



Michele Holleran
Founder and CEO

The Mental Health Crisis Facing Women in Senior Living

By Michele Holleran, MBA, PhD

Stress and anxiety among senior living staffs are at an all-time high, and they are not going away anytime soon. A shocking number of women are leaving the workforce due to COVID-19, according to the Women in the Workplace report issued by McKinsey and Company and Sheryl Sandberg's Lean In Foundation. According to the report, typically 15% of women contemplate downshifting out of their careers, but as a result of COVID, that number has risen to almost 25%. Last September alone, almost 865,000 women over age 20 dropped out of the workforce. Add this to the current churn rate of almost 42% on average in senior living, and the voluntary turnover rate goes through the roof, even at a time of record-setting unemployment numbers.

In senior living, the silent crisis of burnout and stress has taken its toll on female executives and front line workers, who make up nearly 80% of the employee population. Worries at work and at home have been exacerbated by the pandemic. With half the school districts nationwide now holding remote classes, working mothers (especially those who do not have partners to share the load) have had to straddle caregiving at work with caregiving at home. On top of these responsibilities, those in the sandwich generation are also caring for frail parents who may be vulnerable due to pre-existing conditions and their age to COVID. Some have been lost to the pandemic, and there has been little opportunity to properly grieve a loved one in their lives. A recent survey conducted by Holleran among female executives in senior living suggests that up to 70% of this population are feeling all-time high stress levels. Over half of those responding to the survey stated that they have been remiss in practicing good personal selfcare techniques during the pandemic. One senior leader shared "It is a very difficult time for women in our field right now. We are trying to balance families, parents, staff and peers. We are trying to lead our teams through uncharted times."



Never has there been a more important time for senior living leaders to get in touch with the mental health challenges of their co-workers.

On senior living campuses all over the country, employees and residents have been experiencing loss. Coming to work each day contributes to the feeling of grief and pain.

Many of the job stresses faced by women, including making life and death decisions, are felt to a heightened degree by women of color, whose families and communities are disproportionately affected by COVID. For example, Black females are more than twice as likely as women overall to cite the death of a loved one as a significant personal challenge according to the Women in the Workplace report. The report goes on to caution: “If women leaders leave the workforce, women at all levels could lose their most powerful allies and champions. Organizations and society at large will lose valuable advocates for culture change and inclusion.”

Another issue of concern especially in the field of healthcare and senior living is a phenomenon known as “moral injury”, a term originating from the military. It refers to the psychological distress resulting from having to go along with policies or procedures at work that may violate someone’s moral or ethical code. The seed of “moral injury” could be guilt or shame of having to tell a resident’s loved one that the senior living campus did all that they could to save the resident’s life from COVID, when in fact, the employee doesn’t believe that to be true. When employees, especially women, experience this type of disconnect, it can lead to mental health challenges such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and even suicidal ideation.

Never has there been a more important time for senior living leaders to get in touch with the mental health challenges of their co-workers. Below are some potential ways to offer support and a forum for candid feedback.

Take the pulse of the team

An anonymous survey by a third party research firm is a fast and efficient way to get information. You could choose to do your own poll, but mental health is a touchy subject for most employees, so you will want to proceed with caution on this. Utilizing a third party is a better approach because survey responses are anonymous and privacy is protected. Holleran offers a quick 12 question on-line survey that can be taken via computer, tablet or smart phone. The survey provides a foundation to learn more about the stressors experienced by employees and how well they feel supported by their work community. By using the results of this type of survey, campuses can proactively adjust policies and support systems to alleviate stress and create a more wellness-focused work environment.

Institute best practices

Schwartz Rounds provide a structured forum where all staff, clinical and non-clinical, come together regularly to discuss the emotional and social aspects of working in healthcare. These forums allow for the sharing of insights around the challenges and rewards intrinsic to providing care, and are not intended to focus on the clinical aspects of the work. Many staff will attempt to avoid participation, since avoidance is a core symptom of trauma. Reaching out



to those staff who claim to be “too busy” or repeatedly “not available” is critical, because they may be the ones most in need of these conversations.



Managers should be on the look-out for those colleagues whose mental health seems fragile. Sharing stories and vulnerabilities will be easier if a trusting relationship exists between supervisors and direct reports. Most people find that support from their colleagues and immediate line manager protects their mental health. They may also welcome sensitive discussion and support from a suitably experienced person such as the campus chaplain. One senior living leader noticed that her direct report was missing work often, and took the time to sit down and inquire if anything was wrong. The direct report confided that she was experiencing a domestic violence situation. The leader referred her to a shelter and supported her through a difficult transition process. None of this would have happened without the leader asking the all-important question: is anything troubling you that I can help with?



Conducting a human resources audit to find out how many employees are utilizing mental health support resources offered by the organization’s Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is another recommended approach. If the utilization rate is low, find ways to communicate what is available to encourage more employees to participate. Are there parenting resources, health check-ups, mental health apps that can be downloaded onto smart phones, or on-campus trauma support counseling services? Over 45% of workers in a study by the International Council on Active Aging said their company had not shared available mental health resources with them. How clear and frequent is information given to the staff about any changes in HR policies or overlooked resources?



Consider replacing standard annual performance reviews with regular “check ins” that allow managers and direct reports to have empathetic and constructive dialogue with one another. Institute new approaches that encourage candid conversation on a more frequent basis. Ask employees directly what they most appreciate and look forward to at work, and find ways to build in more of what contributes to their passion about their job. Supervisors should continuously look for ways to give positive recognition and praise to employees who are putting their lives on the line for the benefit of residents. “Good communication” consistently ranks low on Holleran employee engagement studies, and one reason for the low ranking is that supervisors do not spend enough time interacting with their direct reports one-on-one.

Many senior living campuses have issued bonuses to workers who consistently show up for their shifts. There is a national movement to raise the hourly minimum wage to \$15.00. These initiatives show sensitivity to workers’ economic needs. However, now more than ever, an investment in relationship-building is what is most required. Some supervisors in senior living are not well-educated in how to build relationships. Because they come from a background of



If self-care was a luxury in the past for female leaders, today it is a lifejacket in a sea of change and uncertainty. Making our own mental health a priority is key.

technical competence and a focus on regulatory excellence, they may be lacking in emotional intelligence. Highly competent managers who have low EI can benefit from guidance from a savvy business coach or a more seasoned campus leader who can efficiently guide them through the relationship maze. Not only will the manager benefit, but her direct reports will as well.

Prepare for the long-haul

With more turnover especially among women in the workforce anticipated over the next several years, now is the time to be thinking about innovative strategies like job-sharing, the hiring of older workers, promoting and supporting diversity and shifting more responsibilities to volunteers. Additionally, many campuses are embracing technology to expediate caregiving to seniors. Voice activated and smart technologies are proliferating nationwide, with new solutions entering the market almost daily. The issue of workforce stability should be front and center on every campus' strategic plan and finding creative ways to address it. Workforce stability is dependent on creating a campus culture that acknowledges the mental health challenges facing senior living employees. Find ways to identify "culture gaps" between what the campus wants to become and where it is today. Holleran offers a culture assessment which quickly and accurately captures perceptual data about how well the campus treats its people, how decisions are made, and how much tolerance for change exists. Such an assessment offers a baseline of information which helps the organization plan for its aspirational future.

Put on your own oxygen mask

If self-care was a luxury in the past for female leaders, today it is a lifejacket in a sea of change and uncertainty. Making our own mental health a priority is key. Use the Employee Assistance Program resources available to you and encourage others to do the same. Resist playing the role of the "strong" one who has every answer to every challenge—spread around the decisionmaking and share power as much as possible. Many leaders have found themselves emotionally fragile during these times and to admit that to ourselves is the first step in finding solutions. The solutions are out there, but having other thinking partners by your side is helpful. Find a wolfpack of other women who want to band with you to find answers. Reach out to resources such as your LeadingAge state affiliate, Argentum, your local chamber of commerce and other organizations who offer female support groups. For more information about Holleran or the content of this article, please contact Michele Holleran, Founder and CEO at michele@holleranconsult.com or visit the Holleran website at www.holleranconsult.com.

