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Run a Regular Check on Mental Health

Statistics reveal many employees are struggling with depression. Do you know how to identify and address it?



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There is much discussion about the mental health of lawyers and the toll stress has on their lives. It's true — depression does hit legal particularly hard. Lawyers are 3.6 times more likely to be depressed as employees in other jobs, and 28 percent of licensed and employed lawyers have depression.

But these issues do not just affect attorneys. In fact, depression has had a major effect on America's workplaces, leading to a decrease in attendance and productivity, and an increase in costs passed onto employers.

One study revealed that depression was the most expensive health condition in the workplace, and another study showed that depressed employees lose an average of 27 workdays per year. While this mental health issue is widely prevalent among employees, it is often not talked about, and employees struggle with it on their own.

"I am hopeful that in the next 5, 10, 15 years we will see a real sea change in how people view, discuss and tackle mental health conditions."

"Most depressed employees will never admit to their managers that they are depressed," says David Reischer, Human Resources Manager at LegalAdvice.com. "A large part of the reason for their silence is due to the stigma many employees experience around mental illness."

HOW DEPRESSION MANIFESTS IN THE WORKPLACE

Depressed workers will stay silent about their mental health issues and keep to themselves in general. This behavior hinders teambuilding and productive idea generation.

"A person [with] depression doesn't feel like talking much and tends to be in [his or her] shell," says Siddhartha Gupta, Chief Executive Officer of Mercer-Mettl. "[He or she doesn't] feel the need for participating in group activities or coming up with new ideas. This has a major effect on team activities, collaboration, brainstorming and discussion of important strategies."

When employees aren't getting the help they need, and suffer with their depression, they can sometimes lash out at coworkers and cause problems around the office. Workplace abuse may escalate because the depressed person might have less patience, won't filter out his or her word choices and will become irritable, says Shannon Thomas, a Licensed Clinical Social Worker. "The combination of job demands and depression can — and often will — lead to an increase in workplace abusive behaviors."

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Michael Moore, JD, a professional coach who specializes in helping lawyers and law firms at his company Moore's Law will be presenting on creating a healthy work environment at ALA's 2019 Annual Conference & Expo. He says when it comes to lawyers, the tremendous pressures can make them fall down mentally or physically. "That can cause them to self-medicate using food or alcohol or drugs. A lot of times

we see good old-fashioned frustration and anger over relatively trivial or mundane matters. You end up with a toxic environment where people don't know why an individual is reacting this way."

Though depression is a touchy subject, employers need to address it. Otherwise, depressed workers might never receive the help they need. Plus, they may have a destructive impact on the rest of the firm, causing other employees to lose focus or feel uncomfortable.

DEALING WITH DEPRESSION IN FIRMS

Combatting depression in the workplace starts with acknowledging that it exists. According to Moore, a frequent law firm response to depression is for workers to tough it out. "We need to realize we have a problem and be open enough to discuss the situation," he says.

Moore suggested setting up wellness programs, which may mean sponsoring gym memberships, employee participation in marathons and fun "firm events that illustrate that there is another side to life than work."

Gupta says that putting a simple stress management strategy into place, like a 15-minute morning motivation, would help all employees. He suggests that in the morning, leaders give everyone 15 minutes to do something they love, whether it's watching funny videos, listening to their favorite songs, meditating or dancing. "This activity sets the routine and higher motivation levels for the rest of the day."

It's also critical for companies not to force activities on their employees. Gupta recommends surveying employees on the kinds of activities they would enjoy. "It could be anything off-site, parties, meditation, [the] gym, sports activities — anything that releases happy hormones like endorphins and serotonin, and reduces the level of stress hormones. Test what works for different individuals."

According to Reischer, it's also a good idea to have yearly discussions with employees about how they are doing. "A company should have regular mental health reviews with

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their employees to discuss work life and things that the organization can do to improve mental health,” he says. “This type of intervention could occur on an annual checkup basis.”

Once mental health reviews are conducted, the leadership can figure out the appropriate ways to guide employees to seek help. “Companies that consult with local mental health professionals are best suited to provide resources that can be quickly accessed by employees struggling with depression,” says Thomas.

But the acknowledgment of depression can’t just come from leaders. It also has to come from the individuals who are suffering from it in order for a resolution to be found.

Mark Goldstein, Counsel, Reed Smith LLP New York, says he realized he was depressed when he had unexpected panic attacks, irrational fears, the inability to focus or perform even basic tasks and an incapability of engaging in normal social interactions with family members, friends and colleagues.

He says that what’s going to make a difference to depressed individuals and leadership is the de-stigmatizing of mental health disorders, so depression is no longer a dirty word. “Disseminate information to employees — through in-person educational sessions, electronic means and other mechanisms

— on the benefits of health, wellness and mindfulness. Encourage employees to come forward if they are suffering.”

Though depressed employees may still feel shame around their disorder, and be afraid to reveal it in the workplace, Goldstein is optimistic that that will change with some progressive reform.

“I am extremely heartened by the recent state of discourse on this issue,” he says. “I am hopeful that in the next 5, 10, 15 years we will see a real sea change in how people view, discuss and tackle mental health conditions. I am hopeful that people will be more open about asking for help. I am hopeful that the 2020s are the decade of mental health destigmatization.” ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kylie Ora Lobell is a freelance writer living in Los Angeles. She covers legal issues, blogs about content marketing, and reports on Jewish topics. She’s been published in *Tablet Magazine*, *NewsCred*, *The Jewish Journal of Los Angeles* and *CMO.com*.



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