When a mental health condition impacts the team

Employees suffering with mental health conditions may be able to manage their condition without leaving the office, while others may need to reduce their work hours or leave the workplace entirely. Whether an employee with a mental illness is actively seeking treatment, currently undergoing it, or planning on taking a mental health leave, the rest of your team will likely be affected. Imagine the following scenario:



Co-workers may see an employee who is still in the office, but who is clearly distracted. The employee may frequently come in late or miss work, and other team members are increasingly covering the employee's tasks and responsibilities while he or she attends to personal matters. Consequently, co-workers may begin to feel resentful, and if the nature of the employee's condition is known, you may start to recognize the harmful effects of the stigma associated with mental health issues.

As a manager, how can you support the employee with a mental health condition as well as your team?

Ways to help your team

According to Susan Blumenthal, MD, one way to reduce the stigma of mental illness is by educating others that "mental disorders have a biological and neurological basis and are not a character flaw or personal weakness." While you certainly don't want to intrude upon anyone's privacy, you can raise awareness of and sensitivity to mental health issues through training.

Actress Glenn Close co-founded BringChange2Mind, an organization dedicated to fighting the stigma associated with mental illness. Consider sharing this mission with your team and asking everyone to take the BringChange2Mind pledge, which includes the following powerful statements:

- It is likely that someone I know is living with a mental illness and that fear of stigma may be preventing them from accepting their illness and seeking help.
- I *can* make a difference by learning about mental health issues and the devastating effects of stigma.
- If someone I know exhibits sudden changes in behaviour, I *will* pay attention and reach out to them.
- If someone I know is experiencing suicidal thoughts, I *will* take it seriously and make *every effort* to ensure they get help.
- I will *not* perpetuate or tolerate stigma of *any* kind and will commit myself to changing the way society views people living with mental illness.

For other helpful articles and resources on managing stigma, understanding mental illness, and dealing with mental illness in the workplace, visit workhealthlife.com.

Ways to help your affected employee remain productive and engaged

Helping your team become more understanding, sensitive, and aware of mental illness in general can also help the employee who is living and working with mental illness. After all, a supportive work environment is much healthier than one filled with fear, misinformation, stigma, and gossip. However, your employee could benefit in additional ways:

- Always respect privacy and suggest face-to-face meetings in a private area away from colleagues.
- Ask how you can help. Would more flexible hours be helpful? What start times work best? Would online access and a few days of telecommuting be of assistance?
- Ask your employee for input and suggestions and offer reassurance that you are readily available to help.
- You and your employee can also reach out to your EFAP for support and guidance 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Your entire team will be impacted by a colleague's mental health issue, which is why it is so important as a manager to help everyone involved. With the right approach, the entire team can emerge stronger and healthier.