

Mental health

Managing depressed employees: What supervisors need to know

Given the American Psychiatric Association's estimate that one in six people will experience depression at some time in his or her life, chances are significant that you'll deal with the issue among your staff (or personally) during your managerial career. Yet despite its prevalence, don't expect team members to readily come forward.

"Most depressed employees will never admit to their managers that they are depressed," says David Reischer, human resources manager at LegalAdvice.com. "A large part of the reason for their silence is due to the stigma many employees experience around mental illness." Thus, it often falls upon managers to recognize the situation. While signs of depression vary greatly, possible indicators include:

- A noticeable drop in productivity.
- Missing deadlines.
- Absenteeism or tardiness.
- Lack of focus.
- Moodiness.
- Sluggishness.
- A tone of hopelessness or sadness.
- Difficulty making decisions.
- An unkempt appearance.
- Excessive worrying.
- Unusual preference for social isolation.

Approaching the subject

It may not be the easiest conversation, but a private talk in which a manager expresses concern and compassion can prove helpful.

"If you see something, say something," says Erica N. Reed, LCSW-C, who works with organizations on creating mental wellness in the workplace.

She suggests stating observations and asking questions. (Remember, you're not qualified to diagnose the employee or tell someone you think he might

have a mental health problem.) Open with something like "I've noticed some changes in your work lately. Can you tell me a bit about what's going on?"

During the meeting, Reed says to avoid pacifying statements such as "Everyone goes through stuff; you'll get over it" or "Don't worry, everything will be OK." Instead, try validating the employee's concerns, such as by saying "I hear that things are hard for you right now. How can I support you?"

Offering assistance

If your company offers an EAP or other supportive services, provide the information. Ease fear by stressing the confidentiality of such programs. Then, brainstorm together additional actions that may prove beneficial.

For example, health expert Samantha Morrison of Glacier Wellness notes that allowing a depressed employee to work from home on occasion can be the difference between getting no work done and a productive day. "Although they may have trouble getting out of the house on a certain day, they may still be able to work if given the right circumstances."

Besides working with the individual to perhaps lighten a workload or switch to more independent projects during a time when interacting with others proves difficult, managers do everybody on staff a service by treating mental health as a serious issue deserving of attention.

"A company should have regular mental health reviews with their employees to discuss work life and things that the organization can do to improve mental health. This type of intervention could occur on an annual checkup basis. Also, a company should have flexible sick and vacation day policies that allow an

employee to have a balanced life outside work," Reischer says.

"Talk about mental health before it's identified as a problem," Reed adds. "By creating an environment where employees feel they can express their concerns and challenges without fear of judgement or demotion, you will improve the culture of the organization and facilitate employees seeking help when needed."

Mind the ADA

When you're faced with an employee who may be suffering from major depression, your legal antenna should go up right away. That's because the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) gives qualified disabled people special rights in the workplace. Here's what a manager needs to know about the ADA:

The ADA covers more than just people who are deaf, blind or in wheelchairs. Technically, people are "disabled" under the ADA if they have a physical or mental impairment that "substantially limits one or more major life activities," such as sleeping, standing or working.

Depending on the person's condition, that can include ailments such as epilepsy, diabetes or arthritis, plus mental impairments, such as major depression and bipolar disorder.

The law also says that if an employer treats a person as being disabled, then that person earns protection under the law, even if he or she wouldn't otherwise qualify. That's why, when faced with an employee or applicant who may be disabled, it's important for managers to talk with HR about how to respond.