Ellen Kelsay:
Today's episode is sponsored by One Medical, a modern, primary care benefit employees use and love. Their mission is to make quality care more affordable, accessible, and enjoyable for all through a blend of human-centered design, technology, and an exceptional team.

Dr. Arthur Evans:
People are experiencing a lot of psychological stress. It's been prolonged over a long period of time. It will have a profound impact, not only on their mental health and their physical health now, but for the months and perhaps even years to come. We can create environments where we can help people to manage that stress, we can help people to manage that distress, and ultimately, not only provide an environment where people are more likely to be healthy, but also an environment that is going to be productive.

Ellen Kelsay:
That's Dr. Arthur Evans, CEO of the American Psychological Association (APA). A clinical psychologist, innovator and leader, Dr. Evans life’s work has been dedicated to improving the mental health of communities, including those that have historically been marginalized. Prior to his role at the helm of the APA, Dr. Evans was the commissioner of Philadelphia’s Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual disAbility Services, where his work became a national and international model.

I’m Ellen Kelsey, and this is a Business Group on Health podcast, conversations with experts about the most important health and well-being issues facing employers. Today Dr. Evans and I are going to discuss mental health and ways employers can lend their support.

Dr. Evans, welcome. Thanks so much for joining me today.

Dr. Arthur Evans:
Thank you. I’m delighted to be here.

Ellen Kelsay:
Well, let's get right into it. Your organization has released a study that is just so impressive called, The Stress in America survey, and I would love to ask you a number of questions related to that and notably some findings coming out of that survey. Let's maybe just start with what's happened to our collective mental health over the past year or so.

Dr. Arthur Evans:
We do The Stress in America survey each year to look at the stress levels in the nation and to understand what's driving those stressors and to really help to educate the public about the importance of stress on our overall health. During the pandemic, we've done that stress survey every few months just to see how the stress levels were changing. What we saw was that the stress levels went up after the pandemic started, they stayed pretty high, and it's starting to have a real impact on our health status. For example, in our latest survey we found that about 60 percent of Americans are experiencing unwanted weight changes - about 40 percent gaining weight and about 20 percent losing weight. For those who are gaining weight, have undesired weight gain, the average is about 29 pounds. We saw that people are experiencing sleep disturbances. Some people are saying they’re sleeping more than they want. Others are saying that they are sleeping less than they would like to. That's about two-thirds of Americans. We saw that people are drinking more to cope with the stress that they are under as a result of the pandemic. About a quarter of Americans are saying that. And people are engaged in less physical activity. All of this is making two really important points. One is that Americans are experiencing stress related to the pandemic. It’s been prolonged stress over the course of a year, but it's also pointing out the inextricable tie between our physical health and our mental health. These kinds of changes will have long-term or could have long-term implications for our physical health, as well as our mental health.
Ellen Kelsay:
I think that point you just made is so important, because this isn't just a point in time and once you're no longer stressed, everything is fine, and you kind of hit a reset button. These are long-term, really correlated, psychological and physical manifestations that will persist and will take some time to perhaps recalibrate and to get back to a healthier, sustainable level. I appreciate you underscoring that point in your remarks. I also wanted to ask about another finding in your survey that our team just found so interesting. We know that it's widely reported that the pandemic has taken a toll on women, and in particular mothers, many of whom have left the workforce or are dealing with the brunt of homeschooling and other childcare issues, but your survey really shined a light on the toll that it's taken on fathers, which is something that we don't often hear about or is often discussed. I would love to hear more specifically what your survey found as it relates to fathers.

Dr. Arthur Evans:
I'll talk about parents generally and then drill down a little bit on fathers, in particular. Parents, in general, are experiencing stress, but we also know that parents of young children who are engaged in remote learning are experiencing even more stress. One of the interesting facts though, was that fathers indicated that they could have used more emotional support than mothers. For fathers it is in the 80 percent range and for mothers it was around the 60 percent range. That was somewhat surprising to us that fathers are indicating that they could use more emotional support.

Ellen Kelsay:
Let's also talk about the kids. What did your survey find about the mental well-being of children and young adults?

Dr. Arthur Evans:
We didn't look specifically at kids, but we did look at people across the lifespan. What our survey showed is a finding that we've found in almost all of our surveys, which is for people who are in the young adult age range, that they're experiencing a lot more stress than people who are much older. In fact, it is a linear relationship that the older you are, the less stress or the fewer people are reporting significant amounts of stress with older adults. Seniors are reporting the least amount of stress. Gen Z, that's the age range from about 18 to 23, are experiencing the most stress, and significantly, those who are in college in that age range are experiencing the highest levels of stress. We suspect that what's happening is that for many of us who have lived through 9/11, through economic downturns, we've learned how to go through and have experienced going through those things. You can imagine coming out, you're graduating, you're looking for your first job, and you're in this huge economic downturn in the middle of a pandemic, is extremely stressful for young adults. For employers who have a lot of employees in that age range, I think they should be aware of that. And for employers who have parents of children who are in that age range, you can expect that they are experiencing a lot of stress as well.

Ellen Kelsay:
Yes, that's so important. That's the generation that is soon to be entering the workforce, if they're not already in it, and just the unique and acute needs that they're experiencing right now are exacerbated above and beyond the very acute needs that the workforce at large is experiencing right now in this space. I'm glad that you've called that out, in particular. Another area that your survey focuses on is really, I guess I would call it the impact of double trauma, that communities of color are facing right now, not just the pandemic of COVID-19, but also the pandemic of racism. We'd love for you to talk a little bit more about that double trauma and how that is really impacting the mental health of communities of color, in particular.
Dr. Arthur Evans:
At APA we talk about this being a syndemic, meaning that it's not just a pandemic, but we have these other layering issues that are exacerbating the impact of the pandemic. One of the things we found out really early on was that communities of color, particularly African Americans, Latinx communities, and native American communities, were having significant disparities in terms of the impact. When you look at the issue of the racial injustice issues that have arisen over the last several months, with the George Floyd killing and a number of these other incidents, those things have a cumulative affect on people in the workforce. The more recent anti-Asian violence, again, those are additive to the stressors that we're all experiencing. It shows up in our survey as well. We asked a question about people's concern about the future. African Americans have the highest levels of concerns about the future as we look to how we return to the work environment after the pandemic. Our surveys consistently show that African Americans, for example, have higher stress levels than the rest of the population and we're seeing that during the pandemic as well.

Ellen Kelsay:
This is a population that pre-pandemic already had challenges with access and attaining culturally competent care in many areas and in particular in the area of mental health and emotional well-being. I would love to hear how you and the APA are promoting culturally competent care and really does think about this double trauma, so to speak.

Dr. Arthur Evans:
The issue of cultural differences is so important in health care. We know that it's a two-sided equation. It's not just the experience of people who are experiencing day-to-day traumas and day-to-day discrimination, but it's also the perceptions of the people who are in the health care world, who are providing services and the implicit biases that they may have, and sometimes explicit, but I think that most of what happens are our unconscious biases that we all carry. We really are working on both sides of that equation, that is really trying to help people in communities of color with addressing the trauma and the stresses that those communities often feel, but also in terms of trying to help professionals who might be providing care to make sure that they can understand the impact that, you know, living in a society that has inherent biases, how those can play out in terms of providing care that is not always the optimal care for individuals.

I also think that it's important to recognize that some of the challenges that we face are not just interpersonal, that they are systemic, they have to do with the way we've designed systems, they have to deal with where we have services. When I was a commissioner of mental health, one of the things that we looked at were if services were actually located in communities. What we found is that often those services were not in the communities, in places that were accessible. Beyond the interpersonal issues, we also have to be aware of some of the structural issues that might get in the way of people getting access to the services that they need. Beyond all of that, I think one of the real messages that we try to convey is that these issues are real. A social psychologist by the name of Dr. David Williams at Harvard, has done studies that have shown and documented that people in communities of color, where there has been what is perceived as an unjustified police shooting, that has a direct impact on the mental health status of people in those communities in ways that you don't see when there may be a shooting, but it's not viewed as unjustified. So what does that tell us? It tells us that parts of our community, parts of our society, are experiencing these traumas where if they believe that their community is being dealt with unjustly, that it has a direct impact on their health. One of the main messages that we try to convey is that these kinds of events are real. They have a real impact and that we have and bear a collective responsibility to address them.

Ellen Kelsay:
It's also important and talk about how timely and relevant is as we sit here today with current events and a lot of the social injustices that are going on all around us. Again, I appreciate you illuminating that
point, that there are some very significant needs that are unique to certain populations and they’re very real and very contemporary today. I really do appreciate you underscoring that.

One Medical:
Mental and behavioral health issues affect millions of Americans. One out of every five people in the U.S. will be diagnosed with a mental health condition and 57 percent of those won't receive any treatment. People bounce between providers and mental health resources with little to no guidance around how to find appropriate care. That’s why we’ve launched Mindset by One Medical, our virtual-first program with coaching therapy and group sessions, with the exceptional One Medical primary care experience. Same or next day, in person or over video, your employees can get care quickly and avoid the typical wait to see a mental health provider. We improve clinical outcomes, so your people are healthier, happier, and more productive. We reduce costs for companies by preventing unnecessary specialist visits and out-of-network referrals. One Medical is here to help your team feel their best emotionally, because mental well-being is essential to overall health and wellness.

Ellen Kelsay:
Let's talk about these issues broadly and the correlation to productivity and performance. Obviously, our audience are largely employers and their industry partners who are supporting them and deploying solutions and programs to support the workforce. How should our audience think about when these issues go unaddressed or when they're not robustly addressed? How does that manifest and play out from a productivity and performance perspective?

Dr. Arthur Evans:
The big message here is that mental health is inextricably tied to our overall health and our overall health is inextricably tied to how we perform in the workplace. We have lots of data around that and particularly around mental health issues. We do an award called the psychologically healthy workplace that is based on research that shows what the correlates of good workforce performance are. It lays out five dimensions that are really important and are related to high performing organizations. The other thing is that we know that mental health and the kind of work environment that we create, whether it's a psychological healthy work environment, is related to things like absenteeism, it's related to retention, it's related to presenteeism, when people are in the workplace, but they may not be as productive as they can. The way we view mental health in the workplace is, it's not only a good thing to do from a value standpoint, but it's directly related to a company's performance and ultimately their bottom line.

Ellen Kelsay:
Dr. Evans, you just mentioned the psychologically healthy workplaces and the five dimensions. I would love to hear you expand on that a bit more and what are those five dimensions?

Dr. Arthur Evans:
We look at five domains for those companies. One of them, the first domain has to do with employee engagement. We know that companies that engage their employees systematically do better. For example, in our organization we do a whole variety of things to engage our employees, everything from small things like having our MCR staff meetings as opposed to managers, to weekly chats with me, the CEO, to involving people in work groups and committees that can help shape our policies. All of those kinds of things are really important in terms of employee involvement.

Secondly, workplace and work life balance is really important. We were talking earlier about parents and distressors that parents are experiencing, particularly those who are working in the home and trying to manage their children's learning as well. Those kinds of stressors have an impact on not only people's health, but it's also on their ability to perform in the workplace. Organizations that take that into account and try to help their employees are going to fair much better. We do things like mental health days, especially during the pandemic. It is interesting, we thought that our productivity would go down.
In fact, our productivity probably went up, but there was a cost to that because people were working at such a high level. What we did as we started to notice this, is to say, look, we need people to dial it back, to bring it down a couple of notches, and mental health days to really signal to people that we really need them to protect their mental health. So work-life balance is important.

Employee growth and development is another important area where organizations that can invest in the development and growth of their employees are going to do better. Health and safety, making sure that that people have a robust set of health care benefits, making sure that the environment is safe. One of the things that I did and we did as a management team during the pandemic is to lead every single message that we sent to our staffs with the idea that this decision, what we have prioritized is your health and safety. Then we started to talk about whatever the decision was. When we surveyed our staff later in the year about how things were going, and one of the questions we ask is about does the organization care about our health and safety, the people overwhelmingly said yes. Part of that was being very intentional about signaling the importance of people's health and safety in terms of our decision-making.

Finally, employee recognition. Organizations that are very intentional about recognizing staff, rewarding staff for those things that are consistent with their mission and values, tend to do better. Those five dimensions are related to how organizations do and how organizations can create that kind of healthy work environment.

Ellen Kelsay: So much that you just said was terrific and I was writing notes. I love the point you made about signaling health and safety and the role that it played in being a priority in your organizational decision making and communicating that to your team and how important that is and was to them. Also, the point you made about dialing it back and too much productivity may not, it gets to a point where it might not be productive and it could be encroaching on burning out. The dialing it back and knowing when to do that and doing it thoughtfully is so important as well.

Dr. Arthur Evans: Yes, it's counterintuitive that a CEO would be telling their staff to not be as productive, but the reason that I took that position and had several conversations with my management team about how do we signal to people that we don't want them working at a hundred percent or that high, is that over the long-term it's going to be detrimental to their health, it's going to be detrimental to our productivity, and ultimately it's going to lead to burnout. My messaging was we can't have you working at a hundred percent over a long period of time. You need to dial it back a little bit because inevitably, and we've seen this during the pandemic, we're going to have times when we're going to need to search, we're going to need to do more, we're going to have to respond to something, and organizations that have people flat out all of the time have very little ability to do that without dropping something off of the plate that they may not have intended to.

From a management standpoint, making sure that people are working at a reasonable level that we can search when we need to search, and ultimately that we are working at a pace that that allows us to manage over the long haul is going to be really important. We sent that message and I think it was received well. I think people were surprised, but I think ultimately people appreciated that we were thinking about their long-term health over getting a few more papers or something out the door.

Ellen Kelsay: I love it. I think to your point around the surge and leaving some reserve energy in your tank for when you do need to surge and making sure that you're rested and prepared for when that moment comes is so critically important. I love that you did that and set the example that you did. I think all these five dimensions or domains are things that employers can be doing, many already are doing, and could
continue to expand their work in. I would love to maybe shift to employers as they think about returning to the office at some point, for those who have been working virtually. What recommendations do you have as we think about the psychological readiness of the workforce to return and the fear and trepidation that many do have about leaving their homes and coming back into a workplace? Any words of wisdom or tricks and tips that you would offer to employers as they navigate that in trying to support their workforce?

Dr. Arthur Evans:
Well, leaders are going to have to spend as much time preparing their staff as they are preparing their physical building. I know people are going to be thinking about what the new physical environment is going to be looking like, but as much thought has to go into how do you prepare people to come back into this environment. I would say for any leader that it is important to understand what people just experienced. We've experienced a collective trauma as a nation. It's had a profound impact on our physical health and our mental health. We know that from a lot of research that when people are under prolonged stress, we all experienced stress and stressors and day to day, but we experience stress and it goes away. What we've experienced is something like nothing that I've experienced in my lifetime, which is a year of significant amount of uncertainty, a significant amount of stress. That's going to have an impact.

The other thing that leaders need to be aware of is that coming back to work may be perceived by many as a very positive event. We also know from a lot of stress research, positive events can be as stressful as events that we perceive as negative. Think about weddings or having a baby or moving to a new home. Those are generally positive events, but they're also very stressful events. Even for people who perceive returning to work as a positive event, this is going to be additional stress on people who have experienced stress over a long period of time. You have a new set of transitions that people are going to have to go through. I think having that mindset that I have a stressed workforce, return to work is going to add to that stress. Many of the people returning to work are now going to have to figure out what they do with their children during remote working. Or during the summer, what am I going to do with my child, because the programs that would have typically been in place are not going to be open. Those are going to be added stressors that people need to think about. A few things that we know from psychological research that can help, one of the things that causes a lot of stress is uncertainty. The more uncertainty you can remove from people, the better people are going to fare. For example, during the pandemic, one of the things that we were very intentional about is using very long timeframes for our decision making. We did that because we wanted people to have some sense of what was going to happen over the next six months. When we made a decision to stay virtual, for example, we made those in six-month increments. So you don't have to worry about your children's childcare or whatever, if you're going to be working remotely, and we aligned our decision making around the school year, because we knew that that was going to be the biggest challenge that our workforce had. People really appreciated that. Back in April of last year, people knew that they were going to be in a virtual work environment through the summer, and so they didn't have to worry about that. It just took that level of uncertainty off. I'm using that as an example. Anything that you can do to reduce the uncertainty of the workforce, that helps.

The other thing is that the psychological sense of control is very important. One of the things that the pandemic does is we don't feel like we're in control, because we're not in control of a lot of things. The more decisions that you can put in people's hands, the more choices that you can give people, the better they're going to fair. It could be something as simple as, you know, at one point we had people's personal belongings delivered to them, to their homes, after it was clear that we were going to be in virtual mode for a very long time. We gave some people the choice, you could come to the building and pick up your things or you could have them delivered to your home. A small thing, but the more things that we can do to signal to people that they do have choice and options and things aren't just happening to them. I talked earlier about engagement. If there's a way to engage people in the decision-making
process or to survey people so that their voices are heard. All of those kinds of things help. I think leaders who are aware of that are probably going to fare much better than those who are not.

One other thing I want to say about leadership. We know that one of the most important things you can do as a leader is to communicate consistently and clearly and transparently over a period of time. So clear messages, you have to over communicate. One of the things that happens when you stress is you have a more cognitive load that makes it difficult for people to process information. In that environment, it's really important to make sure that you are over communicating so that those messages get through to folks. So having that clear, consistent messaging and being transparent about it, telling people what you do know, what you don't know. What I tell people is, if I do know something and I can't tell you, I will even and tell you that, but you know that what you're hearing from me is the best information that I can give you at this particular point.

Ellen Kelsay:
That's so helpful and I think could serve us all well, as we navigate the next many months, as we all think about potentially reemerging, leaving our homes and whether we go back to work full-time or part-time or in some sort of new schedule, these are all really important, and important regardless, it's not just returned to work. I think it's any critical moment in organizational evolution and just good communication and empathetic leadership that could serve all of us well, no matter what the situation is. Thank you shedding some light on all of that.

Dr. Evans, thanks again for joining us. We really appreciate your perspective.

Dr. Arthur Evans:
Thank you. I appreciate being here.

Ellen Kelsay:
I've been speaking with Dr. Arthur Evans, CEO of the American Psychological Association. You can find The Stress in America report on the APA’s website at www.apa.org.

I'm Ellen Kelsey and this is the Business Group on Health podcast, conversations with experts on the most relevant issues facing employers today. Please consider sharing with a friend or a colleague. Thanks for listening.