

Vitality!

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Many managers will agree that it's not the meetings, deadlines, workloads or customer and senior management demands that they find stressful, it's effectively handling people problems – especially those stemming from mental health issues.

Working with a Mental Health Challenge

WITH ONE IN FIVE WORKERS EXPERIENCING MENTAL ILLNESS, MANAGERS ARE INCREASINGLY EXPECTED TO BE ON THE FRONT LINE OF MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE.

Work can be good for our mental well-being. It makes us feel productive and fulfilled, providing stimulation and opportunities for us to reach our potential. In addition, our workplace offers us a sense of community and support.

Work can also be detrimental to our mental health. Increased workloads, long hours, difficult customers or coworkers, economic uncertainties, shifting priorities, competing work and personal demands and unrealistic expectations can take their toll on us all. Currently, one in five Canadian workers say they're depressed¹, although that figure is probably higher due to the stigma and stereotypes attached to mental illness. Add to that figure those employees suffering from other mental health issues such as anxiety and substance abuse that are further exacerbated by managers can be faced with some difficult performance and behavioural problems.

Mental Health in the Workplace

Mental illnesses can have devastating effects on people, careers, relationships and quality of life. They can also have a negative effect on the workplace by reducing productivity, increasing absenteeism and long-term disability rates, hurting customer service and causing resentment in team members forced to pick up the slack.

Mental illness is “characterized by changes in behaviour, thinking or mood (or a combination of the three) and is associated with substantial distress and general dysfunction over an extended period of time”². There are a wide range of symptoms because there are a wide range of illnesses, including:

- Mood disorders (major depression and bipolar disorder)
- Anxiety disorders (panic attacks, phobias, obsessive compulsive disorder)
- Personality and psychotic disorders
- Eating disorders
- Substance dependency and other addiction issues

Early indicators that someone may be experiencing a mental health challenge can include but are not limited to:

- Frequent lateness or absences
- Lack of cooperation or a general inability to work with colleagues
- Decreased productivity
- Increased accident or safety problems
- Frequent complaints of fatigue, headaches or unexplained pains

We all have bad days and experience difficult periods in our lives. As a result, most of us have exhibited some of these behaviours on occasion. However, someone who may have an underlying mental illness exhibits some or all of these over a period of time. Another key indicator is when someone begins to act in an uncharacteristic manner. For example, a normally energetic person becomes lethargic and withdrawn for a long period of time or someone who is usually easy going and reserved may start having outbursts of anger or making grandiose claims about their abilities. Please note these or other changes in behaviour may or may not indicate mental illness. Not all employees exhibiting some or all of these

signs is mentally ill and it may be more appropriate when employee performance is impacted, to simply address that you or other staff have noticed some changes in their behaviour. That way the issues can be addressed without making premature assumptions about what the behaviour is caused by.

Managing mental health in the workplace

While every employee is responsible for his or her own health, every employer is responsible for creating and maintaining safe work environments that foster productivity. And as every manager knows, productivity can be severely compromised when workers are hurt or sick. As a result, one of your main roles is to create and maintain a work environment that not only supports productivity, but also the physical and mental well-being of employees.

Effectively dealing with mental health concerns can be challenging. Most of us know what to say and do when a colleague breaks a leg or needs surgery, but we can be at a loss for words when the situation involves depression, anxiety, panic attacks or post-traumatic stress – which together account for 95 percent of mental illness in the workplace.

A recent national survey by Ipsos found that 84 percent of managers and supervisors feel a responsibility to intervene when an employee is showing signs of emotional distress yet only 31 percent have received training to identify and help employees showing signs of depression or other mental illness. That’s an improvement from 2007 when only 18 percent reported having received training, but many managers still feel uncomfortable dealing with people problems stemming from mental health issues.

What’s difficult is that while a manager may be trained to identify the signs of a possible mental health issue, he or she may feel reluctant to intrude on an employee’s personal problems. And many employees are equally reluctant to discuss or divulge their personal problems – including the status of the physical and/or mental health. Despite the potential hesitancy on both sides, one thing is clear: a situation involving mental illness may not resolve itself. Both you, as a manager, and the employee need to take action before the problems and illness escalate.

Addressing the situation

The first step in resolving any behavioural or performance issue is to meet with the individual privately to discuss your concerns and what solutions might be needed. *It is not your role to diagnose or*

counsel. It is to offer your support and understanding, direct the individual to available resources, such as your company's employee and family assistance program (EFAP), and provide any appropriate workplace accommodations.

Prepare for the meeting

Discussing someone's health and/or behaviour can be delicate and requires tact and sensitivity. It helps to prepare for your meeting by:

- Finding out what resources your organization can offer to employees in distress. Have this information at hand.
- Fully understanding your organization's accommodation policies and procedures.
- Being sensitive to and knowledgeable about mental health issues. Stereotypes and fear are the biggest barriers people with mental illness face.
- Thinking about how you can use your leadership skills to make the person feel secure in discussing your concerns.

Remember that this is not a performance review, rather it's about finding a way to get a productive employee back on track BEFORE a formal performance review or disciplinary action is needed.

Talking with the employee

- Begin by stressing the person's strong points and the contributions he or she has made to the team and to the organization. It's important to make the person feel valued before raising your concerns.
- Assure the employee that the discussion is confidential and that you intend to work with him to get him back on track. Focus on solutions.
- Keep focussed on the issues as productivity concerns rather than mental health issues.
- Ask open-ended questions.
- Listen. Listening is not the same as counselling. Be open to the employee wanting to explain their situation.
- The employee might not want to disclose the specifics of any personal problems with you, preferring to do so with a counsellor or doctor. Respect their feelings. Your aim is that your employee seeks professional help.

- Provide access to your EFAP or referral to community services.
- Assure the employee EFAP services are confidential.
- Discuss next steps such as any necessary accommodations.
- Set a time to meet again to review.
- Document the meeting fully.

Don't:

- Be accusatory
- Give a pep talk
- Say "I've been there." Even if you have, everyone's experience is different.
- Do not diagnose. For example, "It's obvious you're depressed..." Remember, your role is to support, accommodate and direct to available resources.

If the employee becomes tearful and upset

If this happens, it doesn't necessarily mean you're not handling the situation correctly. It probably means the individual is in crisis and feeling overwhelmed by their situation and fearful of disciplinary action for poor performance.

- Reassure the employee that his or her job is safe and you are offering help and support.
- Stay with them and give them a chance to recover.
- Reassure them that it's okay to be upset and that you are listening. By simply offering to listen and not judge sends a powerful message and your employee will be more open to accessing the supports you provide.

Accommodating the employee

While the Human Rights Code requires employers to accommodate disabilities, in the case of a mental health issue, accommodation might be as simple as a temporary flexible work schedule or adjustment of shifts, giving time off to seek treatment, reassigning job duties or moving the employee from a busy, noisy area to a quieter workspace. It's what's reasonable for the employer and helpful to the employee.

If the employee needs to be absent for short periods or for an extended time, inform your team without revealing any confidential information. This can head off feelings of resentment at having to assume extra work or that someone is receiving preferential treatment. Try to call the absent employee occasionally as this can help him or her feel supported by the organization and by you and may make returning to work easier for everyone.

After any illness, physical or mental, an employee may need to return to work gradually to prevent a relapse. Consult with the employee about the best way to facilitate their return to full time work and peak performance. Take the time to welcome the employee back.

Healthy workplaces, healthy workers

There are several things organizations – and managers – can do to create and maintain a healthy work environment and support employee mental health.

They are:

1. Ensure that your demands are realistic, both for you and the employee.
2. Increase employee control over their work.
3. Reduce effort and tension. For example, encourage and facilitate work-life balance and pay attention to perfectionist tendencies in team members and yourself.
4. Increase rewards and professional growth.
5. Offer informational sessions on health and wellness topics. Make sure employees know there is a confidential employee and family assistance program available to them at no charge.
6. Encourage good relationships among members of your team and promote open communication.

The vast majority of people with mental health problems are, with the support of their doctors, employers and families, capable of continuing to work productively. A manager who promotes the mental and physical well-being of his or her staff will reap the benefits in productivity, engagement, morale and creativity.

References

1. Ipsos Reid
2. Public Health Agency of Canada

About Vitality!

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