Focus On: Mental Health

Chances are you, or someone you know, has been touched by mental illness. For some, a mental illness is a temporary state caused by a specific stressful, traumatic or sad event, such as the death of a parent, job loss, or even a seemingly happy event, like a birthday or sending a child off to college. For others, mental illness is something they deal with throughout their life.

In the last few years there have been several celebrity suicides and other famous or influential people who have come forward to speak about their struggles with mental illness. Of course, their struggles are no different or worthier of paying attention to than anyone else's, but this has opened the door for many to feel more comfortable talking about their own mental health experiences, seeking help, and reaching out to help others.

The information that follows has been gathered from several different sources with the hope that it helps you better understand mental health issues, identify behaviors in your employees that could signal they are dealing with a mental illness, and ways to reach out and help them.

What You Need to Know

Mental health includes a person's emotional, psychological and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices. Mental health is important at every stage of life, from childhood and adolescence through adulthood.

Research shows that many mental illnesses are caused by a combination of the following three factors:

1. Biological – genetics, infections, brain injury
2. Psychological – emotional, physical, or sexual abuse, neglect
3. Environmental – loss of a loved one, divorce, low self-esteem, anxiety, social expectations

Contrary to popular belief, springtime is the time of the year when people are most likely to commit suicide – and not the holidays. Researchers aren't sure exactly why suicide spikes in the spring. "It's still rather a mystery," says Christine Moutier, MD, chief medical officer at the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. Seasons with less sunlight are more challenging for people with mood disorders, particularly seasonal affective disorder, but the statistics on suicide rates stand opposite of that fact.

Know the Signs

There are often clues that someone is experiencing mental health problems. Here are **6** of them.

1. Work performance has declined without a clear reason. A once very driven employee suddenly fails to hit his or her goals, frequently calls in sick, or shows up late.
2. Their mind seems to be on other things or they are distant and not fully engaged in what's going on around them. This could mean missing deadlines or not contributing as much as they used to in meetings.
3. They seem very anxious and can't seem to relax or focus on their work.
4. They're negative or apathetic about work or life in general.
5. They get mad or lash out for no apparent reason.
6. They are taking risks or being careless when it comes to their safety. You might even suspect they have a drug or alcohol problem.

What You Can Do

If you are concerned about an employee's well-being, talk to them in a private place and express your concern and offer help in the form of referring them to your organization's Employee Assistance Program or temporary leave options offered. Talk to them about their workload and schedule – maybe a change in their schedule would help them get through a rough time, or maybe they need some time to attend therapy sessions or doctor appointments.

If you aren’t sure what to do or you aren’t comfortable talking to them, talk to your human resource person and ask them to reach out to the employee.

You can also mental health information with your employees in general such as these seven ways to help maintain positive mental health:

1. Get professional help if you need it
2. Connect with others
3. Stay positive
4. Get physically active
5. Help others
6. Get enough sleep
7. Practice and develop coping skills

Realize though that it can be hard to do these things when you are depressed, have anxiety, or other mental health issues, but even incorporating a few of these tips can make a difference.

Help is available in many different forms, from different people, and in different places. If a worker is dealing with mental illness, be supportive and don’t be afraid to reach out to someone who you think is struggling – you can make a difference.