

Acas gives advice ahead of Depression Awareness Week

Wednesday 16 April 2008

Mental health in the workplace: spotting signs of depression - Research shows that bosses underestimate how much their colleagues and employees are suffering from stress, anxiety and depression.



It also reveals that almost three in every ten employees will have a mental health problem in any one year.

Mental health problems in the workplace can be very disruptive - both for individuals and businesses. As well as affecting people's personal lives, wellbeing and morale, it also impacts their performance at work and is a costly burden for businesses. A recent study found that people suffering from depression took an average of 30 days off for each sickness absence spell.

If you are a manager overseeing a team, or a colleague concerned for your co-workers, how can you approach the difficult issue of mental health? Acas, the employment relations service, outlines their advice on how to spot and deal with mental health problems at work. The advice coincides with Depression Awareness Week (21 – 26 April 2008) which is focusing on employment this year.

Gill Trevelyan, Head of Training and Equality Services says: "Spotting and doing something about troubled employees is an important business skill. As well as being good managers in the traditional sense, we urge bosses to look out for early indicators before they develop into something more serious, like stress or depression. Healthy and content workers translate directly into productive employees."

Keep your eyes open...The first sign that someone may have depression or a problem with their mental health is often in changes in their day-to-day behaviour. This could be uncharacteristic behaviour such as not being able to cope with their work, seeming distracted, a sudden loss in motivation or absenteeism. Look out for these signs as a potential warning that someone may be suffering from the early stages of depression.

...but don't make assumptions: We all have our ups and downs, so a change in behaviour doesn't necessarily mean that there is a problem. If you do notice inconsistent behaviour, then try to establish whether it's just a blip, or perhaps the signs of a more serious problem.

Get to the root of the problem: It's rare for someone to voluntarily talk about a mental health problem. Approaching a colleague who you feel may be suffering from a mental health issue is not easy. Try and arrange a moment to catch someone privately, and informally ask if they are feeling ok.

How can you help? Depression can sometimes be caused because of a work issue or a personal one. Act accordingly when you establish what the cause of the problem is. If it's work related then you have the responsibility and control to help remedy it. If it's a domestic issue, then talk to the individual about the changes you can implement to make things easier, such as flexible working. If they have not already found support, point them in the right direction towards help from their GP or a counsellor.

Create a culture: Your long-term aim should be to create a working environment which eradicates the stigma mental health can carry. Introducing policies will help doing this, so staff

know and feel comfortable in feeling able to talk about the topic. You can also make support options available, like employment assistance programmes or access to occupational health.

Walk the talk: A policy will only work if lived out in practice. Work with your HR manager and team to ask them to train management and staff, and teach them to handle things sensitively. Evidence also suggests that exercise, a balanced diet and a healthy work pattern can help treat mild depression, so ask the company to provide advice and encouragement in these areas for the entire workforce.

This advice coincides with the release of Acas' new free guide on [Health, work & wellbeing](#). It helps businesses promote and manage a healthy workplace. Employers and employees can find further guidance and advice via the Acas website or the helpline: 08457 47 47 47.

Note

Acas' aim is to improve organisations and working life through better employment relations. It provides information, advice, training and a range of services working with employers and employees to prevent or resolve problems and improve performance. It is an independent statutory body governed by a Council consisting of the Acas Chair and employer, trade union and independent members.