

# How Employers Can Help Influence Employee Mental Health



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## Dr. America Paredes

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### Rob Parsons:

Welcome to Season Four of Paychex PULSE, an HR Podcast, where HR professionals can find great insights on today's top issues and be inspired to build and lead effective teams in a healthier workplace.

### Rob Parsons:

Hi everyone. Rob Parsons here. Welcome to Paychex PULSE. Today we're going to be talking about mental health and where we as employers fit into the mix. Joining us is Dr. America Paredes, the Chief Social Impact Officer at Mental Health America. As an experienced changemaker, Dr. Paratas uses her more than 20 years of experience within the mental health field to support MHA's programmatic public engagement and community awareness efforts. America, welcome to the podcast.

### America Paredes:

Thank you so much, Rob. Pleasure being here with you all.

### Rob Parsons:

It's great to have you. And I really want to kick off by landing this on the ground for we as employers. I know MHA has an amazing reach way beyond just the workplace, so you're seeing all aspects of this issue. Can you tell me where employers fit into the equation?

### America Paredes:

Well, Rob, that's a very interesting question. For adults, most of us are either at home or in the workplace. So, if workplaces are not really attuned to what's happening in the lives of individuals, they're missing out on how everything that we are interacting with relates to our mental health and impacts our mental health overall. So, employers really have a very strong position to help not only influence conversation, but also provide support to employees.

**Rob Parsons:**

So, as an employer, what should I be thinking about doing? What do employees need to be healthy?

**America Paredes:**

Oh, so many things, right? Well, not only do we need, because I'm also an employee, we need to be paid well for our time. I think sometimes we forget how important that is, but above all, I think one of the most important things that employers need to do is be genuine in the efforts that they are going to engage in. Oftentimes we run into some trouble when an employer will say, "We're going to talk about mental health." And it's one time a year and the conversation goes away. And the reality is that, for instance, in mental health, that's something that is an everyday occurrence. We're dealing with our mental health daily, hourly, minute by minute. So for employers to really be intentional and genuine, looks like very thoughtful conversation, really thinking through what types of resources are available that help support individuals along their mental health journey and when they struggle, also being able to be flexible and create opportunities so that employees feel supported, and more so feel like within my workplace I am heard, and that is really fundamental in helping somebody move along their mental health journey.

**Rob Parsons:**

I can see right away now that some of our listeners could have some trepidation waiting into these waters, especially those who are sincerely, okay I want to do something about this isn't an issue to be taken lightly isn't the realm of professionals and not me as just an HR leader or me as a business leader?

**America Paredes:**

I completely understand that trepidation and as an organization, I think Mental Health America definitely understands the lines that we work between, because the reality is, as individuals who are coming into the workplace with a range of different factors, personalities, characteristics of who we are. As employers, we want to really think about what are we doing for the whole of the person? Within that is this conversation about mental health. I understand that there may be some folks that say, "Well, if I ask the question, if you need mental health support, then it's my responsibility to do something with that answer." And it's true. It is your responsibility. Once you have information that you know have to act on, you really want to do something that's going to be meaningful for that employee. But within that, I think the trepidation is a healthy place to start, but we shouldn't linger there.

**America Paredes:**

I think oftentimes employers linger there too long and say, "Well, I have to figure out and have all the answers before I do anything." And the reality is that's very complex, especially in a world now, where there may be employers that have, for instance, employees that are spread across different locations. So, there are a lot of things that come into play with that. Everything from insurance, to whose network you're in and all that. So the reality is you don't have to have all the answers at the onset of any kind of discussion around mental health. I think it is important to determine where you are as an organization in your journey around addressing mental health. If you've never talked about it, then explore what that looks like within your organization and your organizational culture. If you have talked about it, now, what else can I do? Should I be looking at benefits that are better for our employees? And even beyond that, exploring if I'm not ready to do really do anything with our benefits, what else can I do that can help push this conversation forward and create an environment of openness?

**Rob Parsons:**

I have a couple follow on questions here. One is, as an employer, I'm not just doing this out of the goodness of my heart, I should expect some benefit from it. Going along with that, how do I figure out the way to make the most impact? How do I put my resources to their best use?

**America Paredes:**

That is a very good question. I think a lot of the folks that we have worked with within what we call is our mental health, Bell Seal for Workplace Mental Health, where they start is in doing a survey, and finding out from the employees what is it that you actually want? So for instance, if I come out as an employer and say, "I want to change everything we do around mental health." And then the question's like, "Well, what are you actually going to change?" And my response is, "I'm not really sure." Then we've already hit a barrier where the difference is if we go out and ask folks, "What is it that would help your mental health?" And let's say in a survey they say, "We want childcare." The question may have never come up. That childcare is related to mental health. So, instead of just going in and saying, "Oh, we're going to do everything for mental health." Maybe it's you exploring how you can then provide some additional supports for childcare, which can help ease any issue that comes up tied to that. So it's a lot of exploration that has to happen, but I think there's a lot of room for growth in this area for employers to really think through what is going to make the most impact in the life of the individual across all the different aspects of the employees that we have?

**Rob Parsons:**

I interviewed, it was two years ago now, Jake Flaitz, our Director of Benefits here at Paychex, and he talked about this holistic model of employee wellbeing and talked about there's the financial component, and the professional component, the social component, the emotional and mental components, and you're touching on that a little bit there. It's interesting to me how important our workplaces really are to our lives. We tend to separate them, but aren't a separate thing. We spend 40, 50 hours a week there.

**America Paredes:**

Yes, it's incredible to think about how much the relationships and the environment that we work within influences the rest of our life. And research that we've done, we have found that a majority of people are influenced at home with the environment that exists at work. So, if you are in an unhealthy work environment, whether that's maybe you're experiencing symptoms of burnout and things of that nature, you are definitely going to feel that at home. And the people that are really going to bring this to your attention is your family. They're going to be the ones that are telling you, "Hey, you're not hanging out anymore. You're really reactive to the things that I say." And these types of things can be early indicators for employees that they may be struggling, but also indicators for employers and really helping to create that balance that once I come into the workplace, I'm also seen as a whole person. I don't just leave everything at the door. I know that that's the mentality that we've had before, but if nothing else, the pandemic should have taught us that we are complex people, we have so many needs, and one thing doesn't create a solution for everybody.

**Rob Parsons:**

I sense that as a theme here is that there very much needs to be some personalization, and I would love to be maybe an organization that has all the resources available to take care of each of my employees so individually, but that's not a realistic expectation. If I've got limited resources, where should I focus America? Where do you think in your research, in your experience, where have you seen that we have big gaps right now that we could make some big moves if we just paid attention to it?

**America Paredes:**

One of the top line markers for this is flexibility. There has been such an uptick in the conversation around how employers are able to manage the expectations that exist within the workplace and as employees, how we can do that and still fulfill our roles. So, there's a lot of flexibility and employers that are engaging in this process of understanding maybe we're not working a nine to five, and what used to work doesn't really work now. So some folks are going in the direction of saying, "You work when you can, but do all the work that you need to. We're not checking a box every single minute when tasks are completed." That's a really great space to start in. I think secondarily to that is really understanding what additional supports you can provide around that balance of work life. So in some cases, a lot of employers instead, maybe I don't have the money to be able to increase everybody's salary, but what if I enable access to different personal wellness opportunities like access to gyms, reduced costs like meal planning, which in turn helps when you get home and you're struggling to manage what that looks like if you're trying to make dinner and things of that nature.

**America Paredes:**

You can also incorporate some of the more innovative spaces have created within physical workspaces, actual locations where individuals can come and decompress. Maybe it's a quiet sitting room, a relaxing space, and really creating opportunities for connection. Connection is really important, so it's not about, "Hey, we're just going to have pizza." Which is great, pizza's fabulous, but saying, "We're going to have pizza and we're going to create this opportunity for you to actually get to know your colleagues."

**Rob Parsons:**

I like where you're going there. I've been talking a lot with people about culture, that culture might be the differentiator. I'm trying to find employees. It's challenging work environment, challenging hire environment, and all else being equal. People are choosing the companies that seem to be intentional about that. They're not just having the pizza parties because they're supposed to. There's a thoughtfulness to it. Can you tell me a little bit about culture and where that comes into play here? What you've seen in your experiences with that?

**America Paredes:**

The organizational culture I think is one of the cornerstones of anything, any conversation that we're going to have around mental health. One of the things that our research has shown is when leadership, for instance, speaks openly about mental health in their lived experience, it not only helps set the tone of what's going to happen, and that in itself is a key indicator that says "We're actually going to engage in meaningful conversation." That helps to not only destigmatize mental health and mental illness, but creates an opportunity for us to learn more, and within that, you can then supplement that with all the resources that may be available, even if they are limited. Because we also know as employees, we oftentimes are not aware of all of the different resources that are available, even though we had that employee manual when you first were hired, so that's important.

**America Paredes:**

The other piece of that around organizational culture is creating opportunities for managers to really learn how to manage. That's a place of struggle for many organizations and oftentimes is a loss, right? Where an employee may be doing phenomenal work, but a manager may not necessarily know how to manage people well, lead people well, and that in turn influences employee burnout and where employees are seeking out other opportunities. So providing opportunities for professional development is also very important, and that is tied in with the organizational culture and how we're really going to manage all of the moving pieces to help us move forward.

**Rob Parsons:**

I love that. That answer was gold right there, America, and I really like the first part about it coming from the top, the de-stigmatizing, the people having the freedom to take advantage of the resources that are available, the permission. So important, and I think this is a nice segue for you to tell me just a little bit about Mental Health America and tell me about just that mission and all the resources you have available, especially for employers?

**America Paredes:**

Awesome. Mental Health America has been around for a very long time, Rob. We've been around since 1909, if you can imagine. So, we have changed as much as everything else has changed with the times, but as an organization, we're really focused on three fundamental aspects. One is public education and helping individuals understand what mental health is, what mental illness is, and providing access to free resources like our mental health screening program. We also do a lot of advocacy trying to really help create laws that are going to give individuals the support that they need, provide access to everything that they need. And ultimately we work on that kind of third leg of our stool is working directly in communities through our network of affiliates that are spread out across the United States, and these are independent 501C3 organizations that are tied to our national mission, but are doing all the work in communities to help really provide accessible resources and services to folks.

**America Paredes:**

In terms of workplace mental health, we know that we as an organization can help lead the conversation and help lead employers to understand how you can influence your organizational culture to help create a space of openness. Within that, we have our Bell Seal for Workplace Mental Health, which enables different organizations to go through a certification process to help them understand where are we in terms of our mental health and our organization? In addition to that, we have a range of different materials for employers, including a toolkit that kind of helps you understand if I'm at the beginning stage, what do I do? How do I even create a health fair? All the way through, we want to create employee resource groups that are going to be talking about mental health and things of that nature. So all of these resources are available on our website at [mhanational.org](http://mhanational.org) and they are all free. The campaign materials and all of those things are free, and I would remiss not to mention that May is Mental Health Month, so please try to focus your efforts during May on addressing mental health because it's the month to do so, but you can do it throughout the year.

**Rob Parsons:**

I think that's such an important point, and I can see why Paychex values this very much, and I can see why they've chosen to partner with Mental Health America really is a great organization. Any last thoughts for our listeners America?

**America Paredes:**

I think my final thought would be to, on two sides, right? On the employer. I think we have to be willing to listen, and on the employee side, we have to be willing to share. So there is an opportunity for communication on both sides.

**Rob Parsons:**

That's great. America, thank you so much for joining the podcast.

**America Paredes:**

Thank you so much, Rob and appreciate Paychex for all that you do.

**Rob Parsons:**

For those who want to learn more, you can find Mental Health America's resource page [@mhanational.org/workplace](https://mhanational.org/workplace). We also have additional paychecks resources at [go.paychex.com/wellbeing](https://go.paychex.com/wellbeing), and we'll be sure to put these links in our show notes.

**Rob Parsons:**

Thanks again America and thank you to our listeners. As always, please stay happy and healthy.

**Rob Parsons:**

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**Announcer:**

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