

April/May 2024 | VOL. 16 NO. 2

@work™

Official Publication of Disability Management Employer Coalition

**Mental Health
and Well-Being**



THE DISABILITY INTERACTIVE PROCESS, STRESS, AND MENTAL HEALTH

By Rachel Shaw, MBA, President, Principal Consultant, Shaw HR Consulting

Employers continue to see effects of stress and mental illness in the workplace. According to one poll, 80% of workers feel stress on the job,¹ which can lead to more accommodation requests. The World Health Organization indicates the pandemic triggered a 25% increase in anxiety and depression worldwide.²

While seeking ways to mitigate workplace-related stress and supporting employee mental health is paramount, how do disability compliance managers handle an influx of medical notes that indicate an employee's need to reduce stress in the workplace?

Accommodating a mental health disability is often complex because needs may not be visible or clear at the outset. Moreover, there is no single accommodation solution for psychological disabilities, which are employee- and situation-specific. Often employers will receive a verbal request or medical note that lists a desired accommodation without work restrictions or functional limitations.

To ensure the accommodation requested will mitigate a disability in the workplace and is medically necessary, employers need to obtain functional limitations from healthcare providers. Creating a medical supplemental questionnaire helps with this. For example, if you receive a medical note that says "Mr. Smith needs to reduce stressors in the workplace. I recommend he work remotely," you need clarification. You need to understand what triggers a negative level of stress in the workplace that should be reduced or eliminated so the employee's

health is not affected. Once you have a list of triggers, you can explore reasonable accommodations that, if implemented, would help the employee perform essential job functions.

Here are sample questions to help you obtain this clarification:

- **Reduce stressors restriction:**

In your report dated Feb. 1, 2024, you state that "Smith needs to reduce stressors in the workplace." It is understood that stress and what is stressful is personal and unique to each person. In order to discuss accommodations, we need clarity on what has caused the workplace to be stressful. What interactions, activities, tasks, experiences, or assignments trigger this negative level of stress for Mr. Smith? Please also clarify if these interactions, activities, etc., must be removed from Mr. Smith's workday to ensure he is not exposed to unhealthy levels of workplace stress.

- **Remote work accommodation suggestion:**

In your report dated Feb. 1, 2024, you state that "Smith needs to reduce stressors in the workplace. I recommend he work remotely." The organization is not able to implement accommodation suggestions without understanding the underlining work restrictions or functional limitations that led to a specific accommodation request. Please clarify the underlining work restrictions or functional limitations that will be accommodated by remote work. By providing this clarification the organization can ensure your patient is best accommodated



across job tasks, and the team can seek out alternatives if we are unable to reasonably accommodate your specific recommendation.

This data will help you consider accommodations and/or appropriate next steps. For example, in one case, an employee's stress was triggered by certain sounds in the workplace. The employer moved the employee to a quieter location and provided a noise-canceling headset.

Other appropriate next steps might include an employee assistance program referral, a leave of absence to support treatment and recovery, performance improvement support if the accommodation requests and recommendations from a provider are not related to a disability, or meeting with the employee to develop and implement a reasonable accommodation plan.

REFERENCES

1. The Marlin Company by Harris Interactive. Attitudes in the American Workplace VII, The Seventh Annual Labor Day Survey: Telephone Polling. Retrieved from <https://www.stress.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/2001Attitude-in-the-Workplace-Harris.pdf>
2. World Health Organization. COVID-19 Pandemic Triggers 25% Increase in Prevalence of Anxiety and Depression Worldwide. March 2, 2022. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/news/item/02-03-2022-covid-19-pandemic-triggers-25-increase-in-prevalence-of-anxiety-and-depression-worldwide>