

INDUSTRY OUTLOOK

The industry welcomes better days ahead in 2021
p18

PROCESSOR PROFILE

Thomas Foods International integrates into the US market
p32

BEEF PROCESSING

FPL Food expands to accommodate growth
p40

PACKAGING SOLUTIONS

Automation and robotics streamline packaging
p72

MEAT+POULTRY

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Mental health

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Mental health



Processors strive to remove the stigma and meet the needs of workers

BY JOEL CREWS | jcrews@sosland.com

Any doubts about whether there was a mental health crisis in the United States before 2020 have been dashed in the wake of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, which has tested the mental mettle of people from all corners of the globe. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, even before the pandemic the statistics on mental health in the United States paint a somber picture.

- Mental illness costs America \$193.2 billion in lost earnings per year.
- Mood disorders, including major depression, dysthymic disorder and bipolar disorder are the third-most common cause of hospitalization in the United States for adults between the ages of 18 and 44.
- People with mental illness face an increased risk of having chronic medical conditions.
- Adults in the United States with mental illness die an average of 25 years earlier than others, largely due to treatable medical conditions.

In 2018, more than 47 million Americans reported suffering from a mental illness, which included at least 11 million who were suffering from a serious mental illness. More than 10 million Americans seriously contemplated suicide that year, and 1.4 million attempted suicide with non-fatal results.

In 2019, that number grew to 12 million adults who reported having serious thoughts of suicide, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. As recently as late February 2020, a Mental Health America online survey of 211,000 Americans

found that 10% of respondents reported that they had contemplated suicide or harming themselves.

More recent research indicates that the pandemic has pushed the collective panic buttons for even more people. According to a study in March 2020 by the American Psychiatric Association (APA), spiking rates of anxiety, depression and self-harm were linked to the pandemic. The APA study indicated that nearly 60% of Americans felt the virus was having a serious impact on their daily lives; 40% were anxious about becoming ill or dying of COVID-19; and 36% of Americans felt that the threat of the coronavirus was having a serious impact on their mental health.

GOVERNMENTAL ATTENTION

In September, the US House Energy and Commerce Committee advanced a bipartisan mental health package that included five bills that would facilitate mental health care and address suicide prevention and education as the stresses of the pandemic magnified what was already a societal dark cloud. Committee Chairman Frank Pallone Jr. (D-NJ) lauded the advancement of the legislation which included a total of 26 health bills.

“Many of these bills are particularly important as millions of Americans report the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively affected their mental health and as substance use and overdoses are on the rise,” Pallone said. “Taken together, it is my hope that these bills will provide resources and support to those in need as we continue to work together to respond to this national public health crisis.”



With diverse operations and employees spread throughout the world, Cargill has made mental health awareness a global priority.

MEAT INDUSTRY MENTAL MATTERS

Viewing mental health challenges through a lens focused on the meat and poultry industry and quantifying the scope of it is a challenge. However, most observers – ranging from academics to mental health professionals to trade association officials and representatives from processing companies – agree that for a variety of reasons, mental health awareness and coping with mental illness throughout the industry is an elusive and insidious impediment to success. Most acknowledge it invisibly hums in the ether of all segments of the industry, from farms to feeding operations to slaughtering plants and further processing facilities. Almost everyone agrees mental illness has been able to flourish in the workplace and in the meat and poultry industry especially, because it is cloaked by pride, shame and often unrelenting machismo.

Companies like Tyson Foods Inc., Maple Leaf Foods and Cargill are doing their parts to destigmatize the topic of mental health in the workplace. Leaders of progressive processing companies make the physical and mental wellness of all workers – from the boardroom of their headquarters to the kill floor of their processing plants – a priority because not only is it the right thing to do, but it is also good for business.

Officials with the North American Meat Institute (NAMI) said protecting workers is a top priority of all its member companies, and

for them, worker safety includes mental health.

“Employee health, safety and well-being are Meat Institute members’ leading concerns,” said Sarah Little, vice president of communications for NAMI.

During the onset of COVID-19, meat and poultry companies scrambled to access adequate supplies of personal protection equipment and implement protocols for testing, sanitation, erecting barriers, taking temperatures and conducting contact tracing. Little said, communicating these efforts to employees was vital at a time when uncertainty seemed overwhelming to many. Companies used signage, websites, text alerts and email to keep workers informed about the response to the pandemic.

“This effort was important not only to keep employees safe, but for their peace of mind and confidence during an unprecedented and incredibly challenging time,” Little said.

Since the onset of the pandemic, many companies are proactively implementing programs and investing in technology to identify and prevent another health crisis.

“The goal of these efforts is to improve and protect employee health, including mental health,” she said. “As the industry continues to work against the spread of COVID-19 and this public health crisis, the importance of mental health of employees will remain part of the Meat Institute’s counsel for members.”

Members of the American Association of Meat Processors (AAMP), which represents the meat industry’s smaller processing operations across the country, traditionally rely on interaction and networking with other member companies when business challenges arise. Chris Young, executive director, said while the association doesn’t offer specific guidance or resources related to mental health, AAMP members often interact with him informally about specific situations that might include a mental health component.

“Our small guys are so individual...every situation is so different that you end up helping in almost a counseling type fashion on an individual basis,” he said.

Because most AAMP member companies include a processing operation and a retail store as part of their businesses, the shift from foodservice to retail due to the pandemic, had most scrambling to keep up with

demand, which has been the biggest and most recent challenge.

“How do I maintain my employees’ overall health, and mental health, while trying to meet the demands of what’s put before us?” has been the question facing AAMP members. “It has been a huge demand on everyone on our side of the industry, especially when we saw some of the larger plants shutting down for large amounts of time because of COVID; a lot of pressure got put back on the small side of the industry,” Young said.

Dealing with the spike in demand with the ability to supply the products has been a common dilemma and the solutions have depended on each company’s dynamics.

“The thing for us has been helping our folks to manage, ‘how do we meet the customer demand and not overtax our employees to where they don’t have proper mental health, proper family life?’” Young said.

“What I’ve encouraged our members to look at is that employees need time. You know, you work so you can live, you don’t live so you can work,” he said. “For our folks, what they had to come to grips with is that there’s a place we need to make a cutoff and give our employees the proper amount of time off to be able to regroup.”

For some companies, that has meant closing their retail stores on Sundays for the first time ever and making that part of the new normal moving forward.

“I think that they’re seeing that the job gets done better mentally and physically, if we’ve given them the proper time off that they need,” Young said.

PROCESSOR PERSPECTIVE

Minnetonka, Minn.-based Cargill’s commitment to addressing mental health issues across its diverse operations has included hiring Andi Blaylock as its employee relations programs senior consultant in 2014. Blaylock advises business units on issues specific to employee mental health, wellness and substance abuse and treatment. She is the only Cargill employee who is a licensed clinical social worker.

She pointed out that the company saw the need for someone with her credentials and the fact that she replaced someone in the same position who retired speaks to Cargill’s long-term commitment.

“Just investing in a role like this, I think is unique; that an organization would say ‘we want to have an in-house mental health expert.’ I think this is one way that we’re unique in this space and that we really show our commitment that we want to have someone who’s available to consult with managers as well as employees when employee personal issues and employee mental health issues impact the workplace,” Blaylock said. “For many employers, offering mental health benefits is considered a nice thing to do for workers, but Cargill has realized business benefits to addressing the issue openly.

“It really leads to a healthier and more productive, safer workforce. We see a direct correlation between investing in mental health and that return on investment in safety, in productivity, medical claims...turnover, absenteeism – all of those things.”

She went on to point out that generally, every dollar a company invests in mental-health programming returns about \$4.

ROOTING OUT CAUSES

“Employees don’t generally start at this level of performance, whatever it is, and just become bad employees for no reason. It’s usually driven by something that’s going on in their lives outside of work,” Blaylock said. “That’s why it really behooves a corporation to pay attention to employee mental health. Not because it’s a nice thing to do, which I think it is, and the right thing to do, but it does have those bottom-line benefits as well.”

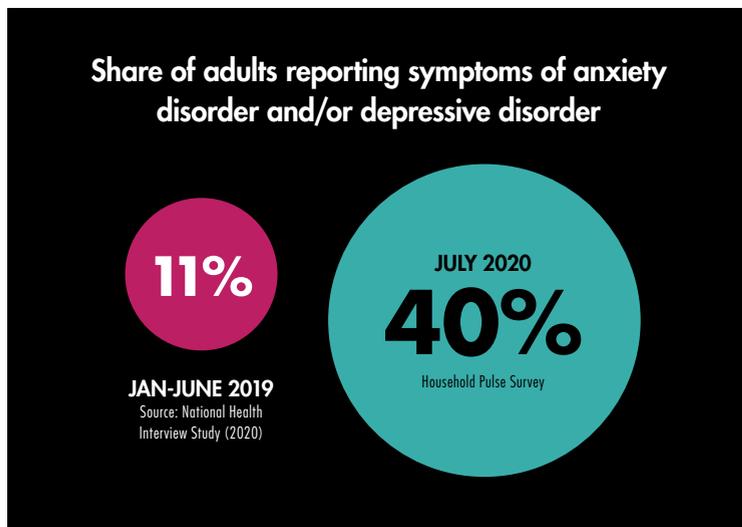
At Cargill, all full-time and part-time employees are offered free mental health care through its Employee Assistance Program (EAP), from the first day of work, unlike many other benefit programs the company offers that require meeting a certain number of hours or days of work. She described the EAP as its core, company-sponsored mental health helpline and includes free work-life services, from financial planning to legal consultations to family caregiving referrals.

“Just like we offer vision benefits and dental benefits, this is our mental-health benefit. Employees, as well as their immediate family members can use that program on day one,” she said.

Utilization of EAPs in the industry and at Cargill are admittedly low, about 5%,

“For many employers, offering mental health benefits is considered a nice thing to do for workers, but Cargill has realized business benefits to addressing the issue openly.”

– ANDI BLAYLOCK



perhaps because of low awareness, which is why Cargill is committed to promoting and educating workers about the program.

“We wish it were more because we know that 18% to 25% of people generally have a mental health issue. So, there’s a gap between the 5% that are using it and the 18% that probably need it,” Blaylock said.

Part of the gap between people suffering from a mental illness and getting help is the stigma that admitting to a mental health issue is a sign of weakness and a source of shame.

“There’s one statistic that I always point to that is so chilling to me, frankly,” Blaylock said, “that it takes people an average of 10 years to get help for their mental health issues from the time of initial onset of symptoms until the time that they actually get treatment.

“And so, what makes people wait for 10 years? You would never do that with a physical health condition so what is it about mental health?”

Providing mental health training to different business segment leaders is an ongoing effort of Blaylock’s. Since the COVID-19 crisis began, Cargill has begun training its teams of farm-facing employees to identify and offer resources to the farm-based customers they work with.

The challenge now and in the future is how to circulate information and resources deeper into the Cargill organization and all its employee segments, including many in the production segment that don’t have access to communication technology, like email or

the internet. One anti-stigma campaign that kicked off this past June and has generated positive feedback is based on interpersonal relationships, called “How are you doing, really?” Blaylock said the intention is to not use the phrase as a generic greeting, but rather as a means of checking on someone’s mental health status by adding “really” after the question.

The company is using the question as a catchphrase on posters circulated globally, in multiple languages and including photos of employees that have credibility and are familiar to production workers along with a quote from them about their struggles and dealing with COVID.

“The message has continued on organically, and now we use it in all sorts of messaging around coping and struggles,” Blaylock said.

TYSON UPS THE ANTE

Springdale, Ark.-based Tyson Foods Inc., through its partnership with Health Advocate, also offers its employees an EAP that includes professional counseling and guidance as part of its benefit packages.

Supplementing Tyson’s EAP to support the wellness of its employees, the company maintains a team of 95 chaplains to provide a broad swath of support to workers up and down the hierarchy and regardless of their background. Chaplain Melissa Brannan said she is part of several support groups within the company that share the responsibility of maintaining mental wellness.

“Onsite nurses, HR professionals and chaplains regularly address mental health concerns as they manifest in a variety of ways,” she said. “Our chaplaincy program has attended to the emotional, mental, relational and spiritual needs of team members for over 20 years. We provide care to front-line team members in production facilities, to truck drivers, housekeeping staff, mechanical and engineering teams, off-site workers, field staff, and corporate personnel; serving all levels of the organizational structure.”

The chaplains are committed to providing ministry and pastoral care to Tyson workers of all denominations, as well as those who choose to not claim a belief system or faith. Brannan said chaplains are accustomed to working with employees at all levels of the company.



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Maple Leaf Foods revisited and enhanced its mental health benefits program after the onset of COVID-19.

“We may be listening to concerns of one of our housekeeping professionals in one moment and then discussing the morale of an entire team with a manager or executive leader in the next,” she said.

The company also acknowledges and supports the message and efforts of World Mental Health Day each year. By doing so, companies like Tyson are supporting efforts to remove the stigma of talking about mental health by encouraging open dialogue about it in the workplace. In the wake of the pandemic, this year’s Mental Health Day was especially relevant for many more people.

“One of the ways chaplaincy addressed 2020’s World Mental Health Day at my location was to provide team members with a list of helplines for resources related to mental

health, suicide prevention, domestic violence, and addiction services,” Brannan said. “This was particularly important during COVID-19 as existing personal struggles seem to be amplified with pandemic-related stressors.”

CANADIAN CARE

Peter Neufeld’s role as vice president of leadership with Toronto-based Maple Leaf Foods Inc. involves wearing many hats. With a master’s degree in counseling and a background as a therapist, Neufeld joined the company about three years ago and was approached by Michael McCain, chief executive officer, about developing programs and identifying resources to meet the mental health needs of Maple Leaf’s employees. Neufeld spent the next year developing a strategy to meet the goal of making Maple Leaf a more psychologically healthy and safe place to work. Part of that effort included forming focus groups within the company to establish benchmarks of current perceptions and needs of employees, from the corporate level to those in the production and processing facilities. Part of the process also included partnering with Canada’s Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), a hospital specializing in treating people with mental health and addiction problems where McCain serves as a board member. Neufeld recalled McCain insisted the program not be referred to as a strategy.

“He [McCain] said, ‘Stop calling it a strategy; it’s an initiative.’ He said, ‘this is not a business, this is an initiative to help people,’ and I think that was a really good call,” Neufeld said.

Through its focus-group-based benchmarking, Maple Leaf discovered that there was a need to allocate more funds per employee specifically for professional counseling. As part of the first phase of the company’s mental health initiative, which launched in January 2020, it increased the counseling allocation from \$300 per year to \$1,500. While committing \$300 per year, per employee might seem ample, Neufeld pointed out that it was a drop in the bucket of what meaningful counseling costs today.

“When somebody has a psychological episode, they can take 10 to 14 treatments to be able to work through it and get to the point of health that they had previously,” he said,

adding that the additional cost was not meant to create a quantifiable return on investment for the company.

“This is not a business decision,” he said, “it’s a people decision.”

Improved accessibility and multiple counseling options were another need uncovered by the focus groups and part of the initial phase of the program. Employees now have three options ranging from an EAP-type of online counseling for acute situations to face-to-face, direct therapy.

Another initiative is requiring mental health training for managers and supervisors at the company.

“So, every people leader is completing a three-hour program on mental health to understand the signs and symptoms and how to support their people,” Neufeld said.

ON-FARM FOCUS

One of those people leaders is Jonathon Sawatzky, vice president of Maple Leaf Farms’

Agri-Farms business unit. He has been with the company for nearly 19 years and previously worked in pork processing, prepared meat and has led capital projects. For the past six years, he’s worked in the agribusiness business unit, overseeing the production of thousands of hogs.

While programs specific to mental health are a priority for the company today, he remembers his early days in the industry when talking about the topic just wasn’t part of the culture.

“You show up every morning, you go hard and it’s all about getting the job done,” was the mentality in those days, he said.

As a supervisor responsible for the people whose care for Maple Leaf’s livestock begins with piglets and ends when they pass the hogs on to the next stage, Sawatzky is aware there might be some people working with animals who are challenged by mental health issues. He makes a point of being a good listener and maintaining a servant-leader mentality, instilled in him by his father, when an employee has

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Monica Kramer McConkey specializes in providing counseling and teaching coping skills to people in the agriculture sector struggling with issues like stress, anxiety and depression.

the courage to approach him about an issue.

“They’re not coming to me for me to talk,” he said, “they’re coming to me because they trust me, and they want someone to listen. I’m not a trained counselor by any means, so my role is listening and providing the resources.”

Sometimes the work itself can be a trigger for a mental health event. In cases when an animal or a group of animals becomes ill, sometimes livestock workers in the barns have to make the difficult

decision to euthanize them or work with a veterinarian to put down unhealthy animals.

“For our team members whose job is to care for those animals, that’s a tough, tough event,” Sawatzky said.

When euthanizing related to an animal disease is necessary at any of Maple Leaf’s farms, which occurred as recently as 2019 when there was an outbreak of Porcine Epidemic Diarrhea, the company enlists a specialty team to perform the euthanasia so the teams working on the farms raising the pigs don’t have to be a part of the procedure.

That is something the company does for mental health reasons, Sawatzky said.

Sawatzky also holds bi-weekly townhall meetings with his entire business unit, intended to address uncertainties employees might have about their jobs and their personal safety, especially since the pandemic began.

It has been through interactions like these that Maple Leaf workers learn more about the implementation of worker safety protocols, which include screening of all employees before they enter the workplace and asking them to take their own temperatures before commuting to work. Maple Leaf has implemented a series of on-farm programs to ensure worker safety specific to COVID-19, providing those employees with the peace of mind that their risks at work have been minimized.

“There have been many comments from our team members saying how they felt safer to be at work than away from work,” Sawatzky said.

PANDEMIC PANIC

Soon after launching the first phase of Maple Leaf’s initiative, COVID-19 engulfed the world, which required Neufeld to modify the company’s mental health initiatives.

“What we recognized very quickly is everybody was actually at risk of having acute problems,” he said. “And so, we had to jump and pivot to [focusing on] wellness and prevention and do it really quickly.”

McCain realized the importance of developing that program rapidly and challenged Neufeld to launch it within a week for both salaried and hourly employees. A week later, a series of expert speakers were scheduled to discuss for 15 minutes, topics such as depression, isolation or how to deal with the stress of COVID-19 and how it impacted employees and their families. A question-and-answer discussion followed each regularly scheduled, virtual presentation.

The simple format of the initiative, which is referred to as “You are not Alone,” was a hit with employees, Neufeld said, and what was planned to be a 10-part series had grown to 17 as of this past December with plans of continuing it.

In the coming year, the company plans include training about 40 people outside of HR to become “Mental Health Champions,” as part of a partnership with Queens University.

“I think people feel like there’s now a culture where this is more accessible to be yourself,” Neufeld said.

COMPASSION FATIGUE

The concept of compassion fatigue, and the effects of it, has long been a condition health care workers more commonly struggled with. But according to Monica Kramer McConkey, a rural mental health specialist whose Eyes on the Horizon Consulting company works with the Minnesota Ag Centers of Excellence and Farm Bureau Business Management, this has become more common among farmers and ranchers. Unchecked, this can lead to chronic stress and have negative physical and mental health consequences.

In general, it is experienced by those helping people or animals in distress; it’s an extreme state of tension and preoccupation with the suffering of those being helped. It can create a secondary traumatic stress for the

person helping those people or animals, which in the meat industry is often veterinarians or farmers, but it can include livestock handlers and those working in slaughtering operations.

“When you’re experiencing the death of animals, you’re experiencing the difficulty that their owners are going through, the emotion that comes with all of that is very relevant to your work,” McConkey said.

“There have been recent studies and research articles that have come out about the increased rate of deaths by suicide among veterinarians. That’s something that many universities are starting to pay attention to in their training programs [for veterinarians].”

She said symptoms of compassion fatigue often are similar to those associated with depression or anxiety.

“In an attempt to cope with feelings, people experiencing this may turn to alcohol or drugs as a way of dulling those feelings of depression or anxiety,” she said. “So, you may see this with staff or people coming to work hungover, coming to work already having used alcohol or drugs or they may be calling in sick more often.”

Especially due to the stresses related to the pandemic, supervisors and co-workers should pay attention and be on the lookout for symptoms. Changes in basic behavior over time can be an indication of something deeper going on and shouldn’t be ignored.

“When you start to see changes from that baseline functioning, then it’s time to check in with them and just find out what’s going on and what’s happening behind all of this change,” McConkey said. “The difficulty is sometimes it’s very chronic, so this change doesn’t happen overnight. It happens over months.”

Effectively coping with compassion fatigue includes recognizing the symptoms and offsetting some of the likely causes with other,

more positive activities and daily self-care, from eating healthier to getting enough sleep and exercise. Taking paid time off is important too and allows for enjoyment of hobbies and spending time with family and friends, she said. Talking to people who understand the effects of working in a stressful or traumatic role is also helpful in coping with the daily angst. 

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