Depression in the Workplace – What it Looks Like and How to Help

What's at Stake?

Depression affects tens of millions of workers across the U.S. and Canada, with a cost to companies of more than $50 billion annually from absenteeism, loss of productivity and medical expenses. By 2020, depression is projected to rank second only to heart disease as the leading cause of disability worldwide. The toll on the workers themselves is often immeasurable.

What's the Danger?

Workers who are depressed often feel tired, unmotivated and have difficulty concentrating. Depression can cause problems with decision-making abilities and an increase in errors and accidents. Workers with depression also miss work more often and experience a higher level of presenteeism, where a worker is present at work but less focused and productive than workers without depression.

Due to the stigma of mental illness, many people find it hard to talk about their depression and seek help for it. Getting help is important, because if left untreated, depression can lead to job loss, damaged relationships, substance abuse and suicide.

How to Protect Yourself

While employers and co-workers are not expected to diagnose or treat depression, knowing the signs and what steps to take next can have a significant impact on affected employees and the workplace overall. Sometimes just knowing there is someone concerned about them provides the extra support needed for depressed workers to seek out help.

Symptoms of depression include:

- Persistent sadness and a withdrawing from friends and family,
- Fatigue and irritability,
- Lack of enthusiasm and loss of interest in things most people find enjoyable,
- Problems with sleeping, including insomnia or sleeping all the time,
- Excessive crying,
- Chronic aches and pains, and
- Thoughts of suicide or death.

At work these symptoms might manifest themselves in:

- Decreased productivity.
- Morale problems.
- Lack of cooperation.
- An increase in incidents and injuries.
- Absenteeism.
- Talking about being tired all the time.
- Complaints of unexplained aches and pains.
- Alcohol and/or drug abuse.

If you think you might be suffering from depression, make an appointment with your doctor and talk to him or her about how you're feeling. You can also check to see if your company has an employee assistance program or other in-house service.

If you suspect a co-worker is experiencing depression, talk to that person confidentially. Be supportive and encourage them to talk to their doctor, an on-site occupational health nurse or an employee assistance professional who can refer them to the right kind of treatment.

Final Word

Help for overcoming depression is available and the success rate for treating depression is very high. Today's medications and therapies can help between 80 and 90 percent of those with

depression.