

VIEWPOINT

WHY MORE EMPLOYERS SHOULD PROVIDE 'MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID'

Educating workers about mental illness is good for your company's health.

By William Stadler



William Stadler is director, behavioral health, at Cerner Corp., a health information technology solutions provider based in Kansas City, Mo.

Everyone knows that first-aid training saves lives—which is why it's a common component of many companies' wellness efforts. Yet few organizational leaders choose to educate their workforces about mental illness, a set of conditions that cause more lost workdays and impairment than arthritis, asthma, back pain, diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease.

WHY?

It's not because mental illness is uncommon or already managed in the population. On average, 1 in 5 U.S. adults will experience it in their lifetimes. Of those, approximately

two-thirds won't receive treatment, according to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). Among full-time workers, 1 in 10 will be affected by substance abuse, which often occurs in conjunction with a mental health disorder.

It's also not because these conditions don't affect companies' bottom lines—they do, significantly. Employee mental health and substance abuse issues cost U.S. employers between \$80 billion and \$100 billion a year, according to NIMH. Moreover, workers experiencing unresolved depression are estimated to encounter a 35 percent drop in their productivity, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI).

Could the lack of employer-provided education be because mental illness is unlikely to result in an emergency? That's also not the case. NAMI

states that suicide—which is among the most dangerous consequences of a mental health crisis—is the 10th leading cause of death among adults in the U.S. and the second leading cause of death among people ages 10-24.

Given these striking statistics, it's clear that employers are making a mistake if they ignore the psychological well-being of their employees. Offering your workforce first-aid training on mental health can be an excellent way to help your employees better understand and address mental illness—which will also improve your company's health.

WHAT IT IS

To start, it's important to know what a first-aid program for mental health is not. It doesn't teach people to make diagnoses or encourage them to self-disclose their own mental illnesses, nor does it take a position about the appropriate use of the Americans with Disabilities Act or medical leaves of absence for individuals with any specific conditions.

What it does do is help allay employees' fear and hesitation about starting conversations with others about mental health and substance abuse. The first such program was created by a nurse and professor in Australia in 2001, and other pro-

grams have emerged since then. A typical course shows employees how to recognize the signs of a problem and gives them the tools and vocabulary to help.

First-aid training for physical conditions uses easy-to-remember acronyms such as ABC (airway, breathing, circulation) to reinforce key lessons. Similarly, the mental health training my company adopted—which is called Mental Health First Aid—is structured around a mnemonic device: ALGEE. When workers recognize telltale signs of a mental health problem or emergency, such as erratic behavior or a sudden shift in personality or appearance, they are taught to:

- Assess for risk of suicide or harm.
- Listen nonjudgmentally.
- Give reassurance and information.
- Encourage appropriate professional help.
- Encourage self-help and other support strategies.

The goal is to give participants the knowledge, resources and takeaways they need to feel empowered to act.

OUR EXPERIENCE

My company, Cerner Corp., launched a pilot program on mental health education for our employees in 2017. So far, more than 200 individuals have been trained in our Kansas City, Mo.,

location, and we're just getting started.

Feedback from participants has been overwhelmingly positive. One hundred percent of those surveyed said they would like to see the course offered companywide. Additionally, employees indicated that they view Cerner more favorably for having taken steps to reduce the stigma of mental illness.

In fact, those who took the course found the conversations so valuable that they asked for a place to continue the dialogue. So we created a private group where program graduates can share articles, information, resources and insights. We are currently evaluating how to implement a mental health education program for all of our 26,000 associates in 26 countries.

Several employees say the training has changed their perspective and even informed how they care for themselves.

"I use it daily when I interact with people because the key thing is to recognize when people may be suffering and to offer them assistance," says Cerner associate Sarah Scoular. "So, when I'm working with a co-worker and see that something is 'off' in their attitude or ... different in the way they're interacting with me, I know I need to say, 'Are you OK? I'm here to talk if you need help.'"

Another participant drew a comparison between the mental health training and traditional first-aid education. In both instances, people are taught to de-escalate dangerous situations and make sure the individual experiencing the difficulty is safe until he or she can access appropriate care. "If someone was choking, you'd do the Heimlich or you'd want to have someone who knew CPR," Cerner associate Martha Tillmon says. "But when someone is having a panic

attack or an anxiety attack, I wasn't sure what actionable steps to take." The training identified some possible responses.

Tillmon says she also uses the techniques she learned to reduce her own stress. "It takes a lot of energy to be upset or stressed," she says. "So, when you have the opportunity, step back and say, 'Why am I feeling this way? Why is the other person feeling this way?' Recognizing when you need to take a step back, that's a huge part of Mental Health First Aid."

It's time for company leaders to take a step back as well—and realize the importance of adding mental health education to a holistic wellness strategy.

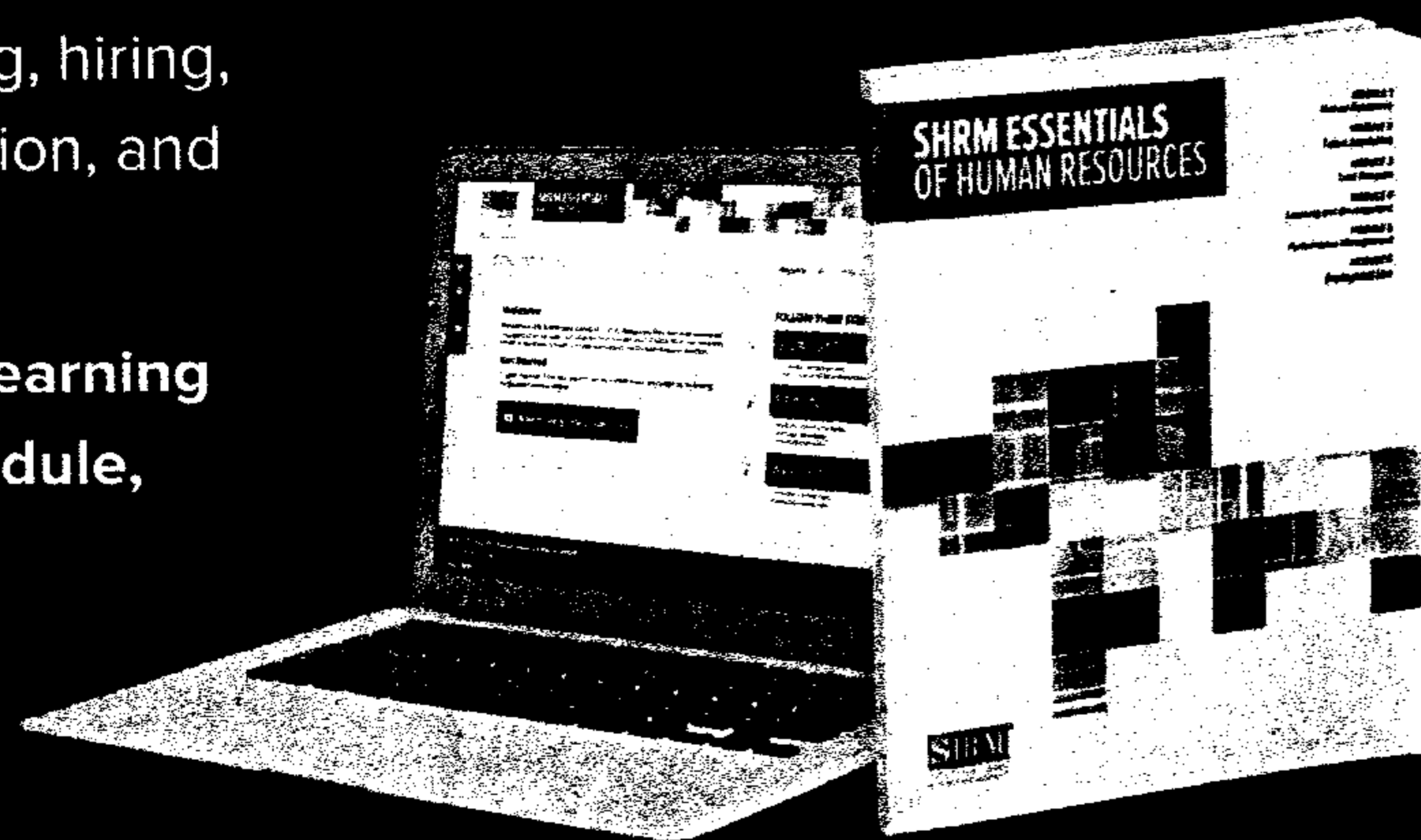
To learn more about first-aid training on mental health or to register for a class, visit www.mentalhealth-firstaid.org. ■

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