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Depression in the Workplace



One of Canada's most common illnesses is also the least understood

Everyone feels "blue" or sad from time to time. It's a normal life experience. But when these emotions increase in intensity, persist for more than a few weeks, and start to interfere with a person's life, it may signal depression. No amount of "cheering up" can make the depression go away; no amount of exercise, vitamins or vacation can make it disappear. That's because depression is an illness, not a weakness.

Depression is widespread

Depression can affect men and women of any age, education, economic or social status. It occurs at an alarming rate. Nearly three million Canadians will experience depression at one point in their life. Most often, it affects people in their working years, between the ages of 24 and 44.

Help can make a difference. Four out of five people with depression can be successfully treated.

The impact of undiagnosed depression

Depression touches everyone, from friends and family to co-workers. While at any one time 1 in 20 employees can experience depression, if it's left undetected, depression leads to decreased productivity and increased sick days. The Canadian Mental Health Association is helping people in the workplace gain a better understanding and recognition of the nature, scope and signs of this debilitating illness.

Recognizing the signs of depression

We have all felt depressed at times, becoming frustrated and discouraged with life. But when the depressed mood persists for a few weeks, deepens, and/or starts interfering with everyday life, it may be clinical depression.

Depression may begin gradually or suddenly. To others, a depressed person will appear more withdrawn than usual. Although no two people will experience this illness in exactly the same way, there are common signs of depression. In the workplace, a person with depression will start to exhibit any number of the following signs:

Personal changes

- Irritability/hostility
- Withdrawal from, or extreme dependence, on others
- Hopelessness/despair
- Slowness of speech
- Chronic fatigue
- Alcohol/drug abuse

Workplace changes

- Difficulty in making decisions
- Decreased productivity
- Inability to concentrate
- Decline in dependability
- Unusual increase in errors in work
- Being prone to accidents
- Frequent tardiness, increased "sick" days
- Lack of enthusiasm for work

Someone who has been experiencing several of these signs for more than a few weeks should seek help.

The consequences of undiagnosed depression

People with depression must live with their feelings 24 hours a day. But it's in the workplace that they will try hardest to mask their illness. Fear of being reprimanded, dismissed or stigmatized for feeling "down", and feelings of shame will prevent someone from seeking help.

Some people try to cope through alcohol and/or drug abuse. Unfortunately, too many people still believe that depression can be handled alone with a "stiff upper lip". Unexplained "sick days" can make family and co-workers resentful, and may, in some workplaces, even result in dismissal. Once depression is recognized, help can make a difference for 80% of people who are affected, allowing them to get back to their regular activities.

The truth is, if depression is not treated, it can last for months or even years. A person can become so withdrawn they simply can't get out of bed. Feeling isolated from family, friends and co-workers and unable to seek help, 15% of people with severe depression commit suicide.

How to seek help for yourself or someone you know

If, after reading this information carefully, you feel that you or someone you know may be experiencing depression, the first step is the most important.

Remember, help is the key: 80% of people with depression can recover if they get help. Do not try to diagnose the problem yourself. That is for a trained health professional to do.

If you think a co-worker may be experiencing depression, you should continue to show them respect. Help make the person aware of their value in the workplace and to their colleagues. Offer encouragement and pay genuine compliments every day.

Finally, use the trust between you to encourage the person to seek help and/or continued treatment. Encourage your co-worker to speak to their health professional, an on-site occupational health nurse, or your employee assistance professional. These people can direct a person with depression toward appropriate treatment such as counseling, self-help groups, family and peer support, or provide referrals to specialists who may recommend medication or psychotherapy. Used alone or in combination, these treatments are highly successful, but they will only work if the depressed person takes the first step.

Seek help immediately-it can make a difference.