

Examining the Nexus of Mental Health and Productivity post the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Mental health is a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well, work well, and contribute to their community 1

Productivity can be defined in a variety of ways. There is economic productivity, work productivity, etc. This article will focus more on personal productivity. Personal productivity refers to how consistently and efficiently an individual completes tasks or accomplishes goals.² During and post the Covid-19 global pandemic, mental health became a common word in the average person's vocabulary. In addition, mental health became an important, more recognized, and needed concept. This paper will attempt to define mental health and productivity, explore the current research that connects the two and provide tips and strategies for individuals to apply to increase their productivity by focusing on their mental health. This brings about the question, what does the current research indicate about the connection between mental health and productivity post the Covid-19 global pandemic. It is hypothesized that mental health is positively connected to productivity. A meta-analysis-designed to systematically assess previous research studies to derive conclusions about the body of research was conducted. The most current and relevant studies that related to mental health and productivity during the years of 2020 and 2023 were reviewed. Based on this review and this author's experience in the mental health field, tips to increase mental health and productivity are offered. Overall, this paper is written based on research and the writer's clinical experience.

Introduction

Mental health can range from poor to well. Poor mental health is when an individual do not have tools and techniques to deal with the stressors of life, thus they are not performing well at work, school, or in relationships with others. Poor mental health can lead to an individual facing barriers in life. The good news is that mental health can be treated and enhanced through talk therapy, prescribed medications, or a combination of both. Mental wellness is when an individual has learned and utilizes techniques and skills to deal with life's stressors. I would also add that this individual shows resilience. Mental wellness is theorized/hypothesized to be connected to productivity. As a mental health provider, practitioner, & scholar, I provide mental health care in the United States, specifically in the States of Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia (Washington D.C.) over the past 15 years. One of the biggest concerns in this industry has been how to increase mental health for patients/the general public to produce effective positive results at home, school, work, and relationships with others. In the reverse, I have had patients come for treatment because their productivity was low at work, home, school and/or in relationships and they had the desire to explore the whys behind this along with the desire to improve. Upon exploration with patients, most of the time there is a mental health condition that is hindering the individuals' productivity. This mental health condition can be depression, anxiety, attention deficit disorder, to name a few. For example, I had a patient who was seeking mental health talk therapy because they were not excelling in college. After assessing their concerns and meeting with them for several visits, it was found that the patient was experiencing depression stemming from a previously unresolved issue. My next step was to treat the depression. In this case, the patient needed a safe space, time, and techniques to work through the depression. Once this was established, the patient reported an increase in their productivity as it related to improvement in grades and motivation in college.

Literature Review

Current research has shown that mental health and productivity is connected before, during, and after the pandemic^{3,4;5}. In addition to the current research, in clinical practice before and during the pandemic, I worked with a couple of clients who, pre-pandemic, were dealing with social anxiety that had a huge negative impact on them as it

related to their productivity at work. During the pandemic, these individuals thrived at work due to not having to socialize with colleagues. They were able to focus on their work tasks without the fear and distractions of dealing with others. Few studies were found that addressed mental health and productivity between 2020 and 2023. However, the studies that were found addressed worker's experience and perspective around mental health before, during and after the pandemic (Wong and Greenwood 2023). For example, one article related on prior to the pandemic many people viewed productivity and performance as the amount of time a person was in the office, engaging in activities and networking, all in person (Hoover, 2022). Hoover went on to state that After transitioning to working from home, productivity and performance didn't suffer - and in many cases, it flourished. Companies and organizations were still able to have employees contribute greatly to the work force. However, employee participants did make references to stress, burnout, and feelings of being overwhelmed. This was due to less boundaries of the start of a work day, the end of a work day and being at home. Checking emails and voicemails began to interfere with normal "downtime" at home. Thus, causing burnout, stress, and feelings of being overwhelmed.

Productivity and mental health have also been linked seasonally. For example, Mind, an organization based in the UK related on seasonal depressive disorders. They define seasonal depressive disorders (SAD) as a type of depression a person can experience during certain times of year (mind.uk.org). This time of the year can be related to the long times when the sun is not out but can also be related to the personal losses that people have experienced. SAD can affect productivity by causing a lack of motivation for individuals to socialize, accomplish tasks, and reach goals during this time period. Thus, I have witnessed the need for psychological services increase during this period.

An article by The JED foundation related on schoolwork stress (mental health) and productivity. They stated that people feel more stressed when their space, schedules, and to-do-list feels out of control. Thus, the biggest hurdle to productivity is prioritizing or organizing their thought.⁶

As stated previously, workers and people in general became comfortable during the pandemic to talk about mental health needs and seek assistance for their mental health. As Wong and Greenwood ⁷stated in the Harvard Business review, workers grew more comfortable talking about mental health and developed healthier belief about it and those with mental health conditions. This improved workers' productivity by employers' normalizing, accepting, and embracing treatment for mental health conditions. For example, in clinical practice, many of my patients felt less stigmatized about acknowledging their mental health conditions, their griefs and loss, and their needs for accommodations during the pandemic. Their employers were much more receptive to their needs because they could also relate to their challenges and uncertainties during this time.

Another example of the connection between mental health and productivity is a study by (Calana, Toma, Imbrisca & Burcea, 2022)⁸. This study showed that five teleworking factors influenced Romanian employee perceptions on wellbeing and productivity. The five factors were individual and societal factors, organizational and work-related factors, technological factors, social factors at home and social factors at work. This study showed that teleworking, which is believed to increase productivity, had a positive impact on employees' perception of their mental health. Thus, their work productivity was increased. Teleworking allows employees to save on transportation time and money, utilize technology as a form of assisting with job duties, and be at home or another remote location while getting work duties accomplished.

In summary, productivity can increase by taking care of one's mental health needs. For example, in clinical consultations with organizations, I have done psychoeducation on Hodge's Seven dimensions of self-care ⁹. These dimensions are: Physical self-care, emotional self-care, financial self-care, spiritual self-care, social self-care, cognitive self-care and creative self-care. These dimensions cover all of the areas of self-care that encompasses an individual. When we consistently focus on these areas we strengthen our mental wellness thus it can lead to increased productivity.

Conclusion

Productivity stems from stress tolerance. In my experience I would define stress tolerance as being able to cope with stress using various mental health techniques such as getting adequate sleep, engaging in talk therapy, staying physically active, maintaining one's social life and nurturing one's spiritual being. The ability to handle and cope with stressful situations gives an individual the ability to have mental clarity and mental clarity leads to productivity. This productivity is transferable in the workplace, at home, and in relationships with others. The relationship between mental health and productivity is undeniable. For example, in clinical practice, I have had patients who were feeling stressed and overlooked at work which had an impact on their relationships with their employer and colleagues. Upon engaging in talk therapy over a period, they were able to learn effective communication skills, conflict resolution skills, and emotional intelligence skills. As a result, their productivity increased leading to a more satisfied work life. Their mind and mental health were clearer. By cultivating a clear and focused mind, individuals can tap into their goals and achieve remarkable levels of performance. On the contrary, poor mental health can disrupt one's productivity. However, tips are needed to increase productivity and to increase mental wellness.

Tips to increase productivity while incorporating mental health.

1. "Mental health day" should be defined, normalized, accepted and practiced in schools, work and even at home. These are days and times where an individual, including children, may need to stay at home and just chill." meaning do nothing but remove themselves from the stress of their day-to-day life.
2. Students can utilize resources to assist them with prioritizing and managing their time. Some of these resources can be apps to help students organize, remind of important deadlines, to-do lists apps, and mental health apps.
3. Individuals can engage in mental health wellness strategies such as talk therapy, utilize prescribed medications, or engage in both talk therapy and prescribed medications. This has proven to increase one's productivity.
4. Parents can teach young children to use feeling words to express themselves. For example, using words and statements such as: I feel disappointed because.....I feel happy because.....or I feel embarrassed because.....
5. Employers need to cater to individual employee needs. (For example, one employee may need to be flexible timewise, arriving to work late if they are caring for the elderly, parents, or if they have small children at home. This can add to employee's productivity by offering acknowledgement and support for their domestic needs.
6. Employers can consult with mental health professionals to educate their employees on using feeling words as described above and they can learn conflict de-escalating techniques.
7. Employers need to offer counseling services and employee assistant progress (EAP). These programs allow professional counselors to work with employees on a temporary basis to offer private, personal, and confidential manner.
8. Employers can consult with professional counselors and psychologists to offer psychoeducational workshops and training such as self-care tips, how to assist a family member living with a mental health disorder and how to balance work and life.
9. Individuals can engage in reading self-help books such as Copeology 10 that offers stories and tips on dealing with stress. This in turn can increase productivity.
10. Employers can educate and embrace employees' multicultural selves and diverse backgrounds such as race,

religion, ableism, age, LGBTQIA+, and ethnicity, to name a few.

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