

TerranearPMC Safety Share

Week of October 14, 2013 – Mental Health in the Workplace

The fact is, many workers are faced with mental health problems. Results from the U.S. National Co-morbidity Survey, a nationally representative study of Americans ages 15 to 54, reported that 18% of those who were employed said they experienced symptoms of a mental health disorder.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), at any given time, there are 121 million people in the world that suffer from depression. Another startling statistic from WHO, is that between 10 and 20 million people around the world have attempted suicide, with an estimated 815 000 people committing suicide each year. It seems that while mental health or the well being of humans around the world is an issue that must be recognized, even in today's more acceptable society there is still a stigma attached to having mental health issues. As such, employees are reluctant to seek treatment; especially in our current economic climate as there is a fear of jeopardizing their employment. At the same time, managers may want to help but aren't sure how to do so. And clinicians may find themselves in unfamiliar territory, simultaneously trying to treat a patient while providing advice about dealing with the illness at work. As a result, mental health disorders often go unrecognized and untreated, thus not only damaging an individual's health and career, but also reducing productivity. Adequate treatment, on the other hand, can alleviate symptoms for the employee and improve job performance. But accomplishing these aims requires a shift in attitudes about the nature of mental disorders and the recognition that such a worthwhile achievement takes effort and time.

The term mental health is commonly used in reference to mental illness. However, knowledge in the field has progressed to a level that appropriately differentiates the two. Although mental health and mental illness are related, they represent different psychological states. Below are brief definitions.

Mental health is a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), it is estimated that **only about 17% of U.S adults are considered to be in a state of optimal mental health**. As a side note, there is emerging evidence that positive mental health is a contributing factor for improving medical ailments as well as speedy recoveries.

Mental illness is defined as "collectively all diagnosable mental disorders or health conditions that are characterized by alterations in thinking, mood, or behavior (or some combination thereof) associated with distress and/or impaired functioning." Depression is the most common type of mental illness, affecting more than 26% of the U.S. adult population. It has been estimated that by the year 2020, depression will be the second leading cause of disability throughout the world, trailing only coronary heart disease.

Depression is a medical illness that affects your mood, behavior, thinking and health. Depression is a common illness experienced by nearly one in 10 Americans each year. Depression does not discriminate; it affects men and women, young and old, and people of all races, cultures, and incomes. It is normal to feel sadness or grief when a loved one dies, if you lose your job or a

relationship ends. But sadness and depression are not the same. While feelings of sadness will lessen with time, depression is an illness that can continue for months, or even years without treatment.

There are two main symptoms of depression: 1) Persistent feelings of sadness or anxiety, and: 2) loss of interest or pleasure in usual activities that lasts for more than two weeks.

Other signs and symptoms include:

- Changes in appetite that result in weight loss or gain unrelated to dieting
- Insomnia or oversleeping
- Loss of energy or increased fatigue
- Restlessness or irritability
- Feelings of worthlessness or persistent guilt
- Difficulty thinking, concentrating, remembering or making decisions
- Ongoing body aches and pains, or problems with digestion that are not caused by physical disease
- Increased drinking, cigarette smoking, or using prescription or illicit drugs
- Thoughts of death, suicide or attempted suicide ó if this is the case seek help immediately

Because employee mental health can result in serious consequences, WHO recommends that employers need to take steps to be aware of their workers moods and to have a policy that deals with these issues. To maximize the effectiveness of the policy, a number of different strategies should be developed. Strategies can be divided into five main categories: (1) increasing employee awareness of mental health issues; (2) supporting employees at risk; (3) providing treatment for employees with a mental health problem; (4) changing the organization of work; and (5) reintegrating employees with a mental health problem into the workplace. The specific strategies adopted depend on the need of the business and its employees and the resources available.

Often, a supervisor will be one of the first to perceive something wrong, such as a noticeable decline in performance. At that point, it would be appropriate for the supervisor to talk with him/her to find out if anything is wrong. Of course this type of discussion can only be productive if both persons have established a certain level of trust so that the employee feels comfortable enough to speak while the supervisor can encourage the employee to seek appropriate help. The bottom line is that you cannot force anyone to get help. So, while employers have a right to expect that work will be adequately performed, an employee's well being needs to be considered. The employer needs to let the worker understand that there are services available and that he/she has an obligation - to themselves as well as their fellow-workers ó to seek help. Otherwise, there is a strong likelihood that the problem will not go away or fix itself, while he/she becomes less reliable in the field; thus placing others in jeopardy due to an inability to function properly.

Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls; the most massive characters are seared with scars ó Khalil Gibran (Lebanese Writer/poet)