

ASC FOCUS

THE ASCA JOURNAL | SEPTEMBER 2023 | ascfocus.org

INSIDE »

LABORATORY AND PATHOLOGY SERVICES
IN ASCs

WORK WITH LOCAL AUTHORITIES
TO CREATE AN EMERGENCY PLAN

Support Mental Health in Your ASC

*Help your team manage change,
stress and anxiety*

=ASCA

Ambulatory Surgery
Center Association



Support Mental Health in Your ASC

Help your team manage change, stress and anxiety

BY ROBERT KURTZ

More than one in five US adults live with a mental illness, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. ASCs would be wise to consider how this statistic applies to them, says Amy Bussie, RN, owner at Blossom Partners in Atlanta, Georgia.

“That figure would suggest 20 percent of any surgery center’s employees could be suffering from mental health issues,” Bussie says. “How an ASC responds to staff members dealing with difficult life experiences will be incredibly impactful, either positively or negatively. It may be a matter of life or death for the employee, or it could help with identifying and responding to a potential risk to patient or team safety.”

The mental health of staff also is important because it can affect retention, says Kelli Schneeweiss, RN, charge nurse at Mann Cataract Surgery Center in Houston, Texas. “When

you focus on improving the mental health of your staff, you can achieve a better work culture, create a caring and enjoyable environment for your patients, and build a center where employees enjoy coming to work.”

Failure to give mental health the attention it deserves can have significant short- and long-term effects on an ASC, says Erin Boers, vice president of human resources services for MedHQ in Westchester, Illinois. “You may experience employee burnout, declines in morale and higher turnover. As people leave your center, you may need to rebuild your culture and foundation, during which you risk experiencing declines in patient care.”

Helping Your Team

A big change at your ASC can add stress to and strain your staff’s mental health, says Christopher Crocker, human

resources client manager for MedHQ. Changes can include adding surgeons and specialties, hiring or replacing staff and introducing technology.

“Changes bring uncertainty,” Crocker says. “It is important to have a communication plan in place that informs your people about what is coming, including how it will affect their work and benefit your ASC.”

Be as transparent about changes as possible, Boers says. “Talk about the change frequently and share as many details as you can. Making staff feel considered, valued and an important part of the bigger picture can help reduce the anxiety that often comes with change.”

While it is essential to pay close attention to mental health when your ASC undergoes changes or experiences other types of disruption, such as an emergency or disaster, an ongoing focus on maintaining a positive culture can benefit staff mental health, Bussie says. “Create a supportive, inclusive work culture that allows everyone to show up as their most genuine self.”

An environment like that can encourage team members to speak up when they have workplace concerns or believe they need personal help, Crocker says. When staff require assistance, your ASC should make it easy for them to get it. “Offer medical coverage that includes mental health services and provide an employee assistance program,” he says. “Then you must go one step further and ensure staff are aware these resources are available and understand what they include.”

Schneeweiss is a believer in the value of counseling. This year, her ASC included a dozen free counseling sessions with a counseling company in its benefits package. “I noticed pleasant changes in those staff who shared they were using the service,” she says. “I started counseling over four years ago. It has been an invaluable resource that helped transform my life.”

People can be afraid that starting counseling will make them look weak or lead to a negative “label,” Schneeweiss says. To encourage staff to consider counseling, she recommends asking volunteers to speak about their positive counseling experiences or bringing in a mental health professional to explain the value of counseling. “Ask the professional to walk staff through how to identify negative or distorted thoughts using questionnaires and teach skills that help one identify negative thought patterns, question their thoughts and redirect them in a more positive manner.”

Building personal days or mental health days into your ASC’s paid time-off program can encourage staff to prioritize their mental health, Bussie says. “Remove any stigma around taking time off and help people to prioritize self care.”

Being attentive to staff mental health needs also requires helping staff with other areas of their health. “Encourage staff to go out for afternoon walks or remind them to meet with your 401(k) vendor,” Boers says. “When staff are



keeping up with healthy practices in other aspects of their lives, their mental health should improve.”

ASC leaders looking to strengthen how they help staff better manage stress and anxiety should seek evidence-based practices, Bussie advises. She points to organizations such as the National Alliance on Mental Illness (nami.org), Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (samhsa.gov) and Mental Health America (mhanational.org), which offer resources that can help ASCs improve staff support.

What to Watch Out For

Even when ASC leaders work to create a more comfortable and welcoming workplace, there are still factors that will inevitably contribute to stress. “The ongoing staffing shortage is a major risk,” Bussie says. “When ASCs are short-staffed, leaders are often so busy reacting to staffing needs—sometimes filling staffing gaps themselves—that they are unable to recognize cries for help among employees. In addition, empathy, active listening and compassionate responses require

more time in an environment where time may already be scarce.”

All it takes is one “toxic” person to change an entire work culture, Schneeweiss says. “I have seen how such a person caused staff to start isolating themselves, were afraid to speak up and started to dislike coming to work. They mentioned feeling oppressed and hopeless that any change would occur because multiple complaints were taken to management and no change was seen.”

Other factors Schneeweiss says can contribute to declines in staff mental health include passive-aggressive behavior, oppressive leadership, micromanagement and limiting or removing autonomy. “Have your leaders and those with authority set the standard and maintain the level of respect, integrity, behavior and emotional intelligence you want your employees to model,” she adds.

Even seemingly minor issues like revisions to a work schedule can greatly affect staff, says Crocker, especially when those changes contribute to stress outside of work. “We are seeing many ASCs relying upon per diem staff, which can cause a lot of differing schedules. If you are unable to have set hours for staff, make sure you have processes in place to inform your people of what they should expect and help them set a schedule that minimizes disruption in their lives.”

By taking the time to get to know their employees, ASC leaders will put themselves in an improved position to support staff mental health, Bussie says. “Regularly speak with employees one on one. Most employees need to feel seen, heard and cared for as people and not just employees. Knowing each individual and having relationships grounded in trust can help leaders identify individuals struggling with mental health issues early and respond in a way that reduces suffering for the individual and the risk to the employee and ASC.” <<