
WORKPLACE WELLNESS PROGRAMS TO PROMOTE CANCER PREVENTION

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OBJECTIVES: *To define the diversity of and business case for workplace wellness programs, highlight best practices for a comprehensive health promotion program, and describe the opportunities for employees to become wellness advocates.*

DATA SOURCES: *Current literature and articles published between 2010 and 2016, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Health Enhancement Research Organization, National Business Group on Health, Wellness Councils of America, best practice program guidelines and internet resources.*

CONCLUSION: *Employers are increasingly affected by rising health care costs and epidemic rates of obesity and associated chronic diseases within the workforce. Employers who offer workplace wellness programs can contribute to the overall health and well-being of their employees, improve employee productivity and retention, and reduce absenteeism and health care costs. Employees participating in workplace wellness programs can reduce their health risks and serve as health promotion advocates.*

IMPLICATIONS FOR NURSING PRACTICE: *Nurses can lead by example by participating in their workplace wellness programs, serving as an advocate to influence their employers and colleagues, and educating their patients regarding the benefits of workplace wellness programs.*

KEY WORDS: *workplace wellness, health risks, best practice, chronic disease, return on investment, health care costs, advocate.*

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Workplace wellness programs (like the constituents they serve) come in all shapes and sizes, therefore, to be effective they must be designed to fit the culture of the institution, aligned with its business goals and valued as a strategic initiative to attract, engage, and retain top talent. This article discusses the business case for and definitions of

the types of workplace wellness, followed by a framework for best practice programs and examples of best practice program components. It concludes with recommendations for health care providers to actively participate in wellness programs and serve as wellness advocates in their workplace and communities.

THE BUSINESS CASE FOR WORKPLACE WELLNESS PROGRAMS

According to multiple sources, there is a worldwide shortage of qualified nurses, which is detrimental to the quality of patient care.^{1,2} The life of an oncology nurse is fraught with several stressors, such as increased workload, long hours, and the emotional roller coaster of caring for cancer patients. This can lead to burn-out, depression, and overall lack of engagement in the workplace. Retaining qualified oncology nurses is paramount to providing quality patient care. Therefore, savvy employers include the retention of these caregivers as a vital goal when developing the business case for workplace wellness. Fortunately, interest in implementing workplace wellness programs has increased due, in part, to reports claiming an attractive list of employer and employee benefits.

The increased commitment from US businesses to implement a comprehensive workplace wellness program is well documented in the literature. According to a Towers Watson survey,³ having a wellness program without a comprehensive strategy does not work to change employee behaviors, and 94% of companies surveyed say they plan to create a health and productivity strategy with stated objectives within the next 3 years. Additionally, the report states that “employers are recognizing that health is a *total business issue* and a lack of it affects workforce performance. Linking the health, well-being, and worker effectiveness strategy to the employee value proposition is key to getting the most from the investment in the program and, more importantly, to effectively driving sustained healthy behaviors.”³

The primary business objective for workplace wellness programs is aimed at reducing health care costs. Health care costs have skyrocketed and are projected to account for 20% (one-fifth) of the US Gross Domestic Product by 2024 or \$4.8 trillion.⁴ Because of the often double-digit annual cost increases, most business cases start by defining the

expected financial gain (return on investment; ROI) to the institution. The costs associated with chronic disease account for more than 80% of total health care spending and approximately one-half of Americans have one or more chronic diseases.^{5,6}

It is well-established that poor lifestyle choices are significantly linked to the incidence of chronic disease. Therefore, much of the chronic disease burden can be prevented and/or managed by making healthier lifestyle choices. The top four lifestyle choices (tobacco use, physical activity, nutrition, and stress) are attributed to 75% of all chronic diseases.⁶ As a result, a comprehensive wellness program must include education, prevention, and intervention strategies to minimize or reverse the impact of unhealthy lifestyle choices.

While most companies began their wellness initiatives by targeting tobacco use, nutrition, and physical activity to combat chronic disease, many are now discovering that unresolved stress has a significant impact on their workforce. According to the American Institute of Stress, high stress is the leading culprit (of all of the lifestyle factors) of chronic disease and excess stress accounts for more than \$300 billion annually in lost productivity, absenteeism, accidents, turnover, and health care costs for US businesses.⁷ In one major study reported in the *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, workers reporting stress had a 46% increase in their health care costs while workers reporting depression had 70% higher health care costs. These two conditions impact health care costs more than obesity, smoking, or high blood pressure combined.⁸ In the 2014 Annual Work Stress Survey, 83% of US employees report being stressed by at least one thing at work.⁷ It is clear that personal accountability for making healthy lifestyle choices a top priority is quickly becoming the mantra for employers and health care professionals alike.

With the rapidly increasing incidence and cost of chronic diseases such as cancer, heart disease, and type II diabetes, ROI is viewed as the must-have measure of effectiveness for wellness programs. Although ROI primarily measures savings achieved through reduction in health care costs, the formulas to calculate and report ROI are as varied as the programs they assess. Most companies report results indicating ROI ranging from 1.5:1 (that is, for every \$1 spent on wellness programs, health care costs are reduced by \$1.50) to as much as 8:1 or more.⁹⁻¹³ While ROI is seen as a cornerstone for determining program value, a newcomer to evaluating the

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