

Why Mental Health Should Be A Top Priority For Expats And Their Employers

In recent years, conversations around mental health have become more open. Once barely discussed, people now feel more empowered to talk about their own experiences and speak up when help is needed. This open dialogue is a positive step forward. However, given one in four people in the UK will suffer from a mental health problem at some point in their life, it's important that we continue to make progress in this area.

One group that can be particularly vulnerable to mental health issues are expatriates. Whilst being offered an overseas assignment is an exciting opportunity for many, the challenges of working abroad can put pressure on an individual's mental health. There are several things employers can do to help protect the mental health of their expatriate employees.

Preparation Is Key

Preparing for the unknown is crucial for those transferring to unfamiliar environments. Employers should help educate employees and their families about cultural differences to ensure they have a good understanding of their new environment. It is important to include all family members in any pre-preparation – ensuring spouses and children enjoy a positive relocation experience is critical to overall assignment success. Preparation helps keep culture shock to a minimum, allowing employees and their families time to explore their new home at ease. Culturally specific training is offered by external agencies, but a more cost-effective option for many companies is to provide support and advice from people within the organisation who have previously lived in those countries. If possible, employers should facilitate medical pre-screening for the employee and their family members. For example, UnitedHealthcare Global offers pre-assignment medical screening to ensure that potential health concerns are identified at an early stage, and specific plans can be put in place to mitigate any risks or stress points.

Employer Support

One of the most common times to experience anxiety is when starting a new

job. Often this is just part of the process and will quickly subside once the initial nerves have settled. Expatriates face many more challenges than simply a new commute and different colleagues. Even if an employee is staying within the same company, the cultural differences between offices in different parts of the world can make an overseas job more complex.

Employers that reduce the emotional stress caused by relocation can increase the likelihood of a successful assignment. Given that nearly 40%⁽¹⁾ of overseas assignments fail, providing adequate mental health support is key to giving them the best chance of success. To help reduce the emotional stress caused by relocation, employers should establish clear lines of communication, so employees feel comfortable asking for support. UnitedHealthcare Global's employee assistance programme offers employees face-to-face, online or telephone counselling so that no matter where a person is in the world, they have a strong support system to assist them.

Building New Relationships

Nearly half a million people in the UK suffer from work related stress⁽²⁾ and workers experiencing these problems could find that feelings are exacerbated by an overseas move. Moving to unfamiliar lands can feel daunting and being physically separated from a network of friends and family can lead to homesickness. Fortunately, modern technology makes it easier than ever to connect with loved ones. UnitedHealthcare Global's Optum My Wellbeing app allows individuals to engage and stay connected with colleagues, friends and family regardless of location. The app encourages users to take part in various fitness challenges, such as step counts, where they can track their progress against others worldwide. This is a great way to ensure employees feel connected and in touch with family, colleagues and friends across the world. The app also monitors a person's mood to ensure his or her mental wellbeing is being tracked. This data is integrated with the Employee Assistance programme, asking the member if he or she would like to talk to someone if his or her mood is recorded as low.

Another way employees can feel better connected is by participating in online employee forums. These are a great space for expats to forge relationships and seek advice from those that already work overseas. Employers should consider educating existing employees in various countries on how to welcome new team members.

Employers make a significant financial investment in sending an employee abroad and it's important that the assignment is a success. Focussing on mental health and making it a key part of any health and well-being strategy helps ensure a positive experience for the employee, his or her family, and the employer. After all, the investment you make in sending your employee and their family abroad should also mean an investment in their health – both physical and mental.

Reference:

- (1) www.insights.learnlight.com/en/articles/overseas-assignments/
- (2) www.nhsemployers.org/news/2018/05/new-stress-report-from-the-mental-health-foundation

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