

Revised 8/20/21

Pandemic Challenges: Mental Health and Returning to Worksites

John Roble

The coronavirus pandemic took a tremendous toll on our nation's mental health. During 2020 and 2021, we and our families, friends and colleagues adjusted to working at home, struggled with home-schooling, coped with illness, and felt the stress of job losses. The difficulty and uncertainty of living through this time caused tremendous anxiety, isolation, depression, substance use and other mental health issues.

Last September, Neal Bowen, director of New Mexico's Behavioral Health Services Division, noted that rates of anxiety, depression and other behavioral health issues were increasing nationally due to Covid-19. This is especially concerning in New Mexico, which already has high rates of substance abuse and suicide.

At the same time, nonprofit leaders in the state reported higher demand for behavioral health services. A June 2019 study from the Health Resources and Services Administration indicated that the (pre-pandemic) mental health needs of just 12% of New Mexicans were being met, leaving more than one million New Mexicans without access to adequate mental services.

And now we face additional uncertainty from a pandemic that seems to have no end. Just when we thought there was light at the end of the tunnel, with vaccination rates rising and case numbers falling, the pandemic has surged because of the Delta variant. As a result, we can reasonably expect the toll on our collective mental health, and the stress on our resources, to intensify.

At Cigna, we have long recognized that the body and mind are inextricably linked so it's important to take care of both your emotional and physical health. With all the events and frequent changes happening around us, it is important to pause and acknowledge the impact of stress on ourselves, our families and our communities. Mental health is no longer something that only affects "other people." If there's one thing that the pandemic taught us is that mental health affects all of us, and it's nothing to be ashamed of.

Throughout 2020 and 2021, Cigna took steps to support employers as they helped their employees navigate the twists and turns of the pandemic. We used analytics, research and a collaborative approach to develop customized worksite solutions that enabled employers help their employees cope with frustration and fear.

A few of the ways we have helped support employers and employees include:

- **A comprehensive online resource:** Cigna's website includes a comprehensive [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Resource Center](#) dedicated to offering resources and guidelines for individuals, families, employers, seniors and health care providers.
- **Wellness, mental health and behavioral resources:** Cigna has curated a wide range of resources from Cigna experts, community partners and other trusted experts. For

example, one of the available webcasts, [“Managing the Return to Work,”](#) helps employees put the impending return-to-work reality into perspective and provides tips to cope with the change.

- **Emphasizing telehealth:** Difficulty in accessing mental health services has long been an issue of concern in this country. The pandemic exacerbated that problem, as in-person doctor visits at times were limited. Cigna expanded its virtual mental health provider network so patients can get the care they need when they need it via an on-demand telehealth appointment. More Cigna customers are now using telehealth than ever before, especially for mental health.²

One of the lessons we’ve learned from the pandemic is that many employees enjoy the flexibility of working at home. At the same time, many others are eager to return to the workplace because they miss the collegiality and the human connection. But they are seeking reassurance that the workplace is safe and their employer is taking the necessary precautions and safeguards. Maintaining a safe workplace is obviously vital to protecting physical health, but it’s also vital to fostering employee peace of mind.

State, CDC and OSHA guidelines for workplace activity, gathering sizes and physical distancing can be used to establish worksite plans and policies. The CDC has a useful [tool](#) designed to help employers make decisions about re-opening, and Cigna also offers online resources and information for safely [returning to the worksite](#). Cigna is working side by side with employers every day to help them navigate the many complexities of employee health and well-being in the age of Covid-19.

John Roble is the Market President of Cigna Mountain States, comprising the states of Colorado, Utah, Wyoming, and New Mexico. He also chairs the board of the American Cancer Society of Denver. In 2019, the Denver Business Journal named him among Denver’s most admired CEOs. To learn more about Cigna, visit www.cigna.com.

Cigna Corporation is a global health service company dedicated to improving the health, well-being, and peace of mind of those we serve. Cigna delivers choice, predictability, affordability and access to quality care through integrated capabilities and connected, personalized solutions that advance whole person health.

¹*New Mexico Behavioral Health Resource Mapping and Needs Assessment, UNM School of Medicine Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Division of Community Behavioral Health, published March 2020*

²*Cigna provides access to virtual care through national telehealth providers as part of your plan. Providers are solely responsible for any treatment provided to their patients. Video chat may not be available in all areas or with all providers. This service is separate from your health plan’s network and may not be available in all areas or under all plan types. A Primary Care Provider referral is not required for this servi.*