

One benefit may lower the cost of all the others — Worksite wellness



Worksite wellness, while it is still the new kid on the block when it comes to benefits packaging, is already proving to be a valuable benefit.

Studies have shown that well-implemented wellness programs result in higher productivity, lower absenteeism and greater job satisfaction among employees.

How does worksite wellness work?

Because employees' ability to work is directly associated with their physical health, employers are beginning to encourage participation in wellness programs. Currently, more than 81% of larger businesses (50 or more employees) offer some form of a health promotion program, with the most common elements being exercise, back care and stress management.¹

These programs appear to be effective. More than 80% of participants in an employer-provided wellness program reported some improvement in their health:

- 51% report feeling better
- 50% now eat healthier
- 47% lost weight
- 42% now exercise regularly
- 41% report a higher energy level

A study by the American Heart Association suggests that employees are most likely to participate when given online tools, incentives to participate and time during the work day to participate. Employees value programs that are easy, accessible and flexible. Expensive programs are not always necessary. Even a team decision to work together on improving health conditions may be adequate. Elements that are most valued by employees include:

- Access to an on-site gym
- Discounted gym membership
- Walking courses
- Flu shots
- Nutritious food choices
- Weight loss programs
- Health information²

The benefits of a worksite wellness program

While worksite wellness seems more of an issue among corporate America, it is also a valuable benefit ministries can offer their employees. Average Americans spend one-third of their day at work.³

For many ministers, since their job is also a calling, the work week is even longer.

While the following is not a definitive list of reasons ministries can benefit from a wellness promotion, it does suggest that ministries have as much reason to focus on wellness issues as secular organizations.

1. It pays for itself while benefiting employees.

- Every \$1 invested in worksite wellness saves \$4 in healthcare costs and \$5.82 in reduced absenteeism.
- Every \$1 spent preventing heart attacks and strokes saves \$9 on treatment.⁴
- Only 90 minutes of physical activity per week for sedentary adults over the age of 50 reduces medical costs the following year by an average of \$2,000.⁵

According to Dr. Steven Aldana, founder and CEO of WellSteps, 35-40% of an employer's total healthcare costs are directly related to the combination of poor diet, sedentary lifestyle and obesity. So **offering wellness benefits that improve employee health may be an effective strategy for reducing the cost of insurance coverage.**

2. It could reverse the trend of rising healthcare costs.

- Healthcare costs are rising at double the rate of inflation annually. As a nation, we spent \$2.3 trillion in 2007 (\$7,600 per person) and are projected to spend \$4.2 trillion in 2016.
- Most chronic illness is preventable. According to the Surgeon General, 75 cents out of every \$1 spent on healthcare treats chronic disease.
- A 50-year-old man has an 89% chance of living to age 65 without developing coronary heart disease, stroke or diabetes if he is physically active and is not overweight.⁶

Obesity, high blood pressure, high triglycerides and low HDL (the good cholesterol), and insulin resistance have been identified as key factors in the development of heart disease, stroke and diabetes. Yet all of these risk factors are controllable, if not preventable. A worksite wellness program encouraging lifestyle changes that control these risk factors could help employees lower their risk for chronic disease.

3. A culture of health is necessary if we are going to adopt more healthy lifestyles.

Worksite wellness programs are successful because our lives tend to revolve around work. Through the worksite, communication and health efforts can be organized and employees can provide one another support and encouragement. In other words, the workplace can become a community with a wellness culture.



And since most Americans receive health insurance through the workplace, it behooves the employer to encourage healthy behaviors that could lower the health risk of his or her group. Promotion of wellness improves the quality of life of employees and lowers the financial burden of health benefits for employers.

What is the best way to promote wellness in the workplace? Typically, wellness initiatives are offered at three levels: (1) awareness; (2) lifestyle change; and (3) the environment.⁷

The majority of wellness programs offer education as well as motivation, which is a combination that seems to be working. Knowledge gives employees the desire to change, and the worksite environment gives them the support to affect change.

4. The ministry is one of *the* most stressful vocations.

The ministry has been found to have some of the highest health risk factors of any occupation, possibly because of the stress level inherent to the ministry. For example:

- While ministers serve as counselor for their congregations, they rarely have someone they can confide in.
- Their schedules are often erratic, far exceeding 40 hours per week.
- Illnesses, death, weddings and funerals — all high stress — are a normal part of their job.
- Because they often work with limited funding, they are frequently in a position of “wearing too many hats.”
- The division between personal life and work often breaks down until it’s difficult to separate the two.

Evidence is mounting that stress is a primary cause of chronic health problems. It has been associated with cardiovascular disease and musculoskeletal disorders, as well as psychological disorders and impaired immune function. For the minister, extended periods of undue stress can lead to burnout.

Wellness programs can make a big difference in lowering stress. Stress management programs, coupled with physical exercise, can help ministers lower stress and extend their years of productive ministry.

5. Ministry employees tend to feel guilty about taking care of themselves.

Employees of ministries are not only trained to put others before themselves, they have a natural tendency to think of their own well-being last. A worksite wellness program sends the message to employees that it’s okay to take care of themselves. It gives them guidance and helps them focus with health risks that are specific to their needs. And it creates a culture of wellness that can encourage them to continue developing healthful habits, even when the going gets tough.

How do you measure success?

The goal of any worksite wellness program is for employees to develop a wellness mindset, which Donald B. Ardell, Ph.D., describes as “a conscious commitment to exceptional health status through personal advancement efforts.”⁸

While physical health is one way to measure wellness, it isn’t the only way. The outcomes that will benefit your productivity and the culture of your ministry include happiness, fulfillment, good lifestyle choices and high energy. And as a bonus, you’re also likely to see lower healthcare spending among your employees.

¹ The Wellness Councils of America.

² American Heart Association. *Worksite Wellness Survey*.

³ M. Pencak. *Workplace health promotion programs: an overview*. 1991.

⁴ Georgia Stroke and Heart Attack Prevention Program.

⁵ Health Partners Research Foundation.

⁶ S.G. Wannamethee, et al. *Lifestyle and 15-year survival free of heart attack, stroke, and diabetes in middle-aged British men*.

⁷ Pencak.

⁸ www.seekwellness.com.