Managing Employees Who Have Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder

With 3.3 million American adults diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder, the possibility exists that you may be managing someone struggling with the condition. As with many disorders, however, sufferers are often reluctant to bring up the subject out of fear that others won’t understand or will make judgments about their mental state. A leader who notices symptoms may need to subtly do what he or she can to deal with the situation.

What is OCD?

OCD is an anxiety disorder that traps people in a cycle of repetitive thoughts and behaviors. Performing certain rituals alleviates anxiety, but the action must be performed again when obsessive thoughts return. For instance, many sufferers are very afraid of germs. They may wash their hands to the point of bleeding or scrub a table so much that the finish wears away. Others may keep checking that a door is locked or that a report is errorless, even when they know that doing so is making them late and that rechecking is senseless.

Helping someone with OCD

Medication and cognitive therapy can help an OCD sufferer, so understand the importance of the employee keeping medical appointments. If you observe behaviors indicating that OCD might be present, do what you can to reduce the person’s anxiety. Try not to sneeze or cough around him or her, and don’t be offended if the person doesn’t want to shake hands or is quick to use hand sanitizer after physical contact. Avoid putting the person in business situations where frequent handshaking is expected, such as the greeter at a job fair. If the person seems compelled to keep his or her office arranged a certain way, avoid disturbing the setup: borrow a stapler from someone else, don’t pick up framed photos on the person’s desk to get a closer look, and ask where to put items such as weekly reports.

Finally, realize that stress is one of the main triggers of OCD symptoms. When the workplace is tense over an impending deadline, encourage staff members to take a 10-minute walk. A bit of fresh air can do wonders for everyone.