A global conversation about mental health

Personal and professional insights from 32 hours of online collaboration

IBM **Institute for Business Value**

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How IBM can help

Governments need to digitally transform to deliver services citizens want and need. The public expects the agility and efficiency found in the private sector, and governments must embrace new technology, processes, ideas, and workforce skills to thrive. For more information on how IBM can help, see https://www.ibm.com/industries/government

The IBM Jam Program Office is a niche team dedicated to delivering every InnovationJam™ engagement. Team members work directly with clients, sharing best practices spanning more than 15 years, and managing large-scale collaborative events. For more information, see https://www.collaborationjam.com

Mental illness knows no borders and does not discriminate based on race, age, sex, or socio-economic status.

Dr. Randy Phelps
CEO, Give an Hour
rphelps@giveanhour.org
@rephelpsphd on Twitter

Foreword

Well before the coronavirus pandemic, the mental health of this nation—and indeed, the world—was in a state of crisis. According to the CDC, one in five Americans suffer from a mental health disorder. Globally that number is one in four. Deaths from suicide in the US exceed those from auto accidents and are rising. Suicide is the second-leading cause of death for children 13 and older. Few who need treatment receive it.

Our mental health system is fragmented, disorganized and poorly equipped to handle existing needs. There are only a half-million mental health professionals in the US, too few to provide treatment to the more than 60 million people in need.

The coronavirus pandemic will further exacerbate the crisis. Previous disasters like Hurricane Katrina and the 2004 Asian tsunami revealed that those with pre-existing conditions will suffer worsening of their conditions, and rates of PTSD, depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and domestic abuse will soar. Those of us in the mental health community fear that the morbidity and mortality rates globally for mental illness will far exceed those of the COVID-19 disease itself.

The Change Direction Jam preceded the pandemic but offers important insights and suggestions for action. Technologically based solutions are promising, and while many have been gaining popularity within the sector, they are quickly emerging as a primary delivery method available when providers and patients are sequestered. Likewise, this report addresses the growing use of peer support and other initiatives that foster more openness about mental health. These and similar efforts will be critical as we rapidly expand available services.

Thank you for your interest in joining Give an Hour and our IBM partners as we change the culture of mental health, so that all in need receive the care they deserve.

Be well,

Randy Phelps, PhD

Key takeaways

Especially during a crisis, mental health care needs the spotlight.
Nearly 3 in 10 surveyed employees cite mental health impacts (such as feelings of loneliness or isolation, and lack of motivation), and challenges meeting family and childcare obligations.

Overcoming the stigma of mental illness is essential.
Getting people to seek treatment—and educating the public on how to spot and help those struggling with mental health disorders—starts with accepting how common it is.

New techniques and widespread collaboration are needed.
To address the worldwide challenges of mental illness and substance abuse, innovative ways of sharing ideas will be essential in moving this topic to the forefront, as well as to testing and implementing new solutions.

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Turning up the spotlight on mental health

Because of COVID-19, much of the world's population has entered a new social regime. It ranges from distancing ourselves to total lockdown to protect the physical health of ourselves and our communities. However, while we do this, the resulting feelings of isolation and loneliness may slowly exacerbate a different health problem: the ongoing global mental health crisis.

The practice of social distancing is certainly a significant life change for many individuals. In a new IBM survey, 45 percent of surveyed Americans said that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, they had regular or almost constant interactions with individuals and/or large crowds on a daily basis.[1] So now, stay-at-home restrictions are almost certain to intensify feelings of isolation for those who live alone.

Eighteen percent of Americans surveyed live alone and more than 7 percent of that group face even more solitude by living without the company of a pet.[2] Research suggests those living alone—regardless of age or gender—have a higher prevalence of common mental health disorders (CMDs) and that this may largely be explained by loneliness.[3]

More than a third of respondents were concerned that at least one member of their household is at high risk for contracting COVID-19.[4] Even more dire: 8 percent say at least one household member has displayed symptoms but not been diagnosed, and 3 percent have already tested positive for the virus.[5]

And still, long before this pandemic upended everyday life, there was already growing attention on how to grapple with the challenges, stigma, and cost of diagnosing and treating mental illnesses. As we focus on combating the immediate threat of the virus, mental illness will certainly be an insidious aftershock that must be addressed, especially in the workplace. One in four employees surveyed cite mental health impacts while working from home during this crisis and more than 40 percent of Americans surveyed feel strongly that their employer should provide access for employees to mental health and well-being assistance programs prior to opening up their workplace to return to normal operations.[6]

Participants from across the world posted their stories on struggles with depression, anxiety, trauma, suicide, and substance abuse.

So, in these worrisome and unprecedented times, what can governments, businesses and other organizations do to better address these challenges? How can we help our friends, family, neighbors, employees, and colleagues who struggle? Clearly, innovative and collaborative approaches are in high demand.

Just prior to the early 2020 declaration of a global pandemic, IBM and the non-profit organization Give an Hour used innovative technology to conduct a brainstorming event about mental health needs and solutions (see sidebar, "Give an Hour").

Give an Hour and IBM: the Change Direction Jam

To identify new techniques and generate greater awareness of the need to change how mental health is considered and treated, IBM and Give an Hour convened the "Change Direction Jam: A global conversation on mental health culture change."

Using the IBM InnovationJam™, a platform for large-scale online collaboration (see Insight: InnovationJam), people from varied backgrounds, professions, and expertise—including those who have lived with the effects of mental illness—shared their experiences and insights.

For 32 consecutive hours, military personnel, entertainment executives, mental health professionals, and many others from around the world shared thoughts and ideas about how to address the stigma attached to mental illness, promote mental health practices and suicide prevention, and curb the spread of substance use disorder.

Nearly 1,000 participants worldwide posted their ideas and stories about struggles with depression, anxiety, trauma, suicide, and substance abuse. The group of Jam hosts prompted conversations and highlighted emerging ideas. Meanwhile, Jam participants were encouraged to "like" and comment on ideas or proposals that resonated with them. The InnovationJam technologies gleaned insights from the longest conversations, highest-rated comments, most-watched content, and other key indicators.

Give an Hour: Helping change how mental illness is considered and treated

US-based Give an Hour (GAH) is a nonprofit organization that, since its founding in 2005, has provided over 300,000 hours of free mental health care to active duty, National Guard, and Reserve service members, veterans, and their families.[7]

Give an Hour participated in a discussion at the White House National Conference on Mental Health in 2013, which came as a result of the Newtown, Connecticut tragedy, and recognized the need to convene a discussion on mental health in America with leading stakeholders.

After several months of study, Give an Hour and the steering committee recognized that significant knowledge and resources exist to address mental health issues and concerns that affect and burden communities. Yet, many in need are not receiving care. They saw a need to improve coordination and collaboration among stakeholders across sectors. Moreover, they found the cultural obstacles that prevent those in need from seeking care to be considerable.

Give an Hour concluded that "to improve our nation's overall mental health we must change our culture so that mental health is seen as an important element of the human condition—something that we all have—something that we all should pay attention to." As a result, GAH launched in 2015 "The Campaign to Change Direction," widening its efforts to address the mental health needs of other groups.

Insight: InnovationJam

The Change Direction Jam is part of IBM's InnovationJam offering—an award-winning, hosted solution designed, managed, and implemented by the IBM Jam Program Office.[8] "Jamming" is frequently used to complement traditional, physical town halls and conferences—enabling individuals and stakeholders to participate in an online event without traveling and assuming other costs associated with in-person large gatherings.

The Innovation Jam solution allows brainstorming and collaboration on a mass scale for a fraction of the cost of an in-person gathering. Since IBM's first "World Jam" in 2001, the collaboration platform has hosted a variety of gatherings on business and social transformation to large companies, countries, and global organizations.
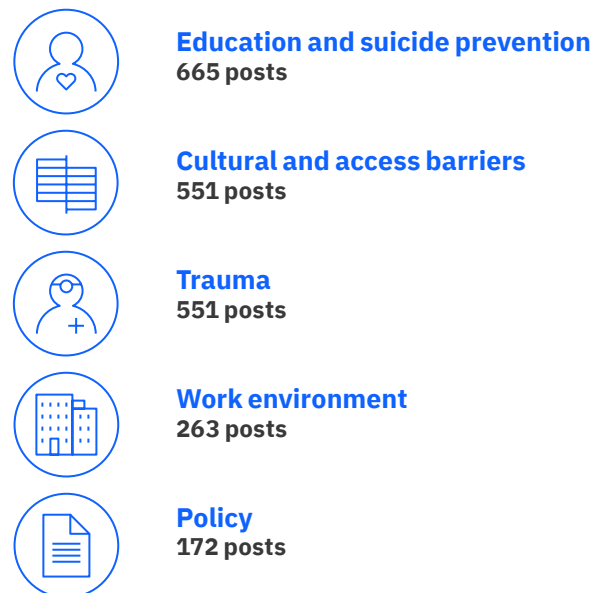
Exploring the Change Direction Jam results

The volume and detail of the personal stories shared was staggering, as was the scope of discussion. Many online participants were compelled to post about their personal experiences, as well as suggestions for improvement.

Jam feedback was organized under a five-topic umbrella (see Figure 1). These broad subjects were intended to engage and encourage participants to think differently about how people generally respond to and treat mental illness, and about how we encourage well-being.

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Fig. 1
Five broad topics set the stage for structured conversations among 992 people during the Change Direction Jam on mental health.

Education and suicide prevention
665 posts

Cultural and access barriers
551 posts

Trauma
551 posts

Work environment
263 posts

Policy
172 posts

Total   **1,995 posts in 32 hours**

Source: Change Direction Jam, October 2019.

Hundreds of ideas emerged... The overriding goal: to change the way mental illness and substance use disorders are culturally considered, identified, and treated.

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Figure 2

Approximately 25 broad topics of discussion emerged during the Jam, with more than 20 percent of all posts touching on the topics of education, youth/schools, and family/first-responders.

Theme	%	Theme	%
Education/resources/events	26.2	Broad or general comments	9.4
Youth/children/schools/students	24.8	Stigma	8.5
Family/caregivers/first-responders	21.9	Technology	6.2
Stories, safe spaces, hopelessness, self-reflection	18.8	Metrics/data/research	5.8
Suicide	18.7	5 signs/Risk Factors	5.4
Treatment/causality/barriers/access/empathy	16.9	Art/music	4.8
Health/wellbeing	16.5	Substance abuse	4.7
Workplace, EAP(s)	14.5	Stress	3.7
Veterans and service members	13.8	PTSD	3.2
Legislation, legal, policy, funding	12.3	LGBTQ+	2.5
Trauma	12.1	Sexual abuse, rape	1.8
Media/Social Media	11.2	Partnerships	1.6
Culture/Diversity/Inclusion	10.7	Divorce	1.1

Note: N=992. Categories based on raw count of mentions with major keywords noted. Keywords may represent a larger taxonomy of similar words not shown here (for example, substance abuse would also include alcohol and drugs).

Topic 1: Education and suicide prevention

The most active topic was education and suicide prevention. Given that the number of suicides by adults in the US increased by 43 percent between 2005 and 2017, it is no surprise this subject had such a tremendous response.[9]

Some participants expressed concern that "many decision makers believe that if you talk about suicide," you will encourage it. Another wrote, "Fear of exposure to liability prevents suicide-prevention programs at school."

Yet it was widely agreed that talking about suicide is a key factor in prevention. One participant asserted, "fear [of talking about suicide] must be removed." One active thread praised pre-broadcast program messages from HBO to warn its audience about upcoming coverage of suicide themes (see Figure 3).

The highest rated post from the Jam dealt with suicide among veterans, particularly as they return home and reintegrate into society. US veterans accounted for 13.5 percent of the 45,390 suicides in 2017.[10]
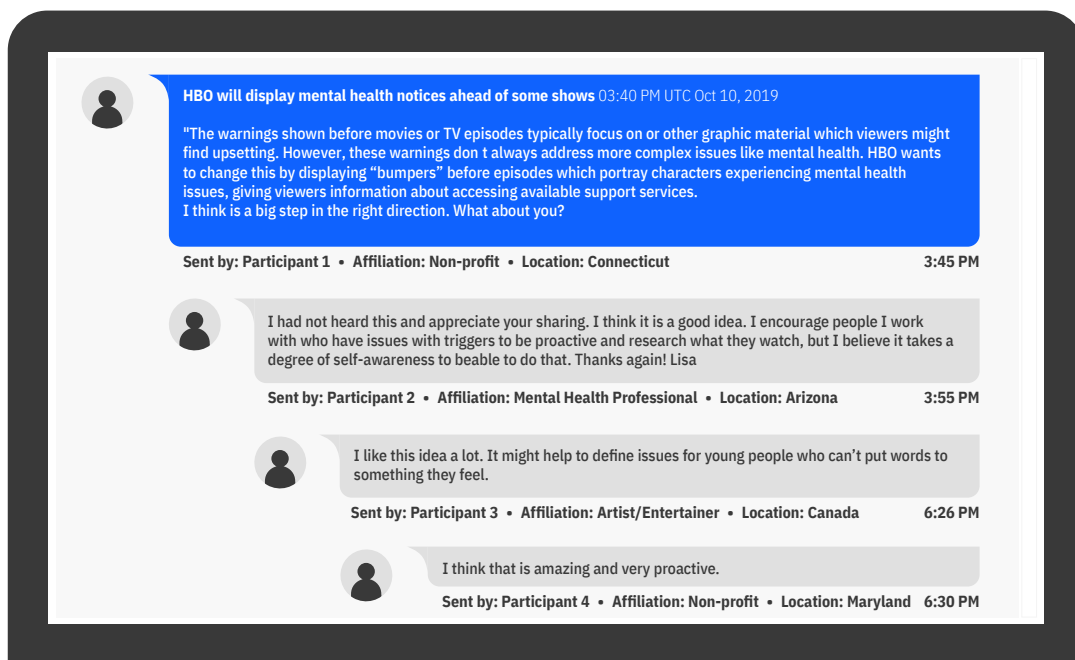
One popular post touched on ways to help service members and veterans find relevant information about Veterans Health Administration mental health resources, including online sites.[11]

A US Executive Order signed April 2018 was greatly lauded in the Jam. The order provides service members and veterans with mental health and suicide prevention services before they are discharged.[12]

The conclusion from Jam participants: preventing suicide has a dependence on overcoming the stigma of mental illness. Making treatment options more visible and providing more education to the public are the next steps beyond identifying those people who are struggling (see "Insight: The five signs of emotional suffering").

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Figure 3

A Jam conversation thread among four participants in various parts of North America (one each from Connecticut, Arizona, Canada, and Maryland) lauded one TV network's new audience warnings before shows portraying mental illness.

HBO will display mental health notices ahead of some shows 03:40 PM UTC Oct 10, 2019

"The warnings shown before movies or TV episodes typically focus on or other graphic material which viewers might find upsetting. However, these warnings don t always address more complex issues like mental health. HBO wants to change this by displaying "bumpers" before episodes which portray characters experiencing mental health issues, giving viewers information about accessing available support services.
I think is a big step in the right direction. What about you?

Sent by: Participant 1 • Affiliation: Non-profit • Location: Connecticut   3:45 PM

I had not heard this and appreciate your sharing. I think it is a good idea. I encourage people I work with who have issues with triggers to be proactive and research what they watch, but I believe it takes a degree of self-awareness to beable to do that. Thanks again! Lisa

Sent by: Participant 2 • Affiliation: Mental Health Professional • Location: Arizona   3:55 PM

I like this idea a lot. It might help to define issues for young people who can't put words to something they feel.

Sent by: Participant 3 • Affiliation: Artist/Entertainer • Location: Canada   6:26 PM

I think that is amazing and very proactive.

Sent by: Participant 4 • Affiliation: Non-profit • Location: Maryland   6:30 PM

Topic 2: Cultural and access barriers

While participants widely agreed that much progress had been made, "silence" continues to be the primary barrier preventing access to mental health. Prominent themes to address this were to find ways to give voice to sufferers and elevate mental health and emotional well-being into the national consciousness and discussion.

Other popular suggestions included encouraging those who have sought help to share their experiences–good and bad–in public forums and with high-risk populations. Those with high profiles, such as athletes, actors, musicians, military personnel, and other influencers, are encouraged to share their stories. They would go a long way to creating awareness that mental illness and substance abuse disorder can happen to anyone.

Finally, in this section, much discussion focused on how to responsibly portray and address the treatment of mental health in the media. One participant noted that movies such as "Silver Linings Playbook illustrate the 'everyman' aspect of the mental health struggle and help remove stigma." Discussion focused on ways in which social media can be used for good, such as connecting individuals with online support groups and therapists.

Insight: The five signs of emotional suffering

In 2015, Give an Hour launched the "Campaign to Change Direction," a collective impact initiative to help change the culture of mental health so it is valued as much as a person's physical health.[13] Give an Hour developed the "Five Signs of Emotional Suffering" to help people recognize when someone—including themselves—is suffering emotional turmoil, and may need help.

– **Personality change:** Sudden or gradual changes in the way someone typically behaves. They may behave in ways that don't seem to fit their values, or the person may just seem different.

– **Agitation:** They seem uncharacteristically angry, anxious, or moody. They may have problems controlling their temper and seem irritable or unable to calm down.

– **Withdrawal:** This sign is marked by a change in someone's typical sociability. They withdraw or isolate themselves and stop taking part in activities they used to enjoy.

– **Decline in personal care:** They stop taking care of themselves, let their personal hygiene deteriorate, start abusing alcohol or illicit substances, or engage in other self-destructive behavior.

– **Hopelessness:** People in this situation seem overwhelmed by their circumstances and may say that the world would be better off without them or show other symptoms of suicidal behavior.

A person may show one or more of these signs. The Five Signs is an easily understandable model to encourage people to be aware of their own emotional functioning and that of their loved ones, friends and colleagues. It encourages people to reach out to others and offer support and help if they become concerned.

> "It's hard to overstate the importance of recognizing trauma especially in crisis situations when immediate de-escalation of the issue is imperative."

Participant, Change Direction Jam

Topic 3: Trauma

Trauma not only has a catastrophic effect on individuals, but also on their family, friends, loved ones, employers, and community. Moreover, unaddressed trauma can have deadly consequences, including suicide and other acts of violence. Participants noted that "the type of trauma —sexual abuse, divorce, violent crime, war experiences— must be acknowledged and carefully considered in order to help the affected."

One participant wrote, "It's hard to overstate the importance of recognizing trauma especially in crisis situations when immediate de-escalation of the issue is imperative." Many agreed on the need for more investment in research to better define—and recognize— trauma in all its forms, especially post-traumatic stress disorder.

The longest and highest-rated conversation under this topic focused on how those who have experienced trauma are uniquely able to help those suffering from trauma. Participants noted that sharing stories of dealing with despair, distress, addiction, and sorrow, offer hope to those suffering through their own tribulations.

Recommendations also focused on the transformative power of music and art as therapy and self-expression (see "Insight: Creative therapies"). One poster wrote, "As survivors, we have been given the gift of empathy and now we can use what seemed to be the worst moment in our lives to help others foster understanding, healing and overcoming stigma."

Topic 4: Mental health in the workplace

Mental illness and substance use disorder can have severe, sometimes hidden, impact on work dynamics and relationships. Roughly three in four employees say they have struggled with at least one issue that affected their mental health.[14]

Employees with substance use disorders miss approximately 50 percent more workdays than their peers.[15] What's more, "presenteeism"—when those at work are not capable of being fully productive or perform in a lackluster manner—accounts for untold loss of productivity.

Mental illness and substance abuse annually cost employers between USD 80 billion and 100 billion in indirect costs.[16] Another study indicates that investment in employee mental health care can boost productivity, raise morale, and improve retention.[17]

Participants were asked to share ways that companies can better support policies and practices that promote emotional health and well-being. The most active conversation on this subject—and fourth most active in the Jam—occurred when participants discussed the role of business leaders in creating a happier and more engaging work environment. Participants noted that this is especially important with Millennials and Gen Z who are more prone to leave jobs for mental health concerns.[18]

Stigma is still an enormous challenge: About two in five employees (42 percent) answer "yes" when asked if they have ever been diagnosed with a mental health disorder.[19] And, the shame of mental illness keeps many from revealing their affliction. In fact, in a confidential survey: 63 percent of those diagnosed with a disorder say they have not disclosed it to employers.[20]

Much Jam discussion revolved around educating everyone on the importance of managing mental health and fitness, and to emphasize the importance of seeking help, including:

– Easier access to employee assistance programs

– More access to qualified mental health professionals

– The use of technology to provide programs, training, and self-screening.

Topic 5: Policy initiatives

Participants exchanged views on the role that state and local government plays in crafting policies to affect access to mental health care, including treatment for substance use disorders. A legislative process and funding thread saw the highest participation in this topic, with many posters expressing their frustration with lawmakers.

Despite great strides to treat mental health on par with physical health since 2010's Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act—which economists estimate extended mental health benefits to 62 million people— many people don't think enough is being done by lawmakers.[21]

That likely reflects the vagaries of having individual states determine local regulations and expenditure on mental health. In 2015, only 24 states increased their mental health budgets—down from 29 in 2014 and 36 in 2013.[22]

Many comments focused on the lack of parity with physical health care benefits, as well as the dearth of funding in general. "Despite all this talk, it fails to draw the attention of policymakers and legislators who need to act and make laws, especially those that support mental health care parity and well-being," one Jam participant noted.

Many participants said there is a need for a concerted effort to lobby state governments to widen the scope of care to include alternative types of treatment—such as telecare and peer-to-peer, to name a few—as recognized mental health care. Many participants also wrote that it is time to embrace an integrated health care model that starts training primary care physicians to spot and treat mental illness.

Another thread suggested the need for more activism to affect legislative and policy changes, specifically the effort underway to replace a ten-digit emergency number with just three digits (see "Insight: Launch of the 988 hotline).

Insight: Creative therapies

"Music hath charms to soothe a savage breast, to soften rocks, or bend a knotted oak," wrote William Congreve in the 1697 play, "The Mourning Bride."

The importance of music, art, and other creative therapies in helping those suffering from mental health disorders was mentioned often during the Jam.

In fact, these therapies have been practiced for more than 70 years.[23] As one poster noted, "the transformative power of music and art as therapy and self-expression reverberates from the persons creating it. It not only offers a powerful release valve for the individual, but also conveys a personal journey and struggle to others."

Music sets off activity in the same part of the brain that releases dopamine (the "pleasure chemical").[24] A 2011 study conducted by researchers from McGill University found that music plays a significant role in causing a good mood and showed that dopamine levels were 9 percent higher in people who had listened to music they enjoyed.[25] One Jam participant noted that the "arts and artists have the ability to touch the soul: they can somehow navigate past the conscious mind and affect the subconscious."

One suggestion from the Jam involved inviting songwriters and artists to perform in prisons. Another is to offer counseling programs to teach writing, music, performance, and other means of expression. These creative therapies help bring to the surface inner experiences that people may be otherwise unable to express.

Insight: Launch of the 988 hotline

When the National Suicide Hotline Improvement Act of 2018 was passed it recommended the adoption of the "988" suicide prevention and mental health emergency number.[26] The 988 was approved by the Federal Communications Commission in December 2019 and is expected to roll out nationally by the end of 2020, after a period of public comment including telecom carriers.

Action guide
A global conversation about mental health

Addressing the global mental health crisis will require a concerted effort among us all. It is critical to share leading practices across many groups in society. People will need to work together to implement strategies that bring real and meaningful change for those suffering from and affected by mental health issues.

And, importantly, in an age of divisiveness, we must all learn to practice empathy and active listening, as well as educate ourselves on mental illness and substance abuse disorders. In sum, the prevailing sentiment from the Jam is that we must all be part of the solution as part of our obligation to humanity.

1. Social and other media

– Unplug and limit the time spent on social media.

– Bolster awareness in schools and educational touchpoints about the pitfalls of social media.

– The responsible representation of mental illness and substance abuse, while protecting free speech and vulnerable consumers, were also top of mind.

– Don't glamorize or sensationalize suicide and avoid stigmatizing mental illness portrayed in movies or television shows.

– Talk about warnings before TV shows, movies, other media, and stories involving complex mental health issues before the encounter, especially with children or teenagers.

2. Relay "lived experience" to help others

– Celebrate people like Michael Phelps, Lady Gaga, Emma Stone, Dwayne Johnson, Michelle Obama, countless military leaders, and other high-profile influencers who have spoken about their experiences, especially to at-risk populations.

– Embrace the "Okay to Say" public awareness campaign (#okaytosay), which urges conversation about the issues facing mental health wellness and offers help to those who need it.

– Promote culture change by organizing events and arranging partnerships that increase awareness of mental health care and facilitate intervention, such as those of the "Campaign to Change Direction" (#changementalhealth).

– The speaker need not be a celebrity. Heartfelt communications conveyed appropriately by many laypersons with real-life experiences.

3. Veteran transition and suicide prevention

– Conduct an awareness and outreach campaign centered on where veterans and their families can find VA resources.

– Lobby the VA and Congress for a detailed review of where and why veterans have slipped through cracks.

4. The legislative process and policy

– Require a mandatory mental health assessment of persons entering the criminal justice system, so their conditions do not go untreated and worsen.

– Expand the mental health care workforce by lobbying for new licensure and accreditation requirements to foster levels of training and experience appropriate for different situations, including more peer-to-peer counseling.

– Create an agency to help with health insurance companies when mental care is not covered on par with physical healthcare.

5. Mental health best practices for both work and home settings

– Familiarize employees and the community on how to listen for and recognize that someone may be suffering emotional issues. (See "Insight: The five signs.")

– Emphasize the importance of seeking help, offer easy access to employee assistance programs, and more qualified mental health professionals for those who need them.

– Offer and recommend self-screening technology applications and programs–and training–that encourage mental wellness. These include brain training, breathing exercises, meditation, and mindfulness exercises.

– Require that stress management be a part of annual human resources workforce training.

Related IBM Institute for Business Value reports

"How technology and data can improve access to mental health resources." One of the most critical issues that the application of technology and data can address is access to healthcare. Technology allows patients to check their own moods and conditions, then prompts them to take healthy corrective actions. https://www.ibm.com/thought-leadership/institute-business-value/report/mental-health-tech

"Loneliness and the aging population: How businesses and governments can address a looming crisis." Diverse stakeholders can come together to help mitigate the impact of solitude and risks associated with loneliness that are especially detrimental to older adults. https://www.ibm.com/thought-leadership/institute-business-value/report/loneliness

"The growing trend of consumerism in healthcare." Healthcare has long aspired to "patient-centricity." Now, new players vying to enter the healthcare market are finding abundant opportunities to own a piece of the industry. https://www.ibm.com/thought-leadership/institute-business-value/report/consumers-health

Methodology

In March-April 2020, the IBM Institute for Business Value (IBV), in collaboration with SurveyMonkey, commissioned a series of weekly pulse surveys of US consumers and employees. Topics surveyed ranged from experiences and perceptions of remote working, to views around re-engaging with mass transit and recreation.

In October 2019, the "Change Direction Jam" was an online collaborative event for interested parties to share ideas about improving mental health: an existential crises facing our communities.

Five main topics were identified to guide discussions. For 32 consecutive hours in October 2019, people across the world shared their thoughts and struggles with depression, anxiety, trauma, suicide, and substance abuse.

Using IBM's InnovationJam™ platform for large-scale, online collaboration and analysis, event hosts and facilitators spurred conversations and highlighted emerging thinking for participants in real time. Jam participants were encouraged to "like" and comment on ideas or proposals that resonated with them.

The Change Direction Jam collected insights from 992 individuals who contributed unique 1,995 comments. Seven key themes and recommendations were identified through text analysis tools and evaluation of the longest conversation threads, the highest rated comments, and the most engaging Jam content.

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Notes and sources

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