

Make the Workplace Safe for Open and Honest Dialogue about Mental Health

Can we stop a crisis before it starts?

by Doc Elliott

► When a crisis strikes in the workplace, the first question that's typically asked is whether or not there were signs of mental health issues at work. The answer is almost always yes, and, even more concerning, not much is typically done to address it. Now more than ever employers are taking mental health seriously and providing resources that help employees who may be struggling. The steps employers take to address mental health in the workplace could be a lifesaving measure. That's why the workplace is the most important environment to discuss mental health and illness, yet it is the last place we expect to hear about it.

There is plenty of motivation for employers to step up. Mental health conditions cost employers more than \$100 billion and 217 million lost workdays each year. By addressing mental health issues in the workplace and investing in mental health care for workers, employers can increase productivity and employee retention.

But there are more reasons why investing in mental health treatment and discussing mental health in the workplace will benefit all of us (and in all parts of our lives).

HELPING PEOPLE BECOME HAPPIER, CONFIDENT AND MORE PRODUCTIVE

Let's say there is an employee who has been diagnosed with panic disorder and suffers from panic attacks during work. He sometimes runs out of a meeting dripping with sweat. In an environment where he doesn't feel comfortable talking about his panic disorder, the situation could become much worse. In a workplace where he felt he could talk with his boss about the issue, the situation could turn around. They could work together to create a plan that might allow the employee to improve his performance and become more valuable to the company.

BREAKING THE STIGMA OF MENTAL ILLNESS

Imagine a woman who deals with depression. In the late evening, she video chats with a therapist who tells her the depression is nothing to be ashamed of. She is lucky enough to have family members and friends or a romantic partner who helps her fight that stigma. Then she goes to work in the morning. On the rare occasions she hears about it, the conversations are not positive. Her co-workers don't have enough education to be sensitive. They accuse people of using mental illness as an excuse to be lazy or receive special treatment.

When people want to view their mental health issues in a positive way, they need encouragement and acceptance in all parts of their life. Inconsistencies or an absence of positive rhetoric in one environment can make it harder to fight the stigma of mental illness.

CREATING A CULTURE OF ACCEPTANCE

Now envision the ideal scenario: Employers disclose their mental health issues to employees, give presentations on mental health and encourage people to discuss mental health issues whenever they feel like it. Such practices create a culture of acceptance that benefits everyone. It's not an easy thing to be open about your personal life, and it often goes against everything we're taught about managing people, but in the world we're living in today, it humanizes a serious issue and gives people the support they need to ask for help.

GREAT COMPANY CULTURE ATTRACTS MORE EMPLOYEES AND RETAINS CURRENT ONES

Some of the most talented and potentially valuable employees in the world have a mental illness. If employers want to hire them before other companies do, a reputation for accepting mental health conditions can be invaluable. There are many people who would forego a salary increase to work for a company guaranteed to accept their mental illness. This can be an advantage when competing for talent against companies with larger budgets.

LESS STRESS AND MORE BENEFITS TO BRING HOME

By creating an environment where people can openly discuss their mental health issues and treatment, we can reduce their stress. This will improve our lives outside of work and make friends and family grateful we are not unloading extra work stress on them.

DECREASING SOCIAL ISOLATION AND MAKING PEOPLE FEEL MORE INCLUDED

Mental illness can make people feel isolated. The loneliness can exacerbate illnesses such as depression. Employers can prevent this isolation by encouraging employees with mental health issues to connect with other people who deal with similar issues. Creating an environment where people can discuss mental illness openly will negate this feeling of isolation, and social inclusion at the workplace makes people happier.

IT'S THE DIRECTION OUR SOCIETY NEEDS TO MOVE IN

Only a few decades ago, it was rare for LGBT people to disclose their sexual orientation in the workplace. Now it is somewhat common for LGBT people to be "out" in the workplace. Mental illness may be different from sexual orientation, but the idea of having the freedom to be open about all aspects of who we are — and to do so in all parts of our life — is the same. It's time for everyone to have that freedom, and the path to it starts in the workplace. ■



Philanthropist and CEO Adam Shaw creates a compassionate environment in his workplace by being open about his obsessive-compulsive disorder and discussing it with staff. He also co-wrote a book, *Pulling the Trigger: OCD, Anxiety, Panic Attacks and Related Depression — The Definitive Survival and Recovery Approach*. Shaw encourages employees to be open about their mental health issues or at least share "quirks" that make them unique.



A nationally renowned Federal Crisis Negotiation Specialist, Doc Elliott is founder and president of Phoenix Training Group. Since 1976, Phoenix Training Group has been the nation's leader in workplace violence prevention training, customizing effective anti-violence training programs for corporations across all industries. phoenixtraininggroup.com



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