Managing Depression in the Workplace

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What does it cost you to have someone absent from work, 3 or 4 days a month, due to depression? How much over 12 months? What are the costs of decreased productivity, effects on sales and lowered staff morale as the remaining team attempts to cope and cover for someone who is away every month? It costs millions of dollars annually.

But what is depression? How can you recognise it?

WHAT IS DEPRESSION?

According to the Diagnostic & Statistical Manual IV – Revised (DSMIV), depression is a constellation of symptoms that affects a person's mood and thinking ability. The diagnosis is dependant upon the number of symptoms, how long the symptoms have been present for, and their severity[1].

RECOGNISING DEPRESSION

At work or home, most people can learn to recognise symptoms of depression, and can offer assistance to their friend, colleague or family member. However, some people have an incredible ability to mask their feelings and can appear confident and happy, so be careful.

Symptoms of depression that you may be able to observe in others:

- An inability to make decisions
- Withdrawal – perhaps avoiding receiving and making phone calls, or face-to-face contact
- Avoiding social events
- Tiredness and fatigue
- Under-eating or over-eating
- Flattening of the facial features, with loss of animation, skin colour and muscle tone
- Increased anger, irritability or frustration
- Short-term memory loss – misplacing keys, wallet, sunglasses and/or an inability to remember little and big things that need to be done
- Teariness

The following symptoms may not be so easily spotted:

- Inability to cry
- Feelings of helplessness and/or hopelessness
- Loss of confidence and self-esteem
- Inability to see a future for oneself
- Loss of sex drive
- Anhedonia – loss of pleasure in things normally enjoyed
- Thoughts of suicide

WHAT CAUSES DEPRESSION?

Numerous factors may contribute to depression, including a genetic pre-disposition based on a family history of depression in your parents, grandparents and so on[2].

Combinations of the following factors will increase the likelihood of depression:

- **Poor Nutrition**
  You need to eat well to feed your brain and maintain a good mood! Protein foods such as eggs, fish, chicken, meat, nuts, and chickpeas are particularly good "brain foods" [3].
- **Alcohol**
  Reduce alcohol intake. Alcohol is a depressant to the nervous system and makes a poor bedfellow as sleep worsens with long-term alcohol use.
- **Stress and Trauma**
  When someone has experienced excessive levels of stress or trauma, depression often goes hand in hand.
- **Low Self-Esteem**
  Naturally, this can be depressing.
- **Health**
  Serious illness often has an accompanying depression. Diabetes, hormonal imbalance, kidney problems, heart problems, cancer… it stands to reason that people become frightened, anxious and depressed.
- **Exercise**
  Exercise increases endorphin levels and endorphins are known as the happy hormones. People who exercise daily have high amounts of endorphins in the blood stream, and this claim is supported by research that shows exercise does reduce depression[4].
- **Personality factors**
  A low level of internal resilience or inability to bounce back following stress, can also contribute to depression. The more optimistic one is, the better one is able to handle life's stressors.

WORKPLACE FACTORS THAT MAY CONTRIBUTE TO DEPRESSION

- **Deadlines**
  Pressure to achieve, and little or no support or acknowledgement of problems, can cause susceptible people to have escalating stress levels and as frustration grows, depression may result.

- **Management or "Boss" Style**
  Managers and CEOs can be domineering, arrogant, narcissistic or just plain sociopathic. Known as "monsters" in the workplace, they bully, frighten and alternatively cajole leaving their victims a mess, or turning them into replicas of themselves.
- **Failure**
  Failure that continues relentlessly causes huge dints to self-esteem and confidence which can over time, be a contributing factor to depression.
- **Lack of knowledge or skills**
  When people are not properly trained, they may find it difficult to manage the role or other people on the team. This creates conflict and constant stress for the Manager.
- **Unmet and unspoken work expectations**
  Everyone has expectations, and if they are not met, it can cause stress. By extension, every employee has expectations of their work place. The Work Expectations Profile looks at 10 key issues, for example: Autonomy, Balance, Career Growth and Diversity. If only half your work expectations were met, you would not be happy, would you? And you may feel betrayed which causes resignations.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

If you recognise the symptoms for yourself, go and see a psychologist. Lots of great help is available. If at work, then see what you can implement from the suggestions below:

- **Educate first.** Get information on depression and provide it to staff. Call your local psychologist who will be delighted to provide a training session on Depression at your workplace.
- **Get Work Expectations Profiles completed.** As an employer, when you know the priority of work expectations for your employees, and meet many of those expectations, it can solve many issues that could contribute to depression as well as reduce staff turnover.
- **Demonstrate you care.** Show you care on a regular basis. Just by stopping and having a quick chat in the corridor for a few minutes, you will demonstrate empathy and support for staff or colleagues.
  Team or staff member depressed? Don't offer time off, as many depressed people will only slip further into the depression, through lack of motivation, lack of achievement and apathy. Caring and concern means that the depressed person has irrefutable evidence that they are worthwhile, rather than hopeless or worthless.
  Provide a list of psychologists or organisations for EAP or consultation.
  Other treatment methods may include acupuncture, Neuro Linguistic Programming, hypnosis, stress management training and Rational Emotive Therapy.
- **Alternatives to alcohol.** Offer water, soft drink, juices and healthy snacks at Friday afternoon drinks or social occasions, instead of alcohol and deep fried fatty foods.
- **Incorporate Wellness Lunchbox sessions.** You can cover a variety of topics: nutrition, Pilates or yoga, tai chi, healthy meals, stress management and meditation.
- **Physical Activity.** Get people into health clubs and have team sporting events.
- **Training.** Provide training in how to communicate when conflict occurs, how to get people to listen to you and Management training on managing difficult people!
- **Resource Library.** Provide a library of books and resources around workplace issues, self help books, creativity and innovation, communication.
- **Profiles reduce conflict.** Get profiles done to understand each other and reduce conflict, with DiSC, Myers Briggs Type Indicator and other personality tools[5].
- **Humour** in the workplace is absolutely vital. If everyone has lost their sense of humour, you will all become depressed.

In summary, adopt a whole of life approach in the workplace, and at home. Work/life balance is a buzz word and it is plain common sense! Depression is an illness, it is treatable, and the sooner you get help, the better it is for everyone.

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4. http://www.beyondblue.org.au/index.aspx?link_id=9.379 On Depression and exercise www.beyondblue.org.au is a great resource website for those experiencing depression and those who wish to learn more about it.
5. Work Expectations Profile and DiSC Behavioural Profiles are available through Sales Champions and Narelle Stratford. Visit www.saleschampions.com.au
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