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## How Firms Can Buttress Mental Health During The Holidays

By **Aebra Coe**

Law360 (December 19, 2023, 3:16 PM EST) -- The holiday season is stressful and overwhelming for many people, and with particular vulnerabilities in the legal industry around mental health, it's a time of year when law firms should take additional steps to ensure their people are healthy and happy, experts say.

According to the American Psychological Association, 38% of people say their stress increases during the holiday season, while data from the National Alliance on Mental Illness shows that 64% of people with mental illness report that the holidays make their conditions worse.

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Patrick Krill

Layer on top of that the fact that lawyers experience higher rates of depression, anxiety and substance abuse than the general population, and the need for law firms to address mental health during the holiday season becomes clear, according to Patrick Krill, a counselor, author and researcher who specializes in lawyer mental health.

"The holidays are a time that presents a lot of joy, happiness and fun, but also stress, pressure and anxiety," Krill said. "Employers need to be mindful of that dichotomy."

On top of all the holiday festivities, there's also a "mad rush" at many law firms to collect on bills before the end of the year, creating another source of pressure on lawyers in December, Krill said.

His biggest tip for law firms and those in management roles: Reduce the workload as much as possible, and recognize that there are often family and home obligations that compete for attorneys' time and energy, which are often extremely meaningful to them.

One major struggle many law firms face in effectively implementing their mental health initiatives is that there is often a view among personnel that firms "talk out of both sides of their mouths" by saying they support well-being, while also creating an atmosphere of unrelenting pressure to perform and deliver a high volume of work product at all times, Krill said.

"There can be a view that the firm might not be authentic in what it communicates about mental health," he said. "This, of all times, should be the time firms should be acutely sensitive to that. It's a time when the message around mental health is more easily undermined. This is a time when peoples' humanity and their lives outside of work should be given more breathing room."

Another way law firms can address attorneys' mental health and well-being around the holidays is by putting in place programs earlier in the year that create a supportive atmosphere.

Weil Gotshal & Manges LLP implemented a program earlier this year to train attorneys on mental health first aid that is currently paying dividends, according to Lori Pines, the firm's chief wellness officer.

Several dozen personnel attended three educational sessions this year, which provide mental health first aid training through the National Council for Mental Wellbeing.

"Law is an inherently stressful field, and we have to recognize that the holiday season brings its own stresses, as well. We want to help our people manage them well," Pines said.

The evidence-based, early-intervention course covers common signs and symptoms of mental health and substance-abuse challenges; how to interact with a person in crisis and connect them with helpful resources; how to respond with a mental health first aid action plan; and additional material on trauma, substance use and self-care.

According to Pines, some of the program attendees have said they were able to immediately apply the skills they acquired in the class to real life situations.

"Just like CPR helps with cardiac arrest, mental health first aid, when applied to a mental health or substance-use-related crisis, really can save a life," Pines said.

With 2024 right around the corner, there's an opportunity for law firms to start engaging with programs and material now that will be useful when next year's holidays roll around, Krill said.

Additionally, with holiday parties in full swing, law firms need to ensure that those attending don't feel pressured to partake in alcohol-related activities that could undermine their efforts at sobriety, he said.

Ultimately, the most important thing for law firms to do as employers this time of year is to acknowledge the humanity of the people who work for them, Krill said.

"When you feel like your employer values you mostly or exclusively for your productivity or billable hours, that translates into poorer mental health and stress," he said. "This is a time when we want to often feel human. I think by making people feel valued and appreciated and offering some kindness toward them, it's going to help in that regard."

--Editing by Nicole Bleier.