

# ACTION BRIEF

*Employer Strategies that Drive Health, Equity and Value*



## NEW APPROACHES TO ADDRESSING MAJOR DEPRESSIVE DISORDER IN THE WORKPLACE

### ACTION STEPS FOR EMPLOYERS

1. Learn how MDD affects your employees as well as the workplace.
2. Determine the best evidence-based treatments for individuals in your workforce.
3. Design value-based benefits that remove mental healthcare barriers and silos, shifting the focus to a whole person health approach.
4. Establish expectations for how vendor partners will report and act on specific MDD data to improve workforce health.
5. Educate employees and families about MDD, the importance of early detection, and available benefits and community options.

### MDD IS OFTEN TREATMENT-RESISTANT WITH BIG IMPACTS ON HEALTH

Major Depressive Disorder (MDD), or clinical depression, is a common, serious, and sometimes chronic mood disorder that can be difficult to diagnose and treat.

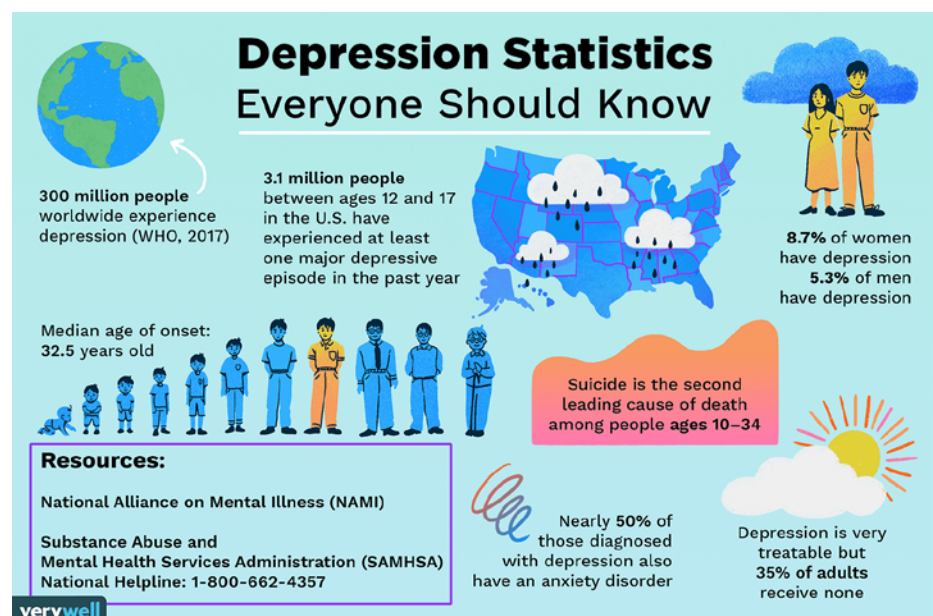
MDD affects 8% of adults in the US—almost 60% of whom either don't seek, or significantly delay seeking, professional support.

MDD symptoms may include a persistently low or depressed mood, lack of energy, poor concentration, psychomotor effects, or suicidal



thoughts. MDD can disrupt sleep and the ability to think clearly, impairing work performance.

Other MDD challenges include long wait times to see specialists and insufficient ethnic and cultural diversity among mental health professionals, as



well as difficulties in diagnosing MDD amid co-occurring medical conditions, treating those co-occurring conditions, identifying the correct medication, ensuring medication adherence, measuring success, and more.

## A CHRONIC CONDITION WITH COSTLY IMPLICATIONS

Clinical depression has become one of America's most costly illnesses, comparable to heart disease. It results in more than \$51 billion in absenteeism and lost productivity, in addition to \$26 billion in direct treatment costs. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), depression causes an estimated 200 million lost workdays each year. This is due, in part, to a complex mental healthcare system that can be difficult to navigate and to the uneven prescribing of, and response to, antidepressant therapies.

A retrospective analysis by IBM MarketScan of US commercial claims data highlights patterns of patients cycling on and off treatments and switching antidepressants. This “fail-first” approach burdens the healthcare system, increases the cost of care, and frustrates patients, leading to relapse, longer episodes of care, increased absenteeism and disability, and an inability to adhere to medication for other health conditions.

## EMPLOYER ACTION STEPS TO IMPROVE OUTCOMES FOR EMPLOYEES WITH MDD

Fortunately, there are strategies employers can use to support the needs of those with MDD. These steps include updated approaches that improve the likelihood of successful diagnosis and treatment and better support of employee wellbeing and productivity.

## ACTION STEP 1

### Learn how MDD affects your employees as well as the workplace.

Employers must begin their consideration of new approaches to MDD with education about the condition. This requires understanding MDD's complexity and current treatment options.

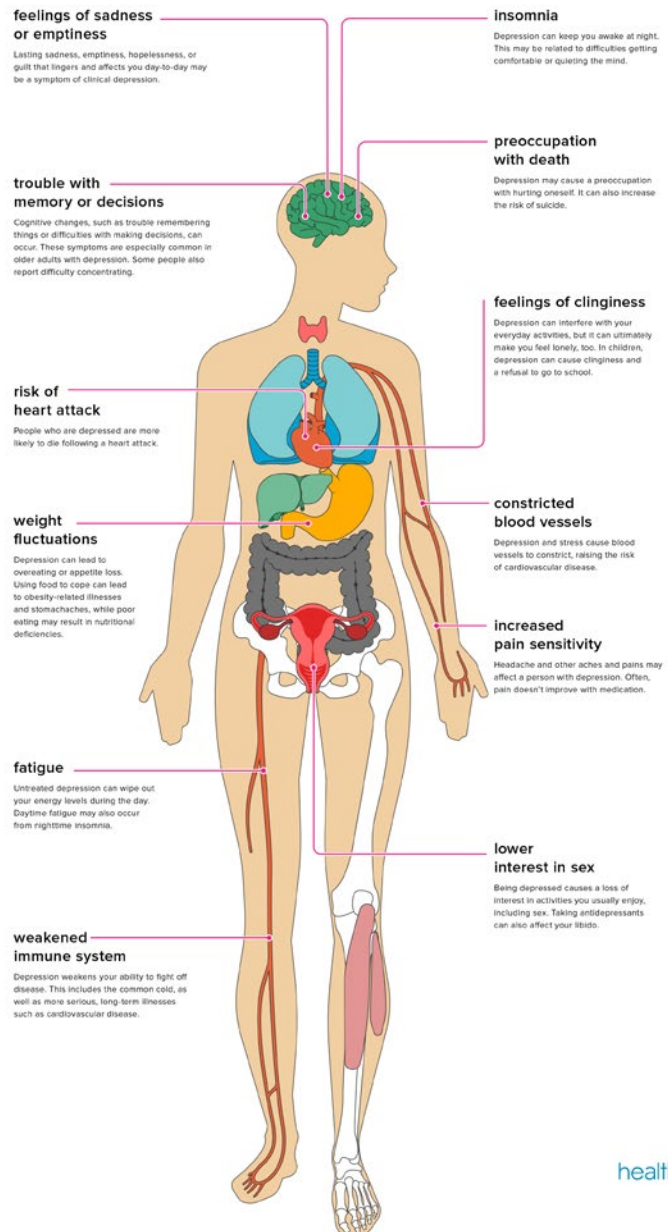
Armed with this understanding, employers can collect data to determine the extent of MDD and other mental health conditions in the workforce—and the effects of MDD on productivity and healthcare costs.

Establishing baseline measurements and tracking them over time helps assess which interventions are working and which are not.

Measurement categories may include:

- ▶ Worker productivity (absenteeism, output and collaboration)
- ▶ Healthcare costs (claims for hospitalizations, outpatient visits, and pharmacy), disability and absenteeism
- ▶ Health outcomes (aggregate mental and physical health status)
- ▶ Education and awareness (training, knowledge and attitudes)

## The Effects of Untreated Depression on Your Body



## ACTION STEP 2

### Determine the best evidence-based treatments for individuals in your workforce.

To offer the optimum range of MDD services, including talk and drug therapy, begin with an inventory of services already available through existing health plans and vendors, analyze their success rates, then identify gaps. The National Institutes of Health characterizes effective treatment as meeting patient needs in four ways:

#### 1. Quick Diagnosis

Early recognition and treatment of MDD are crucial. More than 75% of patients who experienced early response achieved remission in the first six months of treatment. The duration of untreated depression correlates with poorer outcomes.

#### 2. Accurate Diagnosis

Lacking an accurate diagnosis, two-thirds of MDD patients fail first-line therapy. Many patients weather trial-and-error treatment, commonly switching or discontinuing medication, or combining different therapies, with ineffective outcomes.



This National Alliance guidebook provides a detailed understanding of MDD and how a whole person health approach can better support overall workforce health.



#### Mental Health and Health Equity

Within certain ethnic and cultural communities, skepticism and lack of information about MDD and other mental health conditions create barriers to care and treatment adherence. This reluctance to seek treatment is partly due to a lack of ethnically and culturally aligned providers. Studies have shown that shared ethnic and cultural backgrounds between the provider and patient result in a better patient experience.

#### 3. Accessible and Integrated Treatments

Successful treatment of MDD often requires combining several approaches. Medication alone may not be sufficient. Patients should have access to a range of MDD treatments, including drug therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), interpersonal therapy, psychodynamic therapy, and transcranial magnetic stimulation.

Better outcomes result from:

- ▶ Better integrating behavioral health into primary care and removing barriers to full-spectrum care.
- ▶ Integrating employee assistance programs (EAPs) and psycho-social support services into care plans.
- ▶ Ensuring formulary flexibility.

#### 4. Innovation

Depression treatment is rapidly evolving, which is why successful MDD treatment options incorporate new approaches. Promising new treatments include short-course therapy, which minimizes medication side effects, and self-care through increased exercise, healthy eating, adequate sleep, social interactions, and more.

## ACTION STEP 3

### Design value-based benefits that remove mental healthcare barriers and silos, shifting the focus to a whole person health approach.

#### VALUE-BASED BENEFITS AND MDD

Offering value-based benefits for MDD entails providing comprehensive coverage and resources for employees who are living with this condition. Benefits can include:

- ▶ **Access to diverse mental health professionals.** Employer-sponsored benefits are key to ensuring access to mental health professionals. Benefits can be provided through EAPs, health plans, and specialty vendors. Health plan options can include a spectrum of treatment options, such as Collaborative Care; telebehavioral health (including online CBT); crisis residential services; and intensive community services, including partial hospitalization and outpatient services. Employers sometimes expand provider networks to better meet patients' needs.
- ▶ **Medication coverage.** Employers can ask health plans to conduct regular medical drug assessments to ensure appropriate drugs (including appropriate psychotropic medications), medical devices, and specific MDD treatments are covered. Employers should favor the careful use of medication instead of a trial or a "fail-first" approach.
- ▶ **Other key coverages.** These include affordable options for therapy, support programs, and flexible work arrangements.

#### WHOLE PERSON HEALTH AND MDD

Whole person health is especially important for MDD because of the frequency of co-occurring conditions such as autoimmune, cardiovascular/metabolic, neurological, and substance

use disorders. Treatment should consider:

- ▶ **Exercise.** A study published in April 2022 in JAMA concluded adults who performed physical activities equivalent to 1.25 hours of brisk walking per week had an 18% lower risk of depression than those who did not exercise.
- ▶ **Nutrition.** A healthy diet, including nutrient-dense foods such as fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, can help improve mood and reduce depression.
- ▶ **Sleep.** Poor sleep can worsen symptoms of MDD.
- ▶ **Social support.** Social isolation worsens MDD by as much as 63%. Support groups help provide essential, ongoing networks.
- ▶ **Mind-body techniques.** Mind-body techniques help individuals reduce depression and improve overall wellbeing.

The National Alliance has prepared sample RFI questions to ensure vendors and partners support a whole person health strategy, as well as employee education materials about essential self-care.



## ACTION STEP 4

### **Establish expectations for how vendor partners will report and act on specific MDD data to improve workforce health.**

No health issue, and certainly not MDD, can be assessed and treated effectively without accurate data on incidence, treatment outcomes, and long-term effectiveness. Employers rely on vendor partners to gather and act on useful data. To improve data capture and use:

- ▶ **Set clear expectations.** When partnering with vendors, employers can establish clear expectations for how vendors will measure and report improvements in mental health. This may include specific metrics related to MDD, such as the number of employees who seek treatment, the treatment approaches, and the number of employees who experience improvement.
- ▶ **Require transparency.** Employers can require transparency about the methods vendors use to measure improvements in mental health, including specific data related to MDD. The right data helps employers identify areas where additional support or resources may be needed.
- ▶ **Establish reporting requirements.** Employers can establish reporting requirements for vendors that outline how and when data related to mental health will be collected and reported. This may include regular meetings or reports tracking progress toward specific mental health goals.
- ▶ **Hold vendors accountable.** Employers can hold vendors accountable for improving mental health outcomes in the workplace. They may achieve this by setting targets for improvement, providing incentives for achieving specific goals, or taking corrective action if vendors fail to meet expectations.

### **Managing Vendor Gaps**

The National Alliance surveyed employers to better understand their level of satisfaction with their health plans' mental health coverage. Only 31% of employers said they were satisfied with network access for behavioral health services.

## ACTION STEP 5

### **Educate employees and families about MDD, the importance of early detection, and available benefits and community options.**

The education of employees and families about MDD and the services available to support diagnosis and treatment is critical. Equally important are communications designed to end workplace stigma. With policies, programs, and a comprehensive communication strategy, employers can help create an inclusive, supportive culture.

### **MDD AND RACIAL DISPARITIES**

A major study by Blue Cross and Blue Shield in 2022 confirmed racial

*“Like many people in the African American culture, I grew up thinking that therapy was a bad word or therapy’s not for me—therapy’s for White people, therapy’s for crazy people. So it took a lot of work to open my eyes to see that asking for help is not a weakness. In fact, that’s a strength, saying I need this. That’s a superpower.”*

—Wayne Brady, *American Entertainer*  
([Read the full article.](#))

disparities in the diagnosis and treatment of MDD. The urgency of addressing these disparities is heightened by the fact that rates of MDD are higher in Black and Hispanic workers than in White workers, while MDD is more severe in these populations and treatment rates are lower. Half the respondents in the study confirmed that mental health issues carry sufficient stigma that they would only seek treatment outside the healthcare system.

Some guidelines to enhance inclusivity:

- ▶ **Use multiple channels.** Include mental health topics and actionable

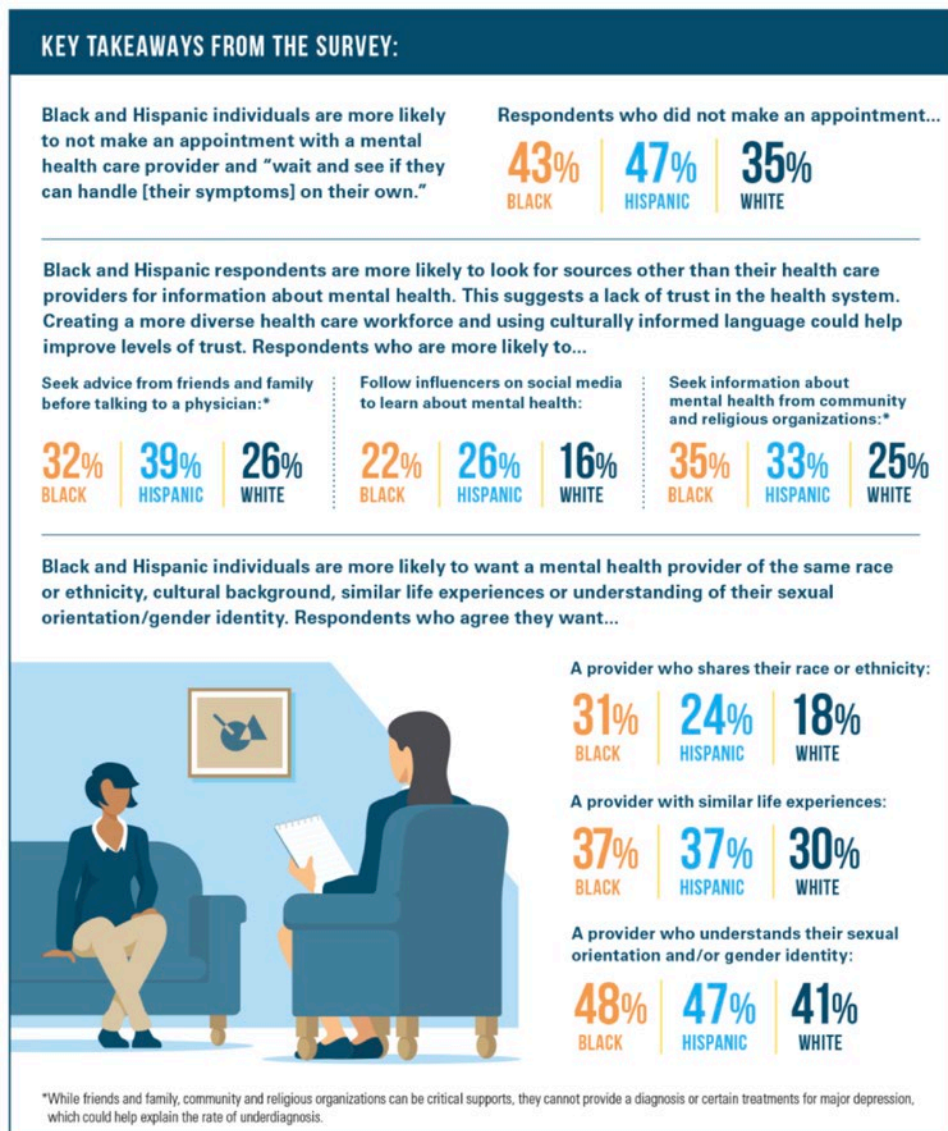
resources across all employee communication channels to continually raise awareness of mental health conditions and the availability of effective treatment and support.

- ▶ **Offer resources.** Promote practical resources designed to eliminate mental health stigma such as Stamp Out Stigma or Make It OK.
- ▶ **Train leaders.** Ensure HR and benefits professionals, as well as supervisors and managers, have the training to recognize and address mental health, MDD, and workplace stress issues.

- ▶ **Encourage peer support.** Offer access to programs such as Mental Health First Aid at Work to equip employees at all levels to notice and support a colleague who may be experiencing a mental health concern.
- ▶ **Work with mental health professionals who are ethnically and culturally diverse.** These providers understand social determinants of health and their impact on mental health.

More frequent and open communication in the workplace about mental health is of high value to employees. Equally important, employees need ready access to early diagnosis, fewer barriers to access to early and effective treatment, and an employer commitment to address MDD as quickly and aggressively as possible.

## Racial Disparities: Treatment for MDD



## RESOURCES

### Facts about MDD

- [The National Institute of Mental Health \(NIMH\)](#)
- [American Psychiatric Association](#)
- [World Health Organization](#)

### Employers and MDD

- [National Institute of Mental Health](#)
- [American Psychiatric Association](#)
- [American Psychiatric Association Foundation: Building a Mentally Healthy Nation for All](#)
- [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)

- [Society for Human Resource Management](#)
- [Harvard Business Review](#)

### Employer strategies for MDD in the workplace

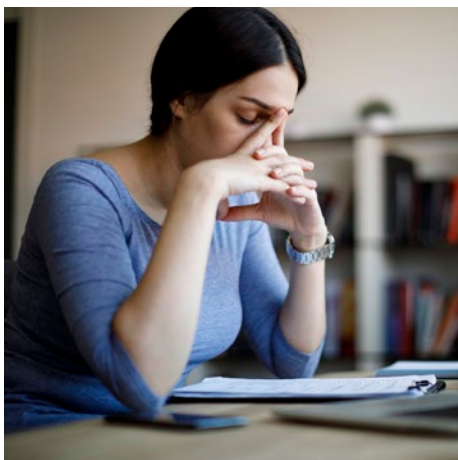
- [National Institutes of Health](#)
- [Society of Human Resource Management](#)
- [The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)
- [American Psychiatric Association](#)



*“Despite advances in depression detection, diagnosis, and treatment, most adults with depression receive no care or suboptimal treatment...for many employees and their dependents, employment provides a gateway to depression care.”*

*—Work-Focused Interventions for Depression*

**9-8-8** is now the three-digit dialing code that routes callers to the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline.



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1015 18th Street, NW, Suite 705 • Washington, DC 20036

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