

# Get in the Right Head Space: Dr. Sue Varma Talks Workplace Mental Health



**Gene Marks**

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**Announcer:**

Welcome to THRIVE, a Paychex Business Podcast, where you'll hear timely insights to help you navigate marketplace dynamics and propel your business forward. Here's your host, Gene Marks.

**Gene Marks:**

Hey, everybody, welcome back. And I've got Dr. Sue Varma with us. First of all, can I call you Sue?

**Dr. Sue Varma:**

Yes.

**Gene Marks:**

Or do you prefer Dr. Varma? You're okay with Sue.

**Dr. Sue Varma:**

Yes.

**Gene Marks:**

Good. Thanks very much for joining us. So, Sue, first of all, we found you after a great appearance that you made on the Today show. We want to talk about mental health and get some of your thoughts on that for our listeners and our viewers. But first of all, let's just start out with, if I can ask you to just tell us a little bit about yourself, your background, and what you do. Go for it.

**Dr. Sue Varma:**

Yeah. So, I'm a Board Certified Psychiatrist and a Clinical Assistant Professor at NYU. So, I teach medical students and residents, and I'm also active with the American Psychiatric Association and I'm a Distinguished Fellow. So, it's a great honor to be recognized for the work that I've been doing. Early in my career, I started working with 9/11 survivors. So, I'm interested in trauma and that got me interested in the topic of resilience and optimism and overall general wellness.

**Dr. Sue Varma:**

So, as a psychiatrist, people typically think that we only deal with very sick patients, but I have to say my genuine love is in the idea of prevention, what are some daily habits that you can do? And in my private practice, I'm a cognitive behavioral therapist, which means short-term, time-limited therapy, helping people get tools, skills, resources, so that they can really thrive in their life. So, yes, a person might come in to see me when they're depressed or anxious or in the middle of a life crisis. But the idea is to move you past that life crisis and really help you have optimal functioning. So, that's where I'm at right now in my career.

**Gene Marks:**

Yeah. You mentioned trauma and obviously we're just coming, hopefully, out of the pandemic. So, lots of trauma for a lot of employees. Okay. Give us an idea of what you're seeing and how sometimes too, it's like, again, I'm in my mid 50s, people like us that run businesses, sometimes we don't understand the trauma or the anxiety or the fears that a lot of our younger employees feel. So, just give me an idea of what they are feeling, what this has been like for them, COVID, just to set the stage for us.

**Dr. Sue Varma:**

Yeah. So, COVID, I think, has been hard for the vast majority of people, especially maybe people who are younger, people who are living alone, people who may not have a lot of social support. I have had the fortune of being as psychiatrist over the last 20 years. And the world has changed considerably, not just because of 9/11, but because of the use of social media. So, everybody, every young person is on social media. And what that has done is really created a shared language around words like depression, trauma, anxiety, and people are really savvy, younger people, and they want to get treatment and they want to work for places that are sensitive to the whole person.

**Dr. Sue Varma:**

So, I think, there was a lot more stigma when I first started working, but I'm noticing that in the last 15 to 20 years, people are feeling as if their boss doesn't recognize what's going on with them outside of the workplace, they're going to eventually lose interest and say, "You know what? You don't see me as an entire person. You're just focused on my work and my productivity, but I want to go to a place where I can have a little bit more of a work-life balance."

**Dr. Sue Varma:**

I think one of the hardest things that people are dealing with is, without a commute, some people were really happy. They're like, "I love it. I love to work from home and I get to go out in the middle of the day and I can do my groceries. I can exercise. I can pick up my kids." So, I think for a lot of people, it has afforded them more work-life balance, but what they've lost is the structure and routine and hard stops at the end of the day. And for a lot of people, they were working a lot more, longer and harder during the pandemic.

**Dr. Sue Varma:**

So, look, some of the benefits have also come at a cost, and the cost is to our mental health, to our sleep schedules, because we don't know day from night, we're staying awake till 2:00 in the morning. A lot of people have put on weight because they're sedentary, they're not social distancing from the refrigerators. So, every time that they feel like they need a snack, they're bored, they're using food as a way, food and alcohol, as a way of coping. So, I think that it's been very isolating for a lot of people and it has, even though they're working longer and harder, I don't know if that necessarily means that they're more productive.

**Gene Marks:**

It's a great answer. It's funny because it dovetails into this whole debate over working from home right now and bringing people back to the office. I mean, it almost seems to me that you're saying that it really is

healthier for our employees, at least on a hybrid level, to get out of the house and come to the office. Does that make sense?

**Dr. Sue Varma:**

Yes. And I think that there's all stages of readiness. I know tons of people who are like, "Thank God, I have been waiting to go back to the office forever." And it could be for any number of reasons, either that they're feeling very socially isolated or the commute gave them an opportunity to prepare for the day, like the 45 minutes or half an hour, maybe they were walking and they had more exercise and their steps were built in, because they had to go to the subway or walk out of the subway or go up the stairs at their job. There was socialization built in, those water cooler conversations, being able to organically grab a coffee or grab a lunch with a coworker, because you just ran into them at the elevator bank, and having more organic conversations with people. If you had a question for a coworker, you would just turn around and ask them as opposed to having to set up a meeting.

**Dr. Sue Varma:**

And then like we've all got Zoom dysphoria, dysmorphia, Zoom fatigue, people are looking at themselves and they're having body image issues, because they're like, "Oh my God, I don't want to look at myself that much." So, they were all built in ways of thinking about the day and then unwinding from the day having that commute. So, I think for a lot of people, it's a mixed bag. Some people, we had so many adjustments, we had to go from working in an office, let's say, hypothetically, five days a week to not working at there at all, to then having multiple "restarts" and before each variant we're like, "Okay, now we're ready to go. Pandemic is over." Nope. Sorry, just kidding. There's another wave.

**Dr. Sue Varma:**

So, I think now people are having anxiety about returning to work, because they don't know what to expect. They don't know if it's five days a week. All of a sudden, we feel a sense of panic when we're surrounded by a lot of people. Because we have been under stimulated for two years and now being reintroduced suddenly feels like a form of overstimulation. So, I think some sort of a gradual, in between, most people will agree that they want some flexibility and having some sort of hybrid option.

**Gene Marks:**

It's funny, COVID has really, because of the inconsistent type of data that we have gotten, I mean, a lot of people have been making up their own rules as to what they think is safe and not. I play squash with a guy, he's a professor at Penn in Philly and his wife still refuses to eat indoors at a restaurant and still very, very cautious. And I know a lot of people really feel that way. Then you've got the people that are just no vaccines, no masks, whatever. So, as an employee, you've got to deal with this diverse sort of demographic of people. So, first of all, for those that are coming back to the office that are scared or that are overly cautious or that are saying to me, the employer, are like, "We need to have more... Everybody should be masked in the office, everybody I'm not," whatever. How would you recommend that an employer deal with that?

**Dr. Sue Varma:**

Yes. I mean, look, it's really tricky. And I think the one word I would say is deal with it sensitively, and that means I want to hear what you're saying. Tell me a little bit about what your concerns are. What are you dealing with outside of work that makes you feel this way? And then it gives a little bit more context. Because let's say somebody living with an elderly grandparent or somebody who's immunocompromised, you might have a little bit more empathy, because you're like, "I get it. I see where you're coming from." And sometimes people may not have it. They just say like, "I'm really scared of getting sick. If I got sick, I don't have anyone to take care of me."

**Dr. Sue Varma:**

So, trying to understand emotionally, where getting a little bit sense of perspective, I think, is very helpful and then trying to work with them, because, look, at the end of the day, as an employer, you want to get the work done. And if a person really convinces you to say, "Hey, I could do the work at home, I'm just as productive." And you might say, you might give pushback and you say, "Listen, I disagree. I think that there's something to be said about us coming together." And then trying to figure out a way to make it work. I have patients from all walks of life and many of them are in your situation and they are... I was counseling them for two years about, "Okay, how do we navigate this?" And then there's also issues of liability and employers don't want to get sued and regulations and how much you can require. And there's no precedents, we're setting the precedents now.

**Dr. Sue Varma:**

So, I've known people who tried as much as they could to allow exactly what you're talking about, a person who's like, "I don't feel safe coming back to work from home." And then, at some point, it just wasn't feasible anymore, you really needed this team effort. So, being very like... Saying, "Okay, I'm going to look at it at a case-by-case basis and in which situation," and then to say like, "A hard no for you might be like, no, listen, I need, at least once a week, I need twice a week. I need these days." Some people are returning to work on Tuesdays and Thursdays. So, there's all sorts of variations. But I think if you can maintain flexibility with someone and then you're being reasonable. And if it doesn't work out, you can say, "I tried in every which way to accommodate you as much as possible. And if this is not working out, let's see what we can work out. What makes sense in the long run? What are your long-term goals?"

**Dr. Sue Varma:**

And sometimes people will say, "You know what? I didn't really want to be in this job anyway." Or, "I'm thinking about...moving to a different city." I think one of the things that COVID exposed is we really need to be living where we live, living in certain high-cost places, for some people, it just didn't make sense. And the city life brought with it something. And if that is stripped away, then they're like, "Well, what am I there for?" And being able to find more affordable places and more remote work that is flexible and allowing [inaudible 00:09:55]. So, I think we really... And then our technology, we really on some level perfected all of this work with Zoom or we're like, "Do we really need business travel anymore?" If so many of these conversations can be had, I do believe that there's nothing as close to in person.

**Dr. Sue Varma:**

So, those in-person travel, meeting, the conversations you're going to have playing squash if this person happened to be your friend, but if you lose your business partner or somebody you're doing business... The golf course, that kind of stuff, you can't... There's no substitute for some things, but we can also be more flexible than we were before.

**Gene Marks:**

That's great. Okay. As a trained psychiatrist, I mean, I'm interested in your perspective as well on the platforms. Because of all this awareness about mental health, there has been this proliferation of new technology platforms, I'm thinking of like BetterUp as one of them. The one that Prince Harry is behind, where you pay a fee for your business and then your employees can get coaches, counselors, psychiatrists like yourself, psychologists. I'm curious about your thoughts on that. I mean, do you think those are good things? Do you think they should be used in conjunction with actual medical care? What are your thoughts to employers that are considering those types of platforms?

**Dr. Sue Varma:**

I think it's an amazing start. And you might find that a lot of people find it very convenient and very beneficial to be able to have these conversations in the middle of the workday, whether they're at home or in the office, to be able to find a quiet space to dedicate 45 minutes to an hour. So, I think what you're doing is when you're signing up for this is you're sending the message that, number one, I really value your mental health. I want you to be able to show up. I want you to be able to... Because all of us have a story and a life that we navigate outside of the office that we really need to be able to process. And if we're not processing, we are never showing up 100% in our workplaces.

**Dr. Sue Varma:**

And they say for every dollar that you spend investing in an employee's mental health, you will get \$4 return on investment back. So, you're never going to lose money ever. And we know that United States alone spends in medical costs, because of absenteeism, presenteeism, showing up and not really being fully productive, but \$200 billion is lost because of depression. So, it's a very expensive illness and it's considered one of the top disabilities in the world.

**Dr. Sue Varma:**

So, if you want to keep your people, depression affects head to toe, everything, puts you more at risk for obesity, for cancers, for a heart disease, stroke, general inflammation in the body, shortens your lifespan by 10 to 15 years. So, we know that if you really are invested in keeping somebody and it's a good person, you want to maintain their mental health and their physical health. So, by giving them benefits such as any of these platforms, which make it convenient for somebody.

**Dr. Sue Varma:**

And then I think it's worth asking them to do a survey to say, "Listen, was this worthwhile?" Number one, asking people, did you use this service I provided? Because you'll be surprising, there was a study that came out within the last 12 months that said, a survey that showed that even though employees were offered a lot of these assistance programs, a lot of them didn't use it. It was like a pretty high percentage. So, the first question is, did you use it? If you didn't... I would even take a survey if you can, if you didn't use it, why not? And did you not have time during the workday? So, that's another thing I would say, if somebody says, "I have young kids at home. As soon as I get home, I'm on double duty. I don't really have time." Then, do you carve out time to allow someone to do that in the middle of the day? And if they're going to an appointment, do they have that ability to leave if they're physically going in places?

**Dr. Sue Varma:**

But I think it's an amazing start and making sure that people are utilizing it and then, do they like providers that they connect with? We know that the treatment is only as good as the relationship and the rapport that the person has. Do they trust this person? Do they feel like the person is pushing them? Because that's really key. A lot of times people will come to me for a second opinion or third. And they'll say, "I went to other people and I just didn't feel like they were listening, or they were listening and they weren't doing much else. And I really need hands-on treatment. I need advice. I need support. I need something more concrete and substantial."

**Dr. Sue Varma:**

So, I think, there's a website, [psychologytoday.com](http://psychologytoday.com), which is very helpful, where you can enter all the demographics of what you're looking for in a therapist. And sometimes you can listen to their videos. So, there are so many platforms and there are so many ways. I do think that telehealth is here to stay, which I think is great. Yes, meeting somebody in person is wonderful, but honestly, we're moving into a different window where that kind of convenience may not exist anymore, because there's such shortages depending on where you live, and being able to getting in an appointment, there's long wait times, things like that.

**Gene Marks:**

All right. That makes complete sense. As an employer, I mean, clearly, I am not a trained psychiatrist or psychologist, if I become aware of a mental health issue, of an issue with one of my employees, whether it just comes to my attention organically or maybe some other employee tells me like, "Oh, Patricia's having a problem with whatever." What advice would you have for me as an employer for dealing with, I mean, again, I'm a small business owner, I'm an accountant, you know what I mean? So, it's just not what I do. What advice would you have for me?

**Dr. Sue Varma:**

I would say, it really depends on the nature of your relationship, because there's so many... I think, there's the whole territory of, from a legal standpoint of view. What my experience has been, and these have been with my patients who work with larger companies is, they may sometimes, they have a third party that deals, for example, with disability and they would have a third party that handles that. So, there's no questions asked in terms of why do you need time off?

**Dr. Sue Varma:**

So, I'm not even saying you may have employees that don't actually need time off. It's not like they're trying to take a leave, a leave of absence. They may just need time to go. And you can say, "Listen, I want to have a meeting. Is there a point person dedicated in your team of 10 that handles these kinds of things?" But just constantly reminding and having it someplace, if there's a message board or internet that shows these are the benefits that we provide.

**Dr. Sue Varma:**

I mean, I think it's great. It's a harder discussion and a harder sell if you don't actually provide that benefit. But if you actually do provide it, there's kind of no reason. And the person may say, "I don't want to go through this app, this platform, but I have my own insurance and I want to find somebody and network," or whatever it may be. But just checking in and saying, "How are you doing?" And I recognize that you're in a very sensitive position because you're the boss. So, they may not want to [crosstalk 00:16:29] too much. And you could say, "Listen, I don't want to ask any questions. We're all human, we all have stuff going on."

**Dr. Sue Varma:**

And one thing that I hear that helps a lot of people is their bosses modeling their own mental health treatment. So, to be able to say things like, "I've been through a rough time in my past, there have been times when I have had to see counseling." If you've had any experience, if you've had a positive one, to be able to share something like... Normalize it. Normalize and say, "You know what, the last two years have been hard for just about anyone and maybe you've never considered seeking counseling. But I think I know a lot of people that have benefited from it and I just want to remind you that this exists and I will support you and you tell me what you need. If you need some flexibility, if you need to leave a little bit early one day, or you need to take a lunch break or you need to take a break to be able to do this."

**Dr. Sue Varma:**

And then, for you to model that, to show that you have a hard stop in your day, because a lot of times people will say, "I get mixed messages. On one hand, the boss is telling me to take care of my health. But then, at the same time, I am working and everyone else working until 8:00 or 9:00 at night and they don't go home. So, I don't want to be..." That's the one, the most frequent things I hear is, "How could I possibly in the work day..." That is one of the biggest barriers. And I'm not just talking about treatment, but like exercise, yoga classes. I have a lot of patients who say, "I couldn't possibly sign off before 7:00. They would think that I'm a slacker." And they've been working 10 hours a day and they're miserable.

**Dr. Sue Varma:**

So, it's interesting. Because I do get to hear the other perspective of people constantly complaining about their work situation and feeling like they can't have a life. So, having those conversations to say, "Listen, I really do value." There's something that I call the four Ms of mental health. These are four daily habits, movement, mindfulness, mastery, and meaningful engagement. And being able to carve out time on a daily basis. And that movement, like I tell people, you need, at least, the recommendation is 180 minutes of exercise. It's 30 minutes six times a week. You have to do it.

**Dr. Sue Varma:**

I think, if you're able to share stories like, "Hey, I was up early morning playing squash, I'm leaving early to play squash." If you're able to share those stories and model it, I think that'll go a lot further than just telling people about the benefits that exist.

**Gene Marks:**

That's great advice. And it kind of overlaps with my next question. I mean, you mentioned, because so I play squash a few times a week and I will stop in the middle of the day and play in the middle of the day just to have a break to do that. And it is unbelievably helpful. I mean, it just clears your head and whatever headache that you had at that moment, it suddenly becomes like, "What was I even worried about? That was right a lifetime ago." I mean, all this conversation and all the conversations that I read are always about the employees, the employees mental health, the employees suffering anxiety, all that coming back to work, which is obviously fair and true.

**Gene Marks:**

But what about the employers? What about the business owners themselves? I mean, what advice do you have for business owners post-COVID? Because we are dealing with, not only dealing with our employees mental health issues, but also dealing with inflation and finding employees to actually work for us and all the other stresses that you have in balancing your personal life. So, do you think that more business owners should be taking advantage of counseling services somewhere to the ones that you might provide or others like yourself?

**Dr. Sue Varma:**

Yes. I think it's really important not only, whether it be coaching or... For a lot of people, if there's stigma around mental health issues, seeing a psychiatrist, a psychologist may not be the first person. And what I like about some of the coaching platforms is that you can have some of the conversations more logistical without going very deep into the emotional part of it. But the emotional part of it is important. So, when a person is ready, it's worth getting a referral specifically to go deeper, because then you're going to be talking about all sorts of family issues on a deeper personal level.

**Dr. Sue Varma:**

But if somebody says, "I'm not ready for that yet, but what's the lighter aspect of this?" I would say coaching is a great start. And also coaching in a form of group coaching, I think, could be very helpful. There's a group of... Even if it's a monthly of small business owners that get on to get together on Zoom and there's a safe, confidential space with a moderator to be able to have a safe place to get together and to know that anything you're saying doesn't go outside, no one's named, but you can say, "I'm really struggling. I have an employee who this, this, this, I don't know what to do." Where is that safe space?

**Dr. Sue Varma:**

Again, I'm not the best person, you want to consult with a lawyer to find out from the legal aspect and privacy issues and confidentiality, how does that work? If people are talking about aces of situations that they're seeing. But I do think that the bottom line is needing support. I love the fact that not only are you taking the time three times a week to take care of your mental health in the form of physical exercise,

which is also really comes down to mental health, but you're doing it with somebody else and point of connection. So, not feeling isolated. Because I can imagine that business owners have been isolated, just from so many points of views and all the financial ups and downs that you're talking about.

**Dr. Sue Varma:**

So, you're experiencing tons, multiple layers of stress, financial stress, and then negotiating with people at every little point. And you're in charge of their welfare. They spend a significant amount of their waking hours, and it's like, as a parent myself, I can't even... And I have been a boss, I have headed a clinic before and I can empathize with what you're going through of like, you care about these people, you're not their parent. Sometimes that gets projected onto you, that you're supposed to take care of them. So, where's that line in terms of, you have a business to run and the same times you want to make sure that people are doing okay and then you have to take care of yourself.

**Gene Marks:**

It's great, great, great answer. We need to wrap this up, unfortunately, but I have one final question for you. You're a trained psychiatrist, so that is a medical profession. For me to go to you once a week or every other week, where you've got no agenda, this is what your profession is. You're not a family member. You have no interest in my business other than our conversations. That to me is a very therapeutic thing to do. I can talk to this woman for an hour and that's what she does for a living. And that's why I think business owners should be really considering doing that.

**Gene Marks:**

What is just, and again, it's an ignorant question, but I just want to make sure it's clear to me and also to my listeners as well. So, do we need a psychiatrist? Do we need a psychologist? Do we need a coach? Who do you think is really for a business owner would be the best type of therapist? Obviously, it's going to depend on the person, I realize, but what are your thoughts on that?

**Dr. Sue Varma:**

Yeah, so that's a great question. And the best type of therapist, honestly, is the person you feel connected to, that there is a rapport with, and that you respect their background and credentials. And it depends, because some psychiatrists do talk therapy, psychotherapy, and some are maybe more medication management focused. And those may not be the person, if you're saying, "I'm not on any medication, I'm not suffering from any disorder." So, that's the first thing is like going online... There's a lot of quizzes on depression and anxiety to say these are symptoms. And doing a self-assessment to say, "You know what? I think I have some of these symptoms, my mood is low. I can't get out of bed. I'm loss of energy." So, that's where I feel like, if your stress goes beyond just everyday stress and it's not like, "I can figure this out," or maybe talking to somebody would help, but you're actually finding impairment in your functioning. Then I would see a trained mental health professional.

**Dr. Sue Varma:**

And that can be a licensed social worker. It could be a psychologist, it could be a psychiatrist. So, going online, like I mentioned, psychologytoday.com. I don't have any investment with them. I'm just referring to them, because so many people I have referred to that to help them in other parts of the country, if they put in their ZIP Code. And you can see videos, and there's so many platforms like this, it doesn't have to be this, but really anything that gives you a glimpse into like, "I like that person, they understand where I'm coming from. I feel like they would get me, they seem warm." So, if it's a well-trained, smart, and kind, good listener and then ask them what is their approach, be like, "Do you give homework? How do you follow up with me?"



**Dr. Sue Varma:**

So, me, personally, I like to see some results. And I like to get people going and I give them homework. But not everyone is like that. Some people are more what we call psychodynamic or psychoanalytic, where you're discussing maybe your childhood and you're going back in time. So, I think it really is about the fit. And then, if you're not getting what you expected out of it, to bring that up and say, "Hey, could we try a different approach?" And if it doesn't work out, it's okay to break up with your therapist, you're not [inaudible 00:24:54]. And in the end, your comfort level is what's going to predict the benefit that comes out of it.

**Gene Marks:**

Got it. Dr. Sue Varma, how can we get in touch with you?

**Dr. Sue Varma:**

I'm on social media. I do a lot of psychoeducation on that, on Twitter and LinkedIn @doctorsuevarma. My practice is so busy, so I'm not sure if I am taking on new patients, but I would love to stay in touch. I would love to stay in touch with your clients, but feel free. I think Instagram is a great way @doctorsuevarma. I'm on LinkedIn as well. So, social media is the best way. And I put a lot of, especially on my Instagram, a lot of social media, a lot of educational content. I also created videos for MedCircle, which is a great online platform. I would check out all content. I did a six episode series on depression, an episode series on cognitive behavioral therapy, loneliness, anxiety. And there's a lot of other trained mental health professionals giving great advice. And it's one of the biggest mental health educational platforms. So, medcircle.com, and you could see my profile page and videos on there.

**Gene Marks:**

Great stuff. Well, Sue, thank you very much for joining us. Great conversation. Great advice. And obviously, this is the thing that will not be going away. And I think, as you had mentioned earlier in our conversation with the growth of the internet and the age of younger employees who are out there talking to so many people, there's just so much more of an awareness of this. So, hopefully, we'll be back and talking to you again in the future. So, thanks for joining;

**Dr. Sue Varma:**

Sounds great. Thank you. Thanks for having me, Gene.

**Gene Marks:**

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**Announcer :**

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