative for boards to show good faith in monitoring these many endeavors, and seeing that the company is exploring and adopting those that help minimize the risk of unwanted outcomes.

The future of the mental health problem is known, and it is creating rapidly growing risks. The future of the solutions, however, is largely in the hands of those who proactively seek to mitigate those risks.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eddie Weiner

Founder and CEO, The Future Hunters

Eddie Weiner is the founder and CEO of The Future Hunters. Originally incorporated in 1977 as Weiner, Edrich, Brown, the business still uses the same future scanning system Weiner pioneered in the late 1960s for the insurance and risk business. She has written 4 books, the latest of which, *FutureThink*, was a global best seller. The first woman to appear on the cover of *Directors and Boards Magazine*, Weiner has served on over 30 boards and advisory boards. She was the youngest outside woman elected to a major board when, at the age of 29, she joined the board of a mutual life insurance company that, with her participation, became the first to demutualize. She has helped numerous organizations, trade groups and academic and government entities identify and capitalize on emerging risks and opportunities.



About the Future Hunters

For almost 5 decades, the scanning system used by the Future Hunters has been subscribed to by hundreds of organizations, from Fortune 500 companies to national governments. Their work is grounded in the constant monitoring of dozens of vetted publications and sources, covering social, economic, political, technological, environmental and demographic indicators of future change. They curate and abstract about 1,000 articles a year and develop 6 white papers a quarter (24 per year). Their work has led to the earliest indicators of change, from the internet to space exploration to religious movements to political swings to now, even the metaverse (they coined the term MetaSpace Economy™ almost 20 years ago). The three principals, Eddie Weiner, Jared Weiner and Erica Orange, have appeared before hundreds of audiences for keynote presentations and proprietary client engagements. While many organizations focus on snapshots of trends, the Future Hunters' cornerstone multi-client offering, Whiteboard, is a way for clients to join them on an ongoing basis as they continually uncover the motion picture of change. www.TheFutureHunters.com, Info@TheFutureHunters.com

