

Study bolsters evidence that depression intervention also benefits employers

4 March 2015, by Glenn O'neal

Workers with depression had improved mental health and were more productive after completing a phone-based intervention that focused on restoring their ability to work, according to a national study published in *Psychiatric Services in Advance*, a peer-reviewed journal of the American Psychiatric Association. The multi-site, randomized controlled trial involved middle-aged and older workers with depression.

Workers with [depression](#) are vulnerable to a wide range of employment problems, in addition to the negative impact the illness has on quality of life for themselves and their families. Each year depression accounts for an estimated \$40 billion in lost [work](#) productivity. Studies have shown that while treatment improves symptoms for many people with depression, residual functional limitations often continue to interfere with working.

Study sites included 19 employers and five organizations serving employed populations. Workers age 45 and older participated in voluntary, privacy-protected, web-based screening for depression and for depression-related work limitations. Those who screened positive were randomly assigned to the work-focused [intervention](#) (WFI) or to usual care (referral to a [health care provider](#) and an employee assistance plan [EAP]). Each WFI participant was provided up to eight, 50-minute telephone sessions every two weeks for four months with a specially trained master's-level clinician from Optum's EAP. The intervention stressed coordinating the employee's regular medical treatment with the program's functional improvement goal and gave the employee strategies for coping with thoughts, feelings and behaviors that interfered with work. It also helped guide employees to make changes to work routines or work conditions to improve effectiveness.

Four months after the intervention, all 380 study participants completed assessment interviews and

questionnaires. Members of the WFI group saw a 44 percent drop in the amount of time they were limited in their ability to perform work tasks, compared to a 13 percent drop in the usual care group. Absence days declined by 53 percent in the WFI group versus 13 percent in usual care. WFI participants also experienced a significant improvement in [depression symptoms](#), compared with the usual-care group. Researchers found significant annual employer cost savings per WFI participant related to their greater productivity.

"Considering the increasing emphasis on providing more patient-centered, value-based care and the importance of helping people maintain their ability to work as they age, this intervention can be an important resource," said Debra Lerner, M.S., Ph.D., Director of the Tufts Medical Center Program on Health, Work and Productivity and lead author of the study.

"This study shows that we have effective and efficient ways to detect and treat depression in the workplace that improve peoples' lives and performance at work," said Francisca Azocar, M.D., co-author and Vice President, Research and Evaluation for Behavioral Health Sciences at Optum.

Provided by American Psychiatric Association

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