

Catching The Signs of Depression In An Employee

written by Rory Lodge | August 22, 2014



When a high profile person such as Robin Williams commits suicide the stories surrounding his death become part of the public consciousness. In some cases this can provide an opportunity for people to discuss the issue of mental illness more openly. Unfortunately for people struggling with mental illness such as depression these discussions can serve to heighten their own struggles.

Employees who are already struggling with their own feelings of depression may experience increased hopelessness, worry, fear, sadness and more in response to the news stories of Robin Williams's death. In fact calls to suicide hotlines in the US spiked in the days following Williams death and in other instances suicides or suspected suicides of well-known people have correlated highly with increased suicide attempts, this is often called the contagion effect. The pain of depression can be heightened for those who identify with the situation or person for months following the high profile death.

Do Not Miss The Symptoms

Symptoms of depression can be difficult to detect. They can come on quickly, take a long time to develop, arise and subside and linger hidden in the background. In the workplace supervisors and co-workers have excellent vantage points from which to observe and detect signs of depression if they take the time to look. While it is important to respect your employee's privacy and personal space it is equally important to provide support and assistance to a person who may be in need of your help.

Within the workplace it is not uncommon to hear the advice 'take some time to observe your employee over a few weeks to see if these symptoms remain or grow worse'. Taking the time to observe an employee over a few weeks can generally be appropriate advice. However, during a time of heightened attention waiting too long can leave your employee vulnerable. If you suspect an employee may be struggling with a mental illness take the time today to understand the symptoms so you can be prepared to provide support as soon as possible

Some Symptoms of Depression to Look For Today

1. **Decreased productivity** – Your employee may work slower, finish fewer tasks, ask for less work, make more errors that cause production delays and be unable to make decisions that enable productivity
2. **Change in personality** – An employee who changes how he/she interacts with other people, typically more withdrawn but could also be more disinterested in normal activities, disappears more, has trouble with moral or ethical questions or problems. The person may engage in more risk taking behaviour than previous and/or exhibit flashes of rage and anger. Dramatic mood swings are a common symptom
3. **Fatigues quicker or more frequently** – lack of energy and the ability to recover energy quickly, reporting feeling tired, sleeping at the workspace, zoning out during conversations. May talk about insomnia.
4. **Failure to comply or follow-through** – The employee may refuse to do a task including after first agreeing or not. Failure to comply or follow-through when asked, especially when this is not the usual behaviour.
5. **Passive and compliant** – often a depressed employee may be argumentative or fail to cooperate but being very passive and compliant and being unable to make decisions and take actions
6. **Complaints about health and more work absences**– increased complaints about physical illness and injury with no specific causes cited. Also tardiness or absenteeism, taking longer breaks, leaving early
7. **Expressions of depression and sadness:** Speaking/writing about death, suicide, feeling hopeless and that things will never improve;

If you see these signs do not approach and ask a person if he/she is depressed. Begin by inquiring about what has been happening in the person's life. Show an interest and demonstrate compassion. Do not suggest that the person cheer up and look at how good he/she has it compared to other people. If the person expresses negative feelings including hopelessness, sadness, worthlessness suggest that he/she could benefit from talking to someone about how he/she is feeling.

There are wonderful workplace 'mental health first aid' courses available across the country that can provide not only awareness of the symptoms of mental health illness but also help with strategies to help another person who is struggling. Helping a mentally ill co-worker is not only a demonstration of compassion it is also a good business strategy. An investment in training and awareness of mental illness across the entire organization can pay dividends in the future.