

WHAT TO DO WHEN AN EMPLOYEE IS DEPRESSED

A Guide for Supervisors

DEPRESSION AFFECTS THE WORKPLACE

As a supervisor, you may notice that some employees seem less productive than usual—they may often call in sick or arrive late to work, have more accidents, or just seem less interested in work. These individuals may be suffering from a very common illness called **clinical depression**. While it is not your job to diagnose depression, your understanding may help an employee get needed treatment.

Each year, depression affects at least 17.6 million adults, often during their most productive years—between the ages of 25 and 44.

Untreated clinical depression may become a chronic condition that disrupts work, family, and personal life.

Depression results in more days in bed than many other ailments (such as ulcers, diabetes, high blood pressure, and arthritis) according to a recent large-scale study published by the Rand Corporation.

In addition to personal suffering, depression takes its toll at the workplace:

- At any one time, 1 employee in 20 is experiencing depression.
- Estimates of the cost of depression to the nation in 1990 range from \$30-\$44 billion. Of the \$44 billion, depression accounts for close to \$12 billion in lost work days and an estimated \$11 billion in other costs associated with decreased productivity.

There is, however good news. More than 80% of depressed people can be treated quickly and effectively. The key is to recognize the symptoms of depression early and to receive appropriate treatment. Unfortunately, nearly two out of three people with depression do not receive the treatment they need.

DEPRESSION IS MORE THAN THE BLUES

Everyone gets the blues or feels sad from time to time. However, if a person experiences these emotions intensely or for two weeks or longer, it may signal clinical depression, a condition that requires treatment.

Clinical depression affects the total person—body, feelings, thoughts, and behaviors—and comes in various forms. Some people have a single bout of depression; others suffer recurrent episodes. Still others experience the severe mood swings of bipolar disorder—sometimes called manic-depressive illness—with moods alternating between depressive lows and manic highs.

Symptoms of Depression Include

- Persistent sad or “empty mood
- Loss of interest or pleasure in ordinary activities, including sex
- Decreased energy, fatigue, being “slowed down”
- Sleep disturbances (insomnia, early-morning waking, or oversleeping)
- Eating disturbances (loss of appetite and weight, or weight gain)
- Feelings of hopelessness, pessimism
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, helplessness
- Thoughts of death or suicide; suicide attempts
- Irritability
- Excessive crying
- Chronic aches and pains

- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, making decisions

that don't respond to treatment

Symptoms of Mania Include

- Inappropriate elation
- Irritability
- Decreased need for sleep
- Increased energy and activity
- Increased talking, moving, and sexual activity
- Racing thoughts
- Disturbed ability to make decisions
- Grandiose notions
- Being easily distracted

In the Workplace, Symptoms of Depression Often May Be Recognized by

- Decreased Productivity
- Moral problems
- Lack of cooperation
- Safety risks, accidents
- Absenteeism
- Frequent statements about being tired all the time
- Complaints of unexplained aches and pains
- Alcohol and drug abuse

Get an Accurate Diagnosis

If five or more of the symptoms of depression or mania persist for more than two weeks, or are interfering with work or family life, a thorough diagnosis is needed. This should include a complete physical checkup and history of family health problems as well as an evaluation of possible symptoms of depression.

DEPRESSION AFFECTS EMPLOYEES

John had been feeling depressed for weeks though he didn't know why. He had lost his appetite and felt tired all the time. It wasn't until he couldn't get out of bed any more that his wife took him to a mental health professional for treatment. He soon showed improvement and was able to return to work.

Depression can affect a worker's productivity, judgment, ability to work with others, and overall job performance. The inability to concentrate fully or make decisions may lead to costly mistakes or accidents. In addition, it has been shown that depressed individuals have high rates of absenteeism and are more likely to abuse alcohol and drugs, resulting in other problems on and off the job.

Unfortunately, many depressed people suffer needlessly because they feel embarrassed, fear being perceived as weak, or do not recognize depression as a treatable illness.

TREATMENTS ARE EFFECTIVE

Mary couldn't sleep at night and had trouble staying awake and concentrating during the day. After visiting the doctor and being put on medication for depression, she found that her symptoms disappeared and her work and social life improved.

As many as 80% of people with depression can be treated effectively, generally without missing much time from work or needing costly hospitalization.

Effective treatments for depression include medication, psychotherapy, or a combination of both. These treatments usually begin to relieve symptoms in a matter of weeks.

WHAT CAN A SUPERVISOR DO?

As a supervisor, you can:

- Learn about depression and the sources of help.
- Familiarize yourself with your company's health benefits. Find out if your company has an employee assistance program (EAP) that can provide onsite consultation or refer employees to local resources.
- Recognize when an employee shows signs of a problem affecting performance which may be depression-related and refer employees appropriately.
- When a previously productive employee begins to be absent or tardy frequently, or is unusually forgetful and error-prone, he/she may be experiencing a significant health problem.
- Discuss changes in work performance with the employee. You may suggest that the employee seek consultation if there are personal concerns. Confidentiality of any discussion with the employee is critical
- Recognize that a depressed employee may need a flexible work schedule during treatment. Find out about your company's policy by contacting your human resources.
- Remember that severe depression may be life-threatening to the employee, but rarely to others. If an employee makes commitments like "life is not worth living" or "people would be better off without me," take the threats seriously. Immediately call an EAP counselor or other specialist and seek advice on how to handle the situation.

What Can a Supervisor Say to a Depressed Person?

"I'm concerned that recently you've been late to work often and aren't meeting your performance objectives...I'd like to see you get back on track. I don't know whether this is the case for you, but if personal issues are affecting your work, you can speak confidentially to one of our employee assistance counselors. The service was set up to help employees.

PROFESSIONAL HELP IS AVAILABLE FROM:

Physicians
Mental health specialists
Employee assistance programs
Health maintenance organizations
Community mental health centers
Hospital departments of psychiatry or outpatient psychiatric clinics
University or medical school affiliated programs
State hospital outpatient clinics
Family service/social agencies
Private clinics and facilities

Source:

National Institute of Mental Health