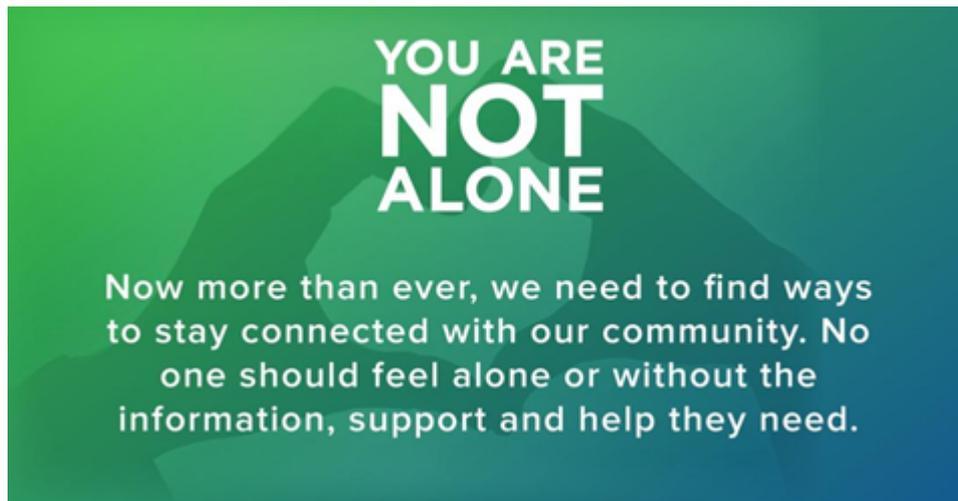


What Communicators Need to Know About Mental Wellbeing – Mental Health Awareness Month 2021



Tressa Robbins, Vice President of Customer Onboarding, Burrelles

“You Are Not Alone.” That’s the tagline for the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) campaign this year. NAMI is focusing on the healing value of connecting in safe ways, prioritizing mental health and acknowledging that it’s okay to not be okay, which seems especially apropos during the pandemic.

If you spend much time on social media or listen to podcasts, you may already be aware that May is designated as Mental Health Awareness Month (MHAM). The goal is to raise awareness of those living with mental or behavioral health issues and help reduce the stigma surrounding those issues.

Mental health defined

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health is a state of wellbeing in which an individual “can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community. Mental health is fundamental to our collective and individual ability as humans to think, emote, interact with each other, earn a living and enjoy life.”

Mental health is more than the “absence of a mental illness”—it’s essential to your overall health and quality of life and affects emotional, psychological and social wellbeing.

In the U.S., anxiety disorders are the most prevalent form of mental illness, followed by major depressive episodes, post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD), bipolar disorder, borderline personality disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), and schizophrenia.¹

The public relations-stress connection

Public relations work is one of the most stressful jobs in America, according to CareerCast. It seems each year, PR ranks in the top 10 on this annual survey (along with our journalism brethren).

As I wrote last October, under ‘normal’ circumstances, PR pros are masters at juggling priorities and performing in stressful situations. However, the pandemic brought on additional stressors to already demanding jobs. When stress is never-ending, it’s as though your body and mind are in constant fight-or-flight mode. The human body isn’t designed to maintain this mode constantly—this is when it can impact overall mental health.

As communicators, you know that communicating is critical and

that tackling an issue directly is best practice, but are you applying to your own wellbeing and mental health? What about those who work for you?

Mental health affects physical health (and vice versa)

Mental health is an integral part of overall health. It also affects physical health, and can lead to a weakened immune system, high blood pressure, heart disease, asthma, diabetes, and even negatively impact life expectancy.

For example, anxiety and depression often manifest as sleep disturbances – either sleeping too much or not enough. Sleep disorders can cause physical and emotional fatigue, irritability, poor memory recall, and real tangible pain (muscle tension, headaches, stomach issues, inflammation).

One thing that's often overlooked is that it works both ways. Chronic physical medical conditions contribute to a higher risk of depression and anxiety. Scientists don't fully understand the direct correlation; nonetheless, the connection is there.

By the numbers

Millions of people (adults, teens and children) struggle with a mental illness each year. In communications-related industries (marketing, PR, advertising) mental health and wellbeing account for a significant amount of lost productivity at work. It also directly impacts key performance indicators (KPIs) and business outcomes.

- In 2019, more than 51 million adults in the U.S. experienced some form of mental illness – that's one out of every 5 adults. ²
- Depression and anxiety disorders alone cost the global

- economy \$1 trillion in lost productivity each year. ³
- Mental illness costs America \$193.2 billion in lost earnings per year. ⁴
 - Mental health is cited as the main reason for over half (51%) of calls to the NABS support organization, followed by low mood and confidence (20%) and work pressures (16%) in the U.K. ⁵
 - 42% of global employees experienced a decline in their mental health since the pandemic started. ⁶
 - A post-pandemic survey of leisure and business travelers found 70% of U.S. respondents expressing concerns about stress. ⁷
 - Over 9 million U.S. adults with mental illness also experienced substance abuse in 2019. ⁸
 - Suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the U.S., and the suicide rate has increased by 35% in the last decade. ⁹
 - In 2020, the number of people seeking help with anxiety and depression skyrocketed with a 62% increase over 2019. ¹⁰

Promoting Wellness

Organizations and companies help themselves by promoting wellness among their employees. While I've read a multitude of advice from various 'talking heads,' NAMI breaks it down to three primary areas:

1. Provide easy access to healthcare and services—health insurance that provides benefits for mental health conditions, employee assistance programs (EAP), wellness programs or incentives, telehealth access, clear policies.
2. Check-in on your teams—encourage open dialogue, ensure privacy and confidentiality, educate, schedule regular

check-ins one-on-one and collectively.

3. Encourage movement—exercise, brief walks, yoga, going outdoors, stretching, meditation, dance. Science shows the mind and body are intimately connected.

Where to go from here

One of the best resources I found for (non-HR) business leaders and employers is the Working Well: 2021 Global Wellbeing Survey—developed and conducted by Aon in partnership with IPSOS, a leading global market research company. The report arms you with current statistical findings and offers advice for organizations to support wellbeing initiatives, tackle historic mental health stigmas, and foster resilience and diversity.

One of the most prominent points the report makes is that wellbeing requires a strategy. It shows that although 82% of companies globally consider employee wellbeing a priority, many firms lack a wellbeing strategy in their culture, talent acquisition and performance objectives. Of the 87% who have wellbeing initiatives in place, only 55% have a strategy.

For individuals, in addition to NAMI, the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) offers some great tips for self-care to help you manage stress and when to seek professional help. They also have a series of wellness toolkits and articles called Your Healthiest Self.

Normalize the conversation

We can end the stigma of mental health conditions by normalizing the conversation surrounding them. Stigmas are born of negative stereotypes and misconceptions. Doing nothing only encourages this misguided, negative behavior. Educating yourself, getting the facts, choosing your words carefully, and positively supporting others are all ways you can help create an opening for discussions and normalize these

conversations.

I especially like Dr. Wendy Troxel's analogy in a recent Wall Street Journal article. The clinical psychologist and senior behavioral and social scientist said, "If you wait until a major stressor hits to try and bolster your mental health, it's like trying to inflate your life raft while you are already drowning at sea."

In the spirit of the NAMI MHAM initiative, let me reassure you that you are not alone! Like many other industry professionals, I struggle to maintain my mental health and keep depression and anxiety in check. Last year, when Burrelles' benefits manager sent out information on our insurance provider's mental health benefits, I took a cursory glance and moved it to a saved folder. However, about two weeks later, I felt myself spiraling, so I decided to go back and re-read the information. While I've half-heartedly tried other apps only to delete them later, I decided to download the suggested app (Sanvello) and give it a try. (Note: I'm not advocating one solution or app over another.) And I do find some comfort in the daily "How are you feeling today" check-ins and weekly questionnaires to gauge where I'm at and the suggestions it offers. Of course, reading and understanding guidance is much easier than putting it into practice! I recently read an article by a marketing firm co-founder where he encouraged readers to *not* fear the stigma and not be afraid to take a look in the mirror and decide if you want to see changes in yourself. Or to simply reach out to someone and check on their wellbeing. I couldn't agree more!



About the Author: Tressa Robbins is a B2B strategic communications leader with years of diversified business, communications, public relations, social media, content creation and management experience. She is currently vice president of customer onboarding at Burrelles where she

manages and performs new customer onboarding of major/enterprise accounts. Tressa has long been active in public relations and regional business groups including PRSA, having previously served the St. Louis Chapter in multiple roles including past president. She also served as the 2015 PRSA Midwest District Conference Chair and was named St. Louis PR Professional of the Year in 2019. She is a Champions for PRSSA member and is professional advisor for the Southeast Missouri State University PRSSA chapter. As a long-time remote worker, she enjoys life in the southeast Missouri Ozark foothills with her husband and two dogs.

Connect with Tressa on Twitter and LinkedIn, or through her website.

¹ <https://www.nami.org/mhstats>

² <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/reports/rpt29393/2019NSDUHFFR1PDFWHTML/2019NSDUHFFR1PDFW090120.pdf>

³ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpsy/article/PIIS2215-0366\(16\)30024-4/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpsy/article/PIIS2215-0366(16)30024-4/fulltext)

⁴ <https://3drst5yt38x3lxeal2br6hlp-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/94/2020/09/Navigating-A-Mental-Health->

Crisis.pdf

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<https://www.marketingweek.com/brands-support-marketers-mental-health/>

⁶ <https://www.qualtrics.com/blog/confronting-mental-health/>

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<https://www.smartmeetings.com/meeting-planning/reports-surveys/133147/survey-travel-stressful>

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<https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/reports/rpt29393/2019NSDUHFFR1PDFHTML/2019NSDUHFFR1PDFW090120.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/suicide>

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<https://www.mhanational.org/issues/state-mental-health-america>

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