

Mental gymnastics score on the job

IBI/NBCH speakers cite online program's productivity gains

By **JOANNE WOJCIK**

SAN ANTONIO—Just as regular exercise has been found to help prevent physical illness, “mental gymnastics” may boost worker productivity and even ward off depression, at least one employer has found.

In a three-month pilot using an online program called MyBrainSolutions, Nationwide Mutual Insurance Co. saw significant improvements in attitude and emotional resilience among participating employees, which translated into lower absenteeism, less presenteeism and enhanced productivity, said Kathleen Herath, associate vp of health and productivity at the Columbus, Ohio-based insurer.

In fact, one call center employee who had always performed at a somewhat mediocre level received productivity scores of 100% after participating in the program, Ms. Herath said during a session on brain health at the 2010 Health & Productivity Forum.

The Feb 8-10 meeting in San Antonio was co-sponsored by the San Francisco-based Integrated Benefits Institute and the Washington-based National Business Coalition on Health.

MyBrainSolutions, devised by Sydney-based Brain Resource Ltd., an international network of scientists, clinicians and information technology specialists, is a Web-based program that uses interactive games and videos to help users reduce stress and improve general and social cognition.

The program begins with a 40-minute assessment that helps users determine their strengths and weaknesses. After completing the assessment, users are instructed to practice certain exercises for 15 minutes a day, three times a week, for three to four weeks. Afterwards, users take the assessment again, almost always discovering improved scores in all areas.

Ms. Herath explained that Nationwide had sought out a program to prevent depression “because it’s too late once they’re depressed.”

“We offer weight loss programs to help people lose weight, but we also offer nutrition courses for people who just want to maintain their weight. We offer physical fitness for people who are physically fit. The one big gaping hole was, we didn’t offer anything for people who are mentally healthy so we can keep them

that way,” Ms. Herath said.

“So we were looking for a program that hit long before the crisis did,” she said of the program conducted last year.

MyBrainSolutions isn’t designed to treat depression, but rather, to “keep healthy brains healthy,” said Eugene Baker, vp of employee assistance programs at Golden Valley, Minn.-based OptumHealth Inc., Nationwide’s employee assistance program provider that piloted the program among its employees before offering it to customers.

Preventing depression could produce significant savings for employers in health care costs and productivity, Mr. Baker said.

Depression results in approximately 400 million lost workdays each year, representing an economic cost of \$51.5 billion annually for U.S. businesses, Mr. Baker said. Depressed workers take an average of 9.9 sick days and \$4,000 in medical services annually, compared with an average of less than \$1,000 in medical services used by nondepressed employees each year, Mr. Baker said.

In fact, the per capita annual costs of depression are significantly more than that of hypertension or back problems and comparable to that of diabetes or heart disease, he said.

The exercises in the online program are designed to address such areas as emotion, thinking, feeling and self-regulation.

“So, for example, you can recognize what people are feeling by looking at their faces,” he said, describing an exercise in MyBrainSolutions in which participants were instructed to identify people who were angry, sad, happy, disgusted or neutral.

“Or you could learn to focus on people who are really positive,” Mr. Baker said. “You can train your brain to attend to more positive things,” he said, explaining that human beings are naturally wired to watch for threats, a negative orientation that the program attempts to turn into a positive orientation.

The program also can help users regulate breathing and heart rate, thereby reducing stress and enhancing productivity.

“When you are breathing at your resonant frequency, where your body is aligned for peak performance, your heart and brain are working together in synchrony and you are calm, focused and ‘in the zone,’” Mr. Baker said.