

As a convener of thought leaders throughout Southern California, we are pleased to welcome **Charlene Dimas-Peinado**, President and CEO of Wellnest, a nationally acclaimed nationally acclaimed, and leading provider of emotional health and wellness services, and Chair of the Chamber's Nonprofit Council and member of the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce Board, as the guest author of this week's Business Perspective.

Mental Health Awareness Month

May is Mental Health Awareness Month – the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce supports this national movement to raise awareness about mental health, reduce stigma, provide support, educate the public and businesses, and advocate for policies that support people with mental health challenges and their families. As a global issue, mental health knows no boundaries—geographic, socioeconomic, age, gender or ethnicity. Mental health challenges can impact anyone anywhere at some point.

Mental health is simply defined as that “state of well-being in which you realize your own abilities...you can cope with the normal stresses of life... work productively...and make a contribution to your community.”

Even as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, we are all still grappling with a turbulent range of emotions caused by this unprecedented social, health, and economic crisis—from fear and loneliness to anger and helplessness. Our overwhelming concern for our health and safety, and that of our loved ones, has created a strain with serious implications for our mental health.

Prior to COVID-19, estimates were that some 450 million people worldwide suffered from a mental health condition at any given moment and 16 million U.S. adults had at least one major depressive episode in the previous year.

These needs skyrocketed with the pressures of COVID-19. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that during the pandemic:

- 41% of US adults experienced COVID-19-related mental health issues.
- 75% of young adults (18 to 24) experienced a mental health issue.
- Women were 1.5 times more likely than men to report mental health as a challenge.

The World Health Organization has definitively linked mental health and economic productivity. The cost of treating depression, anxiety or trauma is enormous, with \$2.5 trillion spent annually worldwide on mental health care (projected to reach \$6 trillion by 2030) and \$1 trillion per year lost in productivity due to depression and anxiety.

Boundaries between work and home have blurred even more, causing many to question their life choices. Research has consistently found that women and men leave their companies at comparable rates. However, due to COVID-19 stresses, including home schooling and lack of child care, as many as two million women are now considering leaving the workforce. This is a tremendous potential loss to our economy and our creativity as a nation. Studies show a company's profits and share performance can be close to 50% higher when women are well represented at executive-level positions.

There are reasons to be hopeful. This crisis has sparked a heightened social consciousness about health and wellness at work.

Even pre-COVID-19, research demonstrated that companies prioritizing health, safety, and wellness saw positive returns. A Harvard University study found that for every dollar spent on employee wellness, medical costs decrease and absenteeism drops.

How do we build on this awareness and give mental health the equal standing it deserves alongside physical health?

Start by knowing the warning signs. They include:

- Depression, anxiety, irritability
- Poor concentration, appetite, sleep health
- Isolation, withdrawal
- Feelings of hopelessness and suicidal thoughts/behaviors
- Excessive use of alcohol or drugs

Reach out for help from health care providers and mental health experts and encourage others to do so. Self-care practices like meditation, therapy, exercise, nutrition, outdoor activities and folk or spiritual healing also can help people empower and recharge themselves. Others find renewal in connecting safely with friends and family, volunteering in their community and simply taking a break from our tech-overloaded world.

Make mental wellness a priority! If you are a business owner, corporation, leader or manager, help to create a psychologically safe culture that supports self-care and open discussion of emotional health. Normalizing fears and concerns bring compassion and inclusivity into the workplace. Flexible work hours for employees, including young parents, acknowledge the difficulty of this balancing act. Employers of large and small businesses can contribute to psychological and emotional stability by considering mental health as part of a holistic on-site return plan.

How do you accomplish this?

1. Talk openly about mental health and give it the equal standing it deserves alongside physical health. Start by knowing the warning signs and proactively support the emotional well-being of your employees. Invest in behavioral healthy literacy and training so that you can recognize the signs of a mental health issue.
2. Promote mental wellness and help to prevent substance misuse...employee wellness activities are a great way to address the issue and build morale. Insurance Companies such as your health care plan will bring their wellness program to your company. And, if you're a smaller business, go to your local Department of Health Services for similar services.
3. Work closely with your health-benefits administrator to ensure adequate behavioral health coverage. When businesses make mental health services more accessible, they improve employee outcomes and performance.

4. It's important to make help readily available...invest in an Employee Assistance Program, counseling and enrichment programs.
5. The pandemic disproportionately affected underrepresented groups. Create a culture of inclusion and ensure the psychological and emotional stability for women, people of color, LGBTQ+ employees, and other under-represented groups.
6. Care for the health and safety of employees through specific COVID-19 practices (improved air filtration, social distancing, easy access to COVID-19 testing) to reduce fear and anxiety.
7. Build a culture that enables collaboration and help your employees feel connected which is a basic human need for emotional well-being.
8. Accentuate the positive and build a culture of recognition and gratitude. Employees will be six times more like to recommend the business as great place to work and seven times more likely to stay with the business.
9. Businesses that articulate with clarity specific policies help employees feel supported having a positive effect on individual productivity.
10. Measure your outcomes. Connect emotional well-being metrics with performance targets.

These actions help to demonstrate your business' commitment to social responsibility, accountability and emotional well-being in the work environment. Businesses that invest in the emotional wellbeing of their employees demonstrate increased productivity, creativity, customer satisfaction and ultimately are more profitable. Additionally, you gain a reputation for being a good place to work and you recruit and retain the best talent.

Finally, good mental health benefits our relationships at home and at work. As we grow more resilient, we can better cope with the challenge's life throws at us—even an unprecedented global pandemic.