Handling Mental Health Issues in the Workplace

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The days are becoming shorter. Winter, in all its gloomy grayness, has touched the landscape. The holidays and their legion of attendant stresses are fast approaching. The economy is in turmoil and the nation is gripped by anxiety. It’s enough to make anyone feel a little depressed or crazy!

It feels like a fitting time to discuss mental health issues in the workplace.

The National Institute of Mental Health tells us that:

- **One in four of adults in the U.S. at any one time are suffering from a diagnosable mental disorder**
- **Mental disorders are the leading cause of disability in people ages 15 – 44**

Mental health parity:

When Congress passed the financial bailout package in October, it contained legislation regarding mental health parity for American workers. Washington State has also passed mental health parity legislation.

The Society for Human Resource Management has supported mental health parity legislation, acknowledging the impacts that employees’ mental health issues have on companies and the workplace.

How do mental health issues directly affect the workplace?

Some of the obvious costs include:

- Increased absenteeism
- Lowered productivity
- Increased risk of other illnesses
- Safety risks
- Employee turnover

Mental Health America reports that:

- **90% of employees agree that their health issues spill over into their professional lives, directly impacting their job performance**
- **Mental health conditions are the second leading cause of absenteeism**
How can managers and employers recognize the signs of mental health disorders?

The first thing you can do about mental health issues in your workplace is to learn to recognize signs of depression, anxiety and substance abuse.

Some of the signs of mental illness include:

- Marked personality changes
- Inability to cope with problems
- Prolonged depression or apathy
- Feelings of extreme highs and lows
- Dramatic changes in eating or sleeping
- Excessive fears or anxieties
- Strange or grandiose ideas
- Excessive anger, hostility or violence
- Working slowly and missing deadlines
- Appearing numb or emotionless
- Chronic lateness or absenteeism
- Forgetting directives, procedures and requests
- Talk of suicide

How should employers handle performance problems that stem from mental health issues?

It is, of course, never your role as an employer to diagnose an employee. While it is important to familiarize yourself with signs that performance issues may be related to a mental health condition, avoid making and acting upon assumptions.

- Always treat performance issues as performance issues only.
- Be prepared and know what steps to take in the event that an employee addresses the subject of having a mental health condition.
- When you must discuss performance problems with an employee you believe to be troubled, it is best to control your own emotions by planning the conversation ahead of time.
- Be prepared for the employee’s reaction and that it might be an emotional one, whether it is surprise, anger, denial or defensiveness. Give the employee time to talk, and remain focused on the performance issue itself.
- If the employee does bring up the fact that they are experiencing mental health issues, make
Handling Mental Health Issues in the Workplace - West Sound Workforce

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sure that you are aware of and can tell them about resources in the community, such as Kitsap Mental Health.

- Post important phone numbers where employees can see them, such as on the lunchroom bulletin board. Don’t forget about 211, the United Way’s referral phone number.
- Treat your employee just as you would an employee with any medical condition. They have the same right to privacy regarding their situation as any other employee who is ill.

The Americans with Disabilities Act:

Remember that if your company is large enough, employees with mental health conditions will be protected by the Americans with Disabilities Act, requiring you to provide them with reasonable accommodations.

These accommodations might include such things as:

- Flexible hours during period of recovery
- Time off for counseling and doctor appointments
- Frequent leave during times of hospitalization or incapacitation during recovery
- Easy access to supervision
- More frequent feedback and guidance about performance

How can employers alleviate the impact of mental health issues?

Beyond handling employee mental health issues on an individual, case-by-case basis, the best thing you can do for your company is to also address this subject on a more general scale.

- **Insurance:** Review your insurance plan and make sure that your employees have good mental health coverage. Early treatment lowers the cost of care and gets employees back to work quickly.
- **Wellness plans:** Many companies today have a wellness program, since prevention is known to lower health care costs. Incorporate mental health into your company’s wellness program, if you have one.

The importance of removing the stigma of mental health conditions:

It is important to create a company culture that understands mental health issues and removes the stigma attached to them.

Many times an individual puts off seeking help for a mental health condition far longer than they would for another health condition, driving the cost of treatment and the time for treatment much
Many mental health conditions are treatable. However, it is still more acceptable to admit you need time off to recover from your heart attack than to recover from clinical depression. But both are very treatable, and neither should mark an employee for the future.

Would you hire Mike Wallace, Abraham Lincoln, Buzz Aldrin, or Ellen DeGeneres? All have recovered from depression.

There is a long list of famous accomplished people who have coped well with mental illness. We would all gladly have them in our organizations. It’s an important lesson to remember when someone on our own staff is faced with that same challenge.

**Conclusion:**

As we business owners today struggle to keep up with rising health insurance costs, we may groan as more benefits are added. However, we’re smart to listen to the human resource professionals who tell us that preventing and treating the mental illnesses of our workers will, in the long run, save us money and make our workplaces more efficient and productive.

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