



Work in Progress

CAREER TALK FOR WOMEN

FORBESWOMAN | 10/23/2012 @ 6:14PM | 2,531 views

Tackling Depression at Work as a Productivity Strategy

 **Judy Martin**, Contributor

Depression tops the list of health-related productivity costs in the workplace. That was the finding in a medical [study](#) shortly after the economy tanked in the 2008 recession, and it's no different now.

The annual cost of depression is estimated at \$44 billion in lost productivity to American companies according to the [National Institute of Mental Health](#). The accelerated pace of work due to expanding technology can feed stress and anxiety in the workplace, but depression is a different animal. It's a clinical diagnosis "with specific criteria, which severely impact a person's ability to function." It can thwart an employees' ability to concentrate, be effective and stay healthy enough to hold down a job.



Depression (Photo credit: Wikipedia)

“Some companies will only tune into the effects of these strains when they experience negative outcomes like losing a customer or losing key talent,” says Clare Miller, Director of the [Partnership for Workplace Mental Health](#), a program of the American Psychiatric Foundation.

Companies that measure engagement and morale, Miller says, will be more likely to identify this “pain” earlier, and take steps to intervene. “My sense is that companies are intuitively concerned about this “new normal” and the long-term impact of unsustainable pace.”

In a joint project, The Partnership for Workplace Mental [Health](#) and [Employers Health](#), an Ohio-based employer coalition, are designing a new workplace human resources toolkit. It will help employees identify warning signs of depression, and help decrease the stigma associated with depression.

“Many employers understand the tremendous human and financial burden of depression, but the big challenge is getting people to reach out for help,” says Miller.

Workplace Communication

Getting messages across to employees that help is available, is the first step. Such communication is a crucial part of workplace culture in a competitive global marketplace, says Fran Melmed of [Context Communication Consulting](#). She specializes in workplace health communications, and is well aware of the challenge.

“If you look at the stressors employees face, downsizings, job insecurity, economic insecurity, doing more with less, doing jobs we’re not fully trained for, etc.; emotional well-being doesn’t get the necessary attention it needs,” says Melmed.

Melmed says when depression or another emotional stress comes knocking at the door, employees might be unaware that the company offers professional and confidential counseling service.

“Building employees’ capability to make smart, healthy choices about their health and healthcare can only be accomplished by committing to on-going health communications,” says Melmed.

And on-going communications means implementing year-round strategies to help employees handle mental health, beyond the typical annual healthcare coverage review. With the “new normal” of an unsustainable pace in a global marketplace, Clare Miller, Director of the [Partnership for Workplace Mental Health](#) says, “there seems to be more openness to addressing stress and depression.”

Miller says there are two important fundamental reasons for companies to look at depression, “First and foremost is the human impact of this serious illness. Second is the huge financial impact of untreated (or poorly treated) depression.”

Due to the stigma of seeking help, Miller adds that it behooves companies to encourage help-seeking behavior. When workers finally seek help, she says, it’s generally in the eleventh hour, after a decade or more of delays.

Is employee depression on the radar of big business? Should it be?

Please share your thoughts. Connect with me on Twitter: [@JudyMartin8](#) and please visit me at [WorkLifeNation.com](#) where I write about transforming stress in an “always-on” world.

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