



Survey of US workers reveals two in five missed work due to depression—<http://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-11-survey-workers-reveals-due-depression.html>

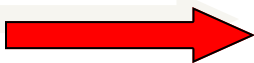
How To Cope With Depression At Work—http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/09/16/work-and-depression_n_5823534.html

Issue 39

focus

What is the Focus?

The *Focus* newsletter highlights important issues in mental health, providing timely information on a range of topics, including work-force development, supported education, organizational development and sustainability, peer-to-peer services, youth transition and system transformation. Have a suggestion for a topic? Let us know!



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Depression in the Workplace

According to The Impact of Depression at Work Audit (conducted by Employers Health, an Ohio-based employer coalition), as many as **one quarter of American workers have been diagnosed with depression** at some

point in their lives. Of those individuals, some 40% have taken time off work as a result of that depression. Beyond diagnosed depression, this study also finds that some 64% of respondents

experience cognitive difficulties in the workplace, such as difficulty concentrating, indecisiveness and forgetfulness.

Given the costs to businesses in terms of productivity, which amount to \$44 billion a year, one might assume that a concerted effort to deal with the issue of workplace depression and mental wellness would be appropriate, with

employers encouraging workers to find help and seeking ways to address the mental health needs of their workforce. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Within the same survey, **35% of managers reported receiving no training or resources to help their employ-**

ees cope with mental health challenges.

One of the reasons that workplace mental health doesn't receive the attention it deserves has to do with attitudes surrounding the issue,

and the prevalence of **stigma in the office**. Within The Impact of Depression at Work Audit, 58% of employees with depression had not revealed their status to their employer. Nearly half, 49%, were concerned disclosing their status would put their job at risk, and 24% described the notion of openly discussing their mental health as "too risky."



The irony regarding this fear of disclosure among workers is highlighted by a second study, conducted by the Canadian Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. This simple survey asked two questions: Would you inform your manager if you had a mental health problem? If a colleague had a mental health problem, would you be concerned with how work would be affected?

Responses to the former question revealed that **38% would be hesitant to disclose**, with half of those fearing that doing so would negatively impact their career. Of those that stated a willingness to disclose, a positive relationship with their manager and strong organizational policies were listed as the deciding factors.

In terms of the mental health of other workers, 64% said they would be concerned. While some of those concerns had to do with reliability and safety, somewhat surprisingly, 50% said they would be worried because of their desire to help their coworker, and 20% revealed their concern was that they would somehow make their colleague's condition worse.

Taken together, this information points to a troubling disconnect. Depression is a significant issue in the workplace that has a profound impact on the lives of individuals and the bottom line of businesses. Within the workforce, there is an understanding of the impact of depression, and empathy for those experiencing challenges. Despite these factors, workplace depression continues to go largely unaddressed.

What Can Employers Do?

Because employers wield the power in the workplace, it's essential that they take the lead in changing how mental health is treated. This should occur both on the organization-wide level, and at the level of individual relationships.

It's very important that employers develop **policies and procedures** that create a framework for how mental health will be dealt with in the workplace. When there is no explicit policy for how an employer will deal with mental health, employees are simply left to guess at how they will be treated should they come forward with an issue or seek some type of accommodation. Anxiety about disclosing an issue can even prevent workers from seeking treatment altogether, as doing so can require absence from the workplace. By creating policies and procedures, an employer makes clear that they appreciate the importance of supporting workplace mental health, and also removes any mystery or ambiguity regarding how mental health will be dealt with should a situation arise.

While policy and procedure provides the outline, and makes clear what a worker can expect from their employer, it is the **individual relationship between worker and manager** that humanizes the day-to-day experience. That's why it's crucial that managers be trained to deal with workplace mental health issues. Appropriate training will equip managers with the tools and strategies they need to build trusting relationships with their workers. Having managers that are open about their understanding of mental health is also central to countering stigma. By allowing managers to create a safe space for their employees to discuss their mental health needs, employers can attain higher productivity, while also improving the health and wellness of their workforce.

What Can Workers Do?

While it would be ideal for every employer to take steps to support the mental health of their workforce, the reality is that many employers have not done so. For workers in those organizations, dealing with depression and related issues can be difficult. There are a few things that can help.

An important first step is **understanding your own mental health, and having a plan to deal with it**. What triggers your depression? What workplace situations play into that? If you have an answer to those questions, you can anticipate an issue before it develops, and come up with a strategy. It's also important to know what your employer's policies are. Does employer-provided insurance have specific coverage for mental health? Are there other services available? What are the rules surrounding leave? Once you have a sense of your own issues and the resources and boundaries associated with your job, you can use that information to navigate the workplace.

Try to take one day at a time, and if necessary, one small task at a time. If you need a break, go ahead and take one. Stepping away when you need to, whether it's for five minutes, an hour, or a day, can help prevent you from getting overwhelmed. Take advantage of the people that are available to support you, like family and friends, coworkers that you feel comfortable with, or peer supporters, if they're available.

You know yourself best, so you know when you need help. If things get too intense, it might become necessary to talk about your mental health with your boss, and it's up to you to decide if, how, or when to have that conversation. Yes, it can be intimidating to break the silence about mental health in the workplace, but you may be surprised by the degree of empathy and understanding that can accompany sharing your story.

Whether or not you end up disclosing your issues in the workplace, it's imperative that you have **compassion for yourself**, and allow yourself to do what you need to do to stay emotionally and mentally healthy at work. Sacrificing your mental health for the sake of your job may seem like the right thing to do in the short term, but if you don't take care of yourself, minor issues can become major.

The Future

It's not clear at this point how workplace depression will be dealt with in the future. Based on available research, it seems clear that employers have motivation to deal with the issue, if only because healthier workers are more productive workers. At the same time, there are many economic forces involved, and tremendous pressures on American workers. In the end, it may be an argument for empathy and compassion, as opposed to economic reasoning, that makes the difference. One can only hope that as the public conversation about depression and mental health grows more open, employers will become more cognizant of the need to address workplace depression, and accommodate the mental health needs of their workers not only because it makes economic sense, but because it is the right thing to do.





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