

## How Employers Can Help Break the Stigma Around Mental Health



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**Announcer:**

Welcome to Paychex THRIVE, a 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 and welcome back to another episode of the Paychex THRIVE podcast. My name is Gene Marks. Thank you so much for joining us today. I am here with Jon Cohen. Jon is the CEO of Talkspace.com. Jon is also an MD, which makes you smarter than my sister, Jon because she is just a DO. So, I just want to be on record. I'm sure she's going to really yell at me for saying that.

**Jon Cohen:**

I'm not going to take the bait on that.

**Gene Marks:**

You don't want to go down that road. Thank you very much for joining. First of all, I'm really happy that you're here. I am a fan of the platform as well. So, let's talk first of all about Talkspace, what it does. Tell us first of all a little bit about yourself and also tell us about the platform and then we're going to get into mental health. Go ahead.

**Jon Cohen:**

Sure. So, I took on the role as a CEO back in November, so I'm all of six months in. I was on the Board for a brief period of time before I came off the Board of Talkspace to take on the position as a CEO. I've had a very, depends who you ask, a checkered career, meaning to be honest, I've been very fortunate. I've had a lot of different life experiences and this is sort of the next turn for me.

**Gene Marks:**

Sometimes checkered is not a good thing, by the way. I think it's like I've had a multifaceted career, a variety.

**Jon Cohen:**

Some people say I can't hold down a job, but I think-

**Gene Marks:**

Okay.

**Jon Cohen:**

Historically, I'm a physician, as you said, I'm a Vascular Surgeon by training. I did the academic thing. I was Chairman of Surgery at a big academic department and ran a medical center. Actually ran for lieutenant governor of New York on healthcare reform and then ended up in the laboratory diagnostic industry for close to 14 years.

**Jon Cohen:**

Prior to this, which we may want to or may not want to get into around the company that probably did almost the third largest amount of COVID testing in the country. So I have a pretty deep experience on what happened to the country during COVID and how we addressed the issue.

**Jon Cohen:**

Anyway. So, Talkspace is amazing. I like to tell people I went to medical school 100,00 years ago and during my medical school training, if I remember correctly, I had maybe a one week of psychiatry. It was okay. One week of psychiatry, I went in for a couple days. I said, "Well, this is interesting," and that was that. And the reason I tell you that is mental health has always been separate from medical health, as people consider. It's been a very separate entity. And what's important is, what I like to tell you is mental health's time has come. There's not a day that goes by that someone does not talk about mental health therapy, what we need, whether it's a current crisis in the news, or the huge amount of funding that's going into trying to change the paradigm. The time has really come for people to get mental health therapy. What's also interesting is the number of people that actually do get therapy, it's enormous.

**Jon Cohen:**

It depends on what number you read. You can read anywhere from 20, 30, to 60% of people are somewhere or another getting therapy. And at least one in 25 Americans probably have some psychiatric sort of mental health issue that they need to have addressed.

**Jon Cohen:**

So, if you layer that on top of what Talkspace is, so Talkspace has been around for over 10 years. It's got a big brand. It was associated with Michael Phelps for a long time, relative to his journey. But more importantly, they paved the way and were the pioneers in proving and publishing over 20 publications, research, peer review journal, that therapy through texting actually works. Talkspace is the pioneers in that. Now, we've moved from both texting to voice and live video. We offer all three services. But the fact that you could text somebody on your phone and actually have somebody basically available 24/7 changes the paradigm enormously. Then if you take them, of course what happened with COVID, they say that COVID probably accelerated telehealth in general by 10 years, if not more. And what's interesting is although it accelerated in all parts of medicine, it was particularly applicable to primary care.

**Jon Cohen:**

Some of that's backed off recently as people returned to physicians. But if you look at the number of telehealth visits, the overwhelming majority of them, over 50, 60% of them are actually telehealth for mental health. The reason is is obvious, it's a very, very easy/convenient platform to deliver that kind of therapy because quite honestly, you don't really need to see a physician, or you don't need to see a therapist. And the convenience is enormous. You don't have to take time off of work, take off on the weekend, spend an hour, half hour driving somewhere, go to someone's office, drive a half hour back.

**Jon Cohen:**

So, those several issues are part of the reasons that this has emerged so quickly. The other is for Talkspace, which we believe is unusual and unique is we've become what's called a covered service. So, we have over 112 million people who could actually get their therapy, essentially for free or for a small out-of-pocket copay. And we're covered and we are, we're in all 50 states and we have over 4,000 therapists. So as you can imagine, up till a year ago, or six months ago or whatever it is, six months, a year ago, you used to find us or find other people and you'd have to pay for it. It was a consumer product.

**Jon Cohen:**

Now what happens when you find Talkspace, you could go on and we'll say, "Listen, you could certainly pay for it to get your therapy. But by the way, let us determine your eligibility. It is a pretty good chance you're covered by your health plan." That's changed things as you can imagine, dramatically for our company because now people could get it. So, now you have a platform that's mature, you have an enormous need, it's now extremely affordable because it's payer reimbursed, and it's in the forefront of what everybody knows is really important to what's going on in the universe of what we live.

**Jon Cohen:**

So, having said all that, those are many of the reasons, that's probably at least the fifth, is from a business standpoint, the market is incalculable. What I mean by that is we're not in a business where I'm here trying to steal market share. What I'm in is a business where all we need to do is tell people and grow the market because it's so big and so many people want it. So, that's a long-winded answer.

**Gene Marks:**

It's a great answer. No, it's a great answer. It's become obvious that mental health is at the roots of so many healthcare issues. I meet people that suffer from stomach issues and a lot of it can be brought back to a mental health thing, or the way that you deal with any trauma or any emergencies. And then of course, we also know, because I see it when I go to my clients, Jon, the companies being run by people over the age of 50, but the majority of their workers are under the age of 35. And you've got a lot of millennials and Gen Xers where they went through a lot of trauma during COVID, and also they're just not afraid to talk about this stuff anymore. I don't know how old you are, but when we were kids, when we were younger, we just didn't talk about it. It was like a stigma. Now it's not.

**Jon Cohen:**

One, it was until recently was absolutely a stigma and nobody talked about it. And by the way, men are even more resistant than women-

**Gene Marks:**

100%.

**Jon Cohen:**

... By the way, about talking about their issues or their mental health. I'll give you an interesting anecdote, one of the most interesting. When we had that recent episode where the NFL player basically tried to die on the field and they basically resuscitated him. It was an amazing sort of set of events. But, what I thought was so fascinating is if you look at the broadcast media, within 12 hours, the broadcasters had people from the NFL and who are prior players saying, "Listen guys, you're going to have to figure out how to deal with this. You need to go either to your therapist or therapy because we need to address this because all of you are thinking about whether or not I'm going to die on the field if this is going to happen to me." You would never have had that conversation five years ago.

**Gene Marks:**

Agreed.

**Jon Cohen:**

The NFL would never have said that five years ago. To their credit now recognizing how important this is. So, it has certainly come to be, as I say, really on top of mind.

**Gene Marks:**

I remember when we were, I just wanted to say, this is now closer to 27 years ago, we had our first kid, we went through all this infertility, my wife and I, and couldn't get pregnant. And it was having much more of an effect on her than it was having on me because I'm a guy. It's like, we just don't let the public know. And so she dragged me to a therapist that specialized in infertility, kicking and screaming. And I got to tell you, I walked out of that session, it was world changing for me because here you were sitting across from a trained professional, that's all she does is see people that are dealing with infertility. So, she knew the right questions to ask, she knew out the responses. She seen plenty of reluctant husbands before and we went to a few sessions with her, and I can't [inaudible 00:09:52]. And this was a number of years ago and it's only improved since then. So it's a gradual change. It really is.

**Jon Cohen:**

Literally, within the last couple days, been reaching out to some fertility companies because women's health is a big deal. Because it's not just infertility. There's a pretty big issue about postpartum depression.

**Gene Marks:**

Yeah.

**Jon Cohen:**

So, it's just one of the multiple areas where people seek therapy, where it makes a big difference. I'll tell you, we're talking about healthcare, Talkspace, we did a study on 600 healthcare workers during COVID who were able to have access to our platform with texting. Three weeks of texting therapy had this dramatic improvement on healthcare delivery, particularly healthcare workers who were in the hospital watching people get sick, watching people in the ICU, watching people die. So, we had this really big impact just on that subgroup of people who, they're sitting there, honestly, all they want to do is talk to somebody, meaning talk, text, communicate like, "What do I do? I feel really bad. I'm really getting depressed. I have people around me dying." So, the impact is really, really enormous.

**Jon Cohen:**

On the business side, you mentioned that the thousands and thousands of small businesses. So, we have a big business in developing and delivering Talkspace to both small and large employers. We sell it directly to them. And it's interesting, it is a added benefit for some of them. So, there's two ways to get it. Just so we go back. A lot of employers have employee assistance programs, called EAP programs. Frequently, you could get therapy through your AEP program. The benefits, although limited. Sometimes it'll be three to five sessions. And then for Talkspace though, you can flip your AEP benefits into your coverage benefit, long term. However, most of our employer business is actually, we sell the benefits separately.

**Jon Cohen:**

So, the employer is actually layered on, and what they do is they pay us a per employee per month fee. But the offering is much different because then what happens is the employee has access 24/7 to texting. They may actually probably get access to one or two videos at least a month. But it's really easy to navigate. Essentially, there's a home agent, you go and you're this employee, you work for this company and then you're off and running, you do the intake and everything else. So, we do that with a lot of employers. It's a really big part of our business. And as you know, the impact on employees and employee health is really enormous. The numbers are extraordinary in terms of work productivity, absence from work, taking time off for therapy, basically being a happy worker with what they do every day. The data is very, very significant.

**Gene Marks:**

And it's not just for existing employees, but from a recruiting standpoint....

**Jon Cohen:**

That's right.

**Gene Marks:**

We're all facing shortages of workers, it's everybody's biggest headache. And I know, because client after client, they interview potential employees, particularly younger employees and they are asked straight up, "I suffer from anxiety or I have depression. What type of mental health benefits does your company provide?" And if you don't have an answer to that, it makes a big impact on the ability to attract people to your company.

**Jon Cohen:**

Yeah. We like to say it's no longer a nice to have, it's really a must.

**Gene Marks:**

It is. Okay, I have specific questions about Talkspace that I just want to make clear. First of all, texting is still a part of the program I'm assuming.

**Jon Cohen:**

Absolutely. Yeah. And you're not being surprised that significant number of people under the age of 35 like to text.

**Gene Marks:**

Yeah, they do. And I'm going to ask you these questions because I get these questions from my clients as well. With services like yours, Talkspace isn't the only game in town, but it is one of the leaders. Do you get a dedicated therapist? So, if I sign up with Talkspace, I'm going to most likely be seeing the same person each time and building a bit of relationship with that person?

**Jon Cohen:**

Absolutely. So we actually are pretty proud of the fact that 80% or plus of our people stay with the same therapist.

**Gene Marks:**

Okay.

**Jon Cohen:**

Don't change. So not only that, but what you don't want to do... So if you start off texting and then you want to flip to video, you flip the video with the same person. It's not like you change. And by the way, just so I tell you this, if you want to text, you will match with a therapist within hours of Talkspace. And if you go straight to video, it'll be somewhere between five to seven days. But if you text and then you go to video, it's shorter. And the reason I tell you that is if you go to the traditional route outside to try and get therapy or a psychiatrist, it's probably three months.

**Gene Marks:**

And it is, because there's a big backlog that is out there. Is there a selection, I don't want to call this like a dating app, but I mean is there a selection process for matching the right therapist with the right patients?

**Jon Cohen:**

Yeah, there is a actually very sophisticated now what we call a two-way matching algorithm. So what I mean by that is you go in and you will match based on some of you what your preferences are. So no surprise, some people match by age, some people match by diversity. Some people will match by other

things. Some people will say, "Listen," they'll match because of LGBTQ, they'll match based on, as I said, diversity, age. Some people will match of course, based on what their perceived needs. They'll say okay, "I want somebody who's a particular expert in family counseling. I want somebody who really knows how to deal with addiction." So we'll match that.

**Jon Cohen:**

On the reverse, so the therapist also can match. So the therapist can say, "Listen, I have time open. I'd like to do a little bit more therapy around bullying."

**Gene Marks:**

Infertility, right? Right.

**Jon Cohen:**

So, we have what I like to call, is a two-way match.

**Gene Marks:**

You know what would be very interesting is, I don't know if you've ever done this before, but I'd love to see that data someday in the form of to share, obviously without naming names. But I'm interested to know, do employees, do people prefer to be matched with somebody of their age or do younger people prefer to be matched with somebody that's older? And what about gender, what about race? Maybe you can generalize, but I'm curious what your data has shown over the years, how people like to be matched. And that's just off script there, is just something that to think about because that's something I would report on and write. I do a lot of writing and I would find that to be an interesting thing for my employees to know, and it would help them get to a better match quicker, I think.

**Jon Cohen:**

The answer is I don't know. But I wrote it down. I will get you an answer about what... If we don't have the data, we probably could do that.

**Gene Marks:**

Yeah, I'm sure you have the data, I just don't know if you've actually done anything with it. Next question is, there are therapists and there are therapists. So, can you define the people that are providing these services? Are there coaches, they're a therapist, they're a psychologist, they're a psychiatrist, who are we getting on your platform and how do we get them?

**Jon Cohen:**

Right. So the average experience in terms of length of time is eight years. So we have a very mature therapist base. We have over 4,000 therapists. We do serve all 50 states. People have to be licensed to give therapy. These are not coaches. There's a lot of ways to get licensed. So, you could be a licensed professional counselor, you could be a licensed clinical social worker, you could be a licensed mental health counselor. You could be a licensed marriage and family therapist. You could be a psychologist, a psychiatrist or a psychiatry nurse practitioner. Now, different states are a little bit different about who's allowed. So, the state licensure issues could vary. But we're not coaches. Everybody is licensed by the society, whatever that requires, with certain requirements and then they have to get through our requirements. We're NCQH approved and as I said, a pretty mature group of people. And people fortunately actually like working for us.

**Gene Marks:**

I have an aunt who is a licensed therapist in New York. She lives in Queens and she claims that she can't practice outside of her state because that's what her license limits her to. And do you find that as well? Are you more likely than not to be paired with somebody that's local to you or not?

**Jon Cohen:**

First off, COVID changed a lot of it. Some of it's going to be lifted. So many, many people had crossed state licensure issues lifted during COVID. It's actually, turns out it's a state issue. So the state can decide. So New York State, which has actually been extending their waiver, which means they've waived the requirement on mental health, I think it's only month to month right now post COVID, about whether or not people cross state can practice.

**Gene Marks:**

Okay.

**Jon Cohen:**

In addition, I will tell you that a significant number of therapists have multiple licenses across states. So, we have therapists that 5, 10, 15 different states. So they purposely have done that. So, we've tried to address the issue. We are pressing, not just us, there are other telehealth companies who are really, really pushing pretty hard on the cross state licensure issue because these platforms are national.

**Gene Marks:**

Of course.

**Jon Cohen:**

And plus, it's not just that the person is local, but I'll give you an example. So if you have a kid in college and they're getting therapy and they live in New York and next year they're going to the University of Miami, can their therapist follow them?

**Gene Marks:**

Okay.

**Jon Cohen:**

So, it's also a quality-of-care issue relative to continuity of care.

**Gene Marks:**

You mentioned the kid in college, and this is a tough question to answer, but I'm curious what you guys do about this. If my kid was using your services and getting, because he or she felt that they needed help, counseling or whatever, as my son or my daughter's parent, I would want to know about it, as a parent, because what can I do about that?

**Gene Marks:**

But switching away from the parent-child thing, there's the employer-employee relationship, obviously there's HIPAA, there's privacy, all of that stuff going on. And I'm curious how you balance that. As an employer, I have 10 employees. I would love to and I probably will, we can talk separately about signing up for Talkspace just from my group. And it's a line, it's a tough line. That's why I'm curious what your thoughts are. I would like to know how the service is being used because I'm paying for it. So how often or whatever. Without breaching any privacy issues, I would like to know if anybody's having any issues that I should be aware of or can help them with or that might actually be a potential problem or a safety or a danger issue in my company. How do you handle that?

**Jon Cohen:**

First off, there's a certain age and I could check. I'm pretty sure it's probably 17-ish where, and I don't want to mis-

**Gene Marks:**

Yeah, where they don't have to disclose or whatever. By the way, my kids wouldn't tell me anyway. They don't even tell me where they are.

**Jon Cohen:**

There's a certain age where you have to get permission from the parents just to let them know that the child's getting therapy. But you're not required to tell them what the results are or what the therapy is.

**Gene Marks:**

Understood, understood.

**Jon Cohen:**

And I'll be honest with you, I don't know if that's cross state. But I know that that has come up as in an issue with public schools about okay, the parents have to know, but you don't have to tell them when, where, what and what's going on.

**Gene Marks:**

So, the answer to that is, by the way, from a parent-child standpoint, be aware that there are those rules and you need to ask about it. So that's fine.

**Jon Cohen:**

And by the way, just for the record, a lot of that comes from the parents, not from the student. Meaning the parents contact us and say, "Hey, can you help me out? I think I'm having trouble with my kid."

**Gene Marks:**

Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Jon Cohen:**

So that's a two-way street. So, then in terms of employer, I'll be honest, there's no way that we release information to employers. It is totally HIPAA protected. It's like any other patient, it's between us and the patient. If the patient employee elects to tell you about it, then so be it. Now we do have of course, significant elevation practices in place if we think someone is suicidal or homicidal, not to you as the employer, but to other agencies that give support.

**Jon Cohen:**

Now, what we do do is we have a special, as this, remember I told you when we go to employers as an added benefit, we do have a added program which goes with it. It's called flex, self-guided, engage. And what we do is with the HR executive, we will tell them, give them the data, "This is how many people use your service, this is what we're seeing." So we'll give them de-identified some issues relative to... The bigger thing is we support the HR executives. So we do a lot of online courses, live with a therapist. So you as an employee could go on it. It's like Peloton.

**Jon Cohen:**

In other words, you're anonymous, you don't know that there's 30 other people signed up for the course, but your interaction with the therapist is live. So we do those live. So we have hundreds of different topics. So every week we're giving classes to different employees and say, okay, there's a I'm worried about getting COVID class, there's a I have a familiar relationship, I'm worried about divorce, my kid, whatever. So we have hundreds of different topics. So we always do, we support, we really, really try and support the HR executive in how they deal. So it's not like we just give you the thing and say, okay, sign up. We say here it is. But we try and support them in a very big way to get people to use it and to give them the tools that they need to make it a much more effective program. That's a big part of what we do.

**Gene Marks:**

That's fine. A couple more questions, and I'll let you go. It's great stuff. Medications, do you guys prescribe?

**Jon Cohen:**

Yes.

**Gene Marks:**

You do.

**Jon Cohen:**

So, we have 200 of our 4,000, roughly 200 of our 4,000 therapists are allowed to prescribe. So we have a psychiatry/medication management business. Now here's the caveats, it's almost all anti-anxiety, anti-depression. We do not prescribe controlled substances. We do not prescribe Adderall, et cetera. And we don't own drugs and we don't own a distribution. So we're not in that business at all. But our psychiatrists will prescribe and then you get it at wherever your pharmacy is. And it's only for 18 years old and older. So we're limited. Those are our limitations by design. But we do have a significant growing business in psychiatry medication management because again, it's easily accessible for people.

**Gene Marks:**

Final question. Listen, I think that Talkspace, platforms like yourself are, like you said, it's like a must have benefit. Mental health benefits are among the top most requested. They're along with health insurance and retirement plans and flexibility, it's all part of the same game. So you're in a great spot.

**Gene Marks:**

But to complement what you do, employers need to be doing things on their own. So, it's providing a good, healthy workspace is also important. It helps you do your job that much better. So having said that, and just your final thoughts, because you've spoken to lots of people and lots of employers and you've been face to face with a lot of different companies, Jon, give me your thoughts, you've been in this business for 150 years. Give me some of your thoughts on providing a good mentally helpful workspace that our listeners and viewers can walk away and think to themselves, we should be doing this in our companies.

**Jon Cohen:**

I think like everything else, it depends on the size of the company because it depends on... I'm a big believer who owns something, right? Who owns the initiative? Who owns mental health, better health, better mental health for the company and the employees? And then like everything else, there's never enough communication. So however you communicate whatever that program is, which should be formal in place, is how often, what are you communicating? How could we, if we were Talkspace, help you get that message out? How could we get to your employees? And we do with permission, we do reminders. We tell people, "Have you done this? Have you done that? You a bunch of open sessions, have you talked to your therapist?" So a lot of it is around communication.

**Jon Cohen:**

And I will tell you as one of the final thoughts as I've talked about this for almost my entire career relative to what patients really are in consumers, because healthcare is very different than anything else you buy is probably the number one issue that promotes mental health, at least telehealth in this, is that the employees don't have to pay for it. And this is true of all healthcare. The minute you put money between a patient and the ability to get a service, it's the number one deterrent for why people don't get healthcare. And that's true of everything, and it's particularly true for us.

**Jon Cohen:**

And there's enormous amount of data. If you look at... [inaudible 00:28:23] here, if you look at just high deductible plans, the number of employees that don't get their basic healthcare screenings, whether

it's colonoscopy, mammography, et cetera, because they're on high deductible plans, they don't want to pay for it out of pocket is just gigantic. It's a proof point for why people don't want to spend money for whatever reason on their healthcare unless they're forced to. The contrary to that is the minute you have something that's really available with minimal cost, that's a huge positive to getting people to use it.

**Gene Marks:**

And not only is it the right thing to do, which obviously it is, but from a business standpoint, the healthier employees are, the more they come to work, the more productive they are, the more they do a better job. And you're right, I think employers fail to realize that they think they're saving money on their health costs by offering high deductible plans or pushing more of these costs down on the employees when in the long term, they're costing themselves.

**Jon Cohen:**

Yep. Absolutely.

**Gene Marks:**

Jon Cohen is the CEO of Talkspace. That's [www.talkspace.com](http://www.talkspace.com). Jon, great information. Thank you very much for coming on.

**Jon Cohen:**

Thank you.

**Gene Marks:**

Like I said, I've been a fan of the platform for a number of years and have recommended it to clients and I hope that this conversation also helps to spread some awareness, not only about what Talkspace does, but also just mental health in the workplace in general. So thank you very much. Your time is valuable.

**Jon Cohen:**

Thank you. My pleasure. Thanks for having me on.

**Gene Marks:**

All right everybody, thanks so much for watching and listening to this week's episode of the Paychex THRIVE Podcast. My name is Gene Marks, hope you enjoyed it. If you have any advice or tips or you'd like to suggest a guest for the show, please visit us at [payx.me/thrivetopics](http://payx.me/thrivetopics). Again, I'm Gene Marks. I'll be back with you soon with another episode. Talk to you soon.

**Announcer:**

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**Announcer:**

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