

Intervention Strategies for Supervisors

What to do when you think someone on your staff needs mental health help

In the best of conditions, supervising staff can be a complicated and stressful role. When it appears that an employee may have a mental health problem, many supervisors are unsure what actions are appropriate and in the best interest of both the individual and the organization. The goal of this resource is to help supervisors assist employees in getting any needed services so they can be healthy and return to a productive work life. To that end, we offer the following strategies to ensure the most positive and constructive outcomes:

ESTABLISH A MENTALLY HEALTHY WORKING ENVIRONMENT

If you ask people in the workplace who have a mental health problem, “What’s the worst part of having such an illness?” many will say, “stigma.” Feelings of shame, concerns about job security, and fear of rejection by colleagues are often debilitating—and they often discourage many from seeking the help they need. Here are some tips for establishing the right environment:

- **Educate:** Employees and managers at all levels of the organization need to learn about mental illnesses, stress, wellness, what health and mental health benefits are available to them, and how to access those services. Some employers are making use of Internet and Intranet technology to provide mental health and benefit information to their employees. In fact, some link their sites to provider directories and wellness information, while others use toll-free information numbers.
- **Watch your language:** Stigma begins with hurtful labels, such as “crazy” or “nuts.” Encourage staff at all levels to discontinue such language and to start using people-first language (e.g., “a person with manic depression,” as opposed to the dehumanizing term “a manic depressive”).
- **Encourage dialogue:** Organizations that can talk candidly about mental health help set a positive tone. Create a safe environment in which staff members are encouraged to talk about stress, workloads, family commitments and other issues. Send the message that mental illnesses are real and treatable. Many people mistakenly believe that mental illness is permanent and untreatable. However, with access to appropriate treatment, the vast majority of people with mental illness achieve significant improvement and continue to lead productive lives.
- **Put your money where your mouth is:** Actions DO speak louder than words, so it is essential to invest in mental health benefits, including prevention and educational programs. Innovative employers have learned that addressing employees’ mental health needs makes good economic sense. They also recognize that they play an essential role in their employees’ mental health not only by paying for a large portion of treatment but also by creating an environment in which people feel comfortable accessing care.



LEARN THE SIGNS OF A MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEM

In the workplace, mental health problems manifest in a number of ways. Here are some employee behaviors that may be signs of a mental health problem:

- Working slowly
- Missing deadlines
- Calling in sick frequently
- Increasing absenteeism
- Expressing irritability and anger
- Difficulty concentrating and making decisions
- Appearing numb or emotionless
- Withdrawing from work activity
- Overworking
- Forgetting directives, procedures and requests
- Having difficulty with work transitions or changes in routines

These symptoms could also result when an employee has a family member suffering from a mental health problem or other serious health issue. Such situations can sometimes disrupt the employee's working hours, lead to absences, affect concentration and decrease morale as much as it would if the employee had the mental health problem.

DO NOT DIAGNOSE

As a supervisor, you cannot and should not diagnose an employee. However, you can note and discuss changes in work performance, and listen to the employee's response and concerns. If there are personal issues, suggest that the employee seek consultation from WellSpan Employee Assistance Program (EAP). The EAP can help you in encouraging the employee to seek a mental health assessment. Reminding the employee of available benefits provided by your organization at this time can also be helpful. The following website may be a useful resource:
www.wellspaneap.org

When you do intervene, remember to control YOUR emotions. It is not uncommon to be nervous about handling this type of intervention appropriately—nor is it uncommon to feel your own emotions about the situation. Perhaps you feel anger at a particular behavior or disappointment in performance, or worry about the staffer's well-being. This is normal, but to ensure the conversation goes well, plan out the content ahead.

Be prepared for surprise, anger, disagreement, defensiveness, denial or verbal attacks. If they occur, remain calm. Let the staffer express his or her feelings, but maintain control—and keep focused on the work performance—not on “personality.”

Try to avoid appraisals that are completely negative. Be constructive; point out weaknesses, but emphasize what can be

done to improve or rectify the situation. Finally, be thoughtful about the timing and location of the meeting. Make sure you have adequate time and privacy, and try to avoid interruptions.

MAKE REASONABLE ACCOMMODATIONS

To support employees who are dealing with a mental health problem, you may need to make some reasonable accommodations that will help them perform their jobs. Be prepared to accommodate the needs of staff who have “standing appointments” for mental health treatment. Some employees may need time off for treatment, and supervisors need to ensure a healthy transition back to work. Staff should also be encouraged to ask for the support they need, and supervisors should provide an environment where people feel comfortable and not judged. Contact your organization's human resources staff to find out about flexible work schedule and leave policies.

It is important to remember that making reasonable accommodations is not only good for your organization and the staff involved—it is also required by law. The American Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibits discrimination based on disability and requires employers to make reasonable accommodations. Modifying work schedules for appointments is a common accommodation.

BE PREPARED TO HANDLE EMERGENCIES

If somebody is causing problems and conflicts with other workers, deal with the problem quickly and efficiently—especially if there are concerns that the environment is becoming hostile or possibly violent. Listen to all sides, and make decisions based on the facts. Make sure your employees feel that they are listened to and that you care about them. Document accurately how you treat people fairly and consistently.

Severe mental illnesses may be life-threatening to the employee. If a staff person makes comments such as, “I wish I were dead,” or “Life's not worth living anymore,” take these threats seriously. Dial 911, take the employee to the emergency room, or contact your EAP or a mental health professional immediately to seek advice about how to handle the situation.

SEEK CONSULTATION

WellSpan EAP staff may be helpful in some of these situations and efforts. In addition, the EAP is your business partner in educating, eliminating stigma, reducing mental disorders and improving emotional well-being. Please do not hesitate to contact a client services representative at 1-866-227-6527 for assistance.