

*Mental health disorders are real, common and treatable. Together we can do more to help the 1 in 4 Americans who live with these disorders. Sadly, some estimates are that as many as 50 percent of people living with a treatable mental illness do not seek or receive help because of stigma, lack of information, cost or lack of health insurance. **Who is your 1 in 4?** A family member, friend, co-worker or veteran struggling with depression, ADHD, post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or substance abuse?*

Managers and supervisors are in a unique position to support their employees living with mental illness because of their opportunity for regular communication and interaction. It is critical to remember that it is not your job or responsibility to **diagnose** a mental illness, but being aware of the signs that suggest someone might be experiencing a mental illness is important in order to provide the appropriate support and resources.

How do I talk to an employee about a concern for their mental health?

You may see behavior or performance signs that suggest an employee has a mental illness. As a manager or supervisor, you have a responsibility both to the individual and the organization to take action if you suspect that this is the case. You may be able to provide the employee with an opportunity to get the support, professional help, and workplace accommodation they need so that they can continue working productively. Often the best approach is to meet with the person **privately** to talk about your concerns about their **work-related performance**.

Preparing for the meeting

- Find out what resources your organization can offer an employee who is in distress (including accommodation policies, processes, EAP). Have this information with you when you meet with the person.
- Misunderstanding and fear are the greatest barriers people face in dealing with a mental illness; be aware that your own misconceptions and fears might interfere with your ability to respond.
- Use your skills as a manager to help make the person feel safe and comfortable in the meeting. If the employee is dealing with a mental illness you will want to minimize their stress – not contribute to it. In addressing the performance issues, be honest, direct, professional and caring in your approach.

- Think about the strengths and contributions that they have made. It will be important to talk about the ways in which the employee is valued before raising areas of concern.
- Consider open-ended questions that will encourage an employee to request support or accommodation. Remember that your job is not to probe into an employee's personal life, to diagnose a problem, or to act as their counselor. Be prepared for the possibility that, while you may be opening a door to offer help, the employee may choose not to walk through that door.

Talking with the employee

- If the situation is serious enough that the loss of a job is imminent, it is important to be clear and document the meeting as a performance issue so there is no confusion.
- When possible, assure the employee that you intend to work with them to help them to try to get back on track and get the support they need. Be deliberate in establishing an atmosphere of safety and privacy in hopes they may feel more open to talking to you.
- Before assuring an employee confidentiality, check the company policy, who needs to have the information and in what form. Have a copy of the company policy available for the employee. You may want to discuss your plan with Human Resources.

It is important that you:

- Approach your concern as a workplace performance issue, be specific about what behaviors need to change and develop a plan.
- Discuss workplace accommodations that may be helpful.(ex. schedule)
- Provide access to an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or referral to community services.
- Assure the employee that meetings with an EAP provider are confidential.
- Set a time to meet again to review the employee's performance.
- Document this meeting and all additional meetings in detail.

Things you should not say or do:

- Don't offer a pep talk.
- Don't be accusatory.
- Don't say "I've been there" unless you have been there. You may not understand or relate to a mental illness, but that shouldn't stop you from offering help.
- Don't try to give a name to the underlying issue. Even if you suspect a particular diagnosis, focus on how the employee's behavior is concerning you and how you want to help them improve.
- If you learn that a specific illness is causing the behavior, don't ask what "caused" the illness.
Focus on solutions.
- Your employee may not know, or may refuse to acknowledge, that they have a mental illness. In that case, there may be little you can do to help them. Again, focusing on work performance is the best approach.

Follow-up

- Your organization's involvement doesn't end with this meeting. You'll want to follow-up with the employee, or designate someone who can follow-up on your behalf.
- Keep your notes on the meeting in a secure location. A locked filing cabinet and password-protected computers are essential to maintaining your employee's confidentiality.

Accommodations aren't "special treatment"

Accommodations are used only when someone has a functional limitation—the limitation of skills and abilities due to a disability—preventing them from performing essential duties of their job

Accommodations-

- especially those for mental illnesses—usually are easy to implement and inexpensive (most cost less than \$500 and many have no cost at all)
- may be temporary (when someone is adjusting after their return to work, for example)
- could increase the productivity of other workers
- are small adjustments that can make a big difference in the mental health of your employees.

To provide appropriate accommodation, you will need to know:

- If there are any functional limitations that could affect the person's ability to carry out the essential duties of their job.(noise, workload, space)
- What accommodations would enable them to continue to do their job effectively?
- That you and the employee understand the employer's obligations to provide accommodation.

**One of my employees has a mental illness.
How can I explain the situation to other
employees?**

The co-workers of an employee with a mental illness may come to you expressing discomfort about working with someone they suspect or know has a mental illness. Or they may approach you right before an employee is ready to return from a disability leave for a mental illness, complaining that accommodations for that employee are *special treatment*. (preferential hours or private or preferential workspace)

Privacy comes first

- First, remember your obligation to respect the privacy of your employees—a mental illness is a medical problem, so you are not free to discuss it with other employees. Your organization should have a policy respecting the privacy of employees.
- If you hear other employees discussing the details of the individual's illness you need to talk to the other employees and let them know it is inappropriate. If these conversations reveal discriminatory attitudes or could be seen to constitute harassment, appropriate disciplinary measures should be taken.
- Ask the employee with the mental illness how they want to handle questions about their illness and accommodations. Some will be very open about recovering from an illness, or taking time each week to see a psychiatrist, or trying to manage stress. Some will want to keep that information confidential, and it's their right to do so. **It's crucial that you encourage the employee to communicate with you about their needs and preferences.** It will smooth the accommodation process for everyone.

Scenario: What should you say?

Ellen has told you she has bipolar disorder, and needs to travel into the next town every Tuesday and Friday afternoon to meet with her psychotherapist. You've agreed that she'll work until 3 pm on those afternoons, and make up the time by taking short lunches and bringing work home. Two other employees approach you about "going home early;" they expect "equal treatment" and want short Friday afternoons in particular. Again, make sure you and Ellen have agreed on what she wants to tell co-workers. If you have a flex-time policy that permits flexible scheduling for workers as long as they work a certain number of hours each week, be sure to mention that policy.

If Ellen is not willing to discuss her condition, you might say:

- Ellen has appointments during office hours each week that she can't schedule for evenings or weekends, so we've set up a work schedule that lets her make up the time.
- I want everyone in the organization to work as productively as possible, and if that means that we need to reorganize your work schedule in accordance with our policies, we can talk about that.

If Ellen is willing to discuss her condition, you might say:

- Ellen has a common condition called bipolar disorder, and she gets treatment during office hours, but we've organized her schedule so she makes up the time.
- She's very open to talking about bipolar disorder; you could ask her about it if you want to know more.
- I want everyone to work as productively as possible, and if that means juggling your work schedule in accordance with our policies, we can talk about that.

If another employee is needed to fill in for Ellen the accommodation may require you to juggle the schedules of other employees, which may interfere with their own jobs. In those cases, you should discuss scheduling and duties with the affected employees to determine how best to satisfy every employee's needs.

Sources:

Mental Health America
Mental Health Works - a project of the Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario.
www.wellspaneap.org

Stigma defined as “a mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality or person: the stigma of mental disorder.”

(Source: Oxford online dictionary)

Mental illness exemplifies stigma.

Stigmas about people with mental illnesses, and those misconceptions and fears make their way into workplaces. Although the stigma around mental illness can take the form of well-meaning misunderstandings, it often results in discrimination and harassment. Remember, the employee with the problem will face the same questions you're facing, and they'll have to suffer the misunderstandings and resentments of other workers.

What We Can Do To Counter Stigma

- ✓ **Learn and share the facts about mental health** and about people with mental illnesses, especially if you hear or read something that isn't true.
- ✓ **Treat people** with mental illnesses **with respect and dignity**, as you would anybody else.
- ✓ **Avoid labeling people** by using derogatory terms such as crazy, wacko, 'schizo', loony, psycho, or nuts.
- ✓ **Avoid labeling people** by their diagnosis. Instead of saying, 'she's a schizophrenic, say, 'she has schizophrenia'.
- ✓ **Support people** with mental illnesses by helping to develop community resources.
- ✓ **Respect the rights of people** with mental illnesses and don't discriminate against them when it comes to housing, employment, or education. Like other people with disabilities, people with mental illnesses are protected under federal and state laws.
- ✓ **Teach children about mental health**, and help them realize that mental illnesses are like any other treatable health condition.

