

## Addressing mental health in the workplace is good for all

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It wasn't so very long ago that employees were expected to "leave their personal lives at the door" of the office. Have a sick child? That was your problem, not your boss's. And a personal call using your office telephone was equated with theft of company time. Quite simply, your employer didn't want to hear about your personal life or problems.

I'm thankful that we have come a long way since those days. In many companies, for example, sick days have been replaced with PTO—paid time off—that can be used at the employee's discretion. Instead of being forced to lie about the reason for calling off work when stuck at home with a feverish child, many employees can now take that time off guilt-free. And while making personal calls from work isn't always welcomed in the office, it's no longer considered a reason for invoking the employee discipline process—at least not in most workplaces.

We still have a long way to go on one front, however. Most employers struggle with how to handle mental health problems in the workplace. Many simply avoid addressing the issue, considering it one of those personal matters in which they shouldn't get involved. But it's a business issue that impacts productivity, morale and sometimes even safety.

Let's start with the easier problem to address—workplace stress. The Mental Health Survey published in 2017 by Mental Health America (formerly the National Mental Health Association) surveyed more than 17,000 employees across 19 industries; 33% reported sometimes, often or always calling off work due to stress. The same approximate number in those workplaces identified themselves as "always actively looking for work" elsewhere. The highest rates of stress were found in the manufacturing, retail, and food and beverage industries. These are bottom-line concerns, because absenteeism, reduced productivity and lack of engagement all hurt the profitability of an organization.

The stressful nature of jobs can't always be changed, but the way we manage the people who perform them can. While millennials get a bad rap for supposedly needing constant praise, the truth is that we all need positive feedback and support in the workplace. The MHA study found approximately half of employees in "unhealthy workplaces" perceived a complete lack of support and recognition from management.

The same study also found that "supportive and reliable leadership seemed to translate into a workplace culture that fostered supportive relationships amongst all coworkers." In other words, when managers are supportive, the entire workplace culture improves. Obviously, being supportive will not make all workplace stress go away, but it's certainly a great place to start.

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More complicated is the issue of mental illness and its impact on the workplace. According to the World Health Organization, one out of every four people in the world will experience a mental health disorder at some point in their lives, and nearly two-thirds of those people will never seek treatment. For an employer, that means you will no doubt have people working for you at some point who are experiencing depression, anxiety, bipolar disease, PTSD or other serious mental health concerns.

Mental health disorders are protected under the Americans with Disabilities Act, but simply complying with the law isn't enough to prevent employees from experiencing the stigma that prevents them from getting the help they need. Employers need to be proactive when it comes to mental health concerns.

Because people often don't get treatment out of fear of shame or retribution, it's important for employers to be forthright about mental health and their commitment to supporting employees who might experience problems. They should discuss the topic openly and encourage employees to seek help by providing information and resources. Larger companies might provide more specific assistance through an employee assistance program, but even small employers can share details about different services and programs in their area that might be of use to the employee.

Companies should also train their managers about how to handle situations when they notice an employee experiencing mental health concerns. Too often, managers feel it's not their place to get involved in someone's personal problems, and they therefore ignore the warning signs. We've all seen the terrible stories about mentally ill employees and former employees who commit violence in the workplace—but those are the exception.

Managers should be attuned to changes in behavior or attitude that might indicate the employee needs help. By reaching out and providing support and resources, a manager can make a difference in that person's life. Improving productivity and engagement will be an added bonus.