

Managing a depressed employee: What supervisors need to know

Given the American Psychiatric Association's estimate that one in six people will experience depression at some time in his or her life, chances are significant that you'll deal with the issue of a depressed employee among your staff (or personally) during your managerial career. Yet despite its prevalence, don't expect team members to readily come forward.

"Most depressed employees will never admit to their managers that they are depressed," says David Reischer, human resources manager at LegalAdvice.com. "A large part of the reason for their silence is due to the stigma many employees experience around mental illness." Thus, it often falls upon managers to recognize the situation. While signs of depression vary greatly, possible indicators include:

- A noticeable drop in productivity.
- Missing deadlines.
- Absenteeism or tardiness.
- Lack of focus.
- Moodiness.
- Sluggishness.
- A tone of hopelessness or sadness.
- Difficulty making decisions.
- An unkempt appearance.
- Excessive worrying.
- Unusual preference for social isolation.

Approaching the subject

It may not be the easiest conversation, but a private talk in which a manager expresses concern and compassion can prove helpful.

"If you see something, say something," says Erica N. Reed, LCSW-C, who works with organizations on creating mental wellness in the workplace.

She suggests stating observations and asking questions. (Remember, you're not qualified to diagnose the employee or tell someone you think he might have a mental health problem.) Open with something like "I've noticed some changes in your work lately. Can you tell me a bit about what's going on?"

During the meeting, Reed says to avoid pacifying statements such as "Everyone goes through stuff; you'll get over it" or "Don't worry, everything will be OK." Instead, try validating the employee's concerns, such as by saying "I hear that things are hard for you right now. How can I support you?"

Offering assistance

If your company offers an EAP or other supportive services, provide the information. Ease fear by stressing the confidentiality of such programs. Then, brainstorm together additional actions that may prove beneficial.

For example, health expert Samantha Morrison of Glacier Wellness notes that allowing a depressed employee to work from home on occasion can be the difference between getting no work done and a productive day. “Although they may have trouble getting out of the house on a certain day, they may still be able to work if given the right circumstances.”

Besides working with the individual to perhaps lighten a workload or switch to more independent projects during a time when interacting with others proves difficult, managers do everybody on staff a service by treating mental health as a serious issue deserving of attention.

“A company should have regular mental health reviews with their employees to discuss work life and things that the organization can do to improve mental health. This type of intervention could occur on an annual checkup basis. Also, a company should have flexible sick and vacation day policies that allow an employee to have a balanced life outside work,” Reischer says.

“Talk about mental health before it’s identified as a problem,” Reed adds. “By creating an environment where employees feel they can express their concerns and challenges without fear of judgement or demotion, you will improve the culture of the organization and facilitate employees seeking help when needed.”

Case in Point: Failure to accommodate depressed employee costs \$75,000

A Dallas-area defense contractor has agreed to settle charges it violated the ADA when it refused to accommodate an engineer’s depression.

The engineer began working at L-3 Communications in 2008. He experienced two bouts of depression, taking leave both times to seek treatment. The second episode ended when the man’s doctor certified him able to work. The employer had a psychologist perform a fitness-for-duty examination. The psychologist also concluded the engineer was fit to return to work.

Rather than hire him back, L-3 gave the engineer a choice: resign or be fired.

He quit but filed a complaint with the EEOC alleging the employer discriminated against him because of his disability. Attempts to resolve the dispute during the EEOC conciliation process failed and the EEOC filed suit on the man’s behalf.

Instead of going to trial, L-3 elected to settle. Under the agreement, the company agreed to pay the engineer \$75,000. Additionally, the employer agreed to train employees working in the engineer’s department about employer responsibilities under the ADA.