

Workers' mental health is in employers' best interest

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Jay Yudof lives with adult attention deficit disorder at home and at work.

Sometimes he has a hard time concentrating, which can make it difficult to meet deadlines. "In my case, it is the boring tasks that can get pushed off" that can cause his mind to wander, said Yudof, a computer programmer and graduate student.

But over the years, he has come up with some coping skills. "I learned how to hyper-organize. How to make allowances for brain drifting," said Yudof, of Ocean Township, N.J., a member of the National Alliance on Mental Illness-Greater Monmouth. "It has taken years to learn how to be sure brain is engaged before mouth is in gear."

Yudof is not alone. Mental health issues affect many people at work.

Consider this: Nearly a quarter of the U.S. work force -- 28 million workers ages 18 to 54 -- experiences a mental or substance abuse disorder, according to the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. The illnesses can include major depression and social anxiety disorder. Of those, 71 percent have never sought help from a specialist, the agency said.

Mental health issues cost U.S. companies about \$63 billion a year, said Pat Demers, president of the board at the National Alliance on Mental Illness of Mercer County (N.J.). While about 28 percent of that is in treatment costs, 27 percent is in costs associated with excessive absenteeism, 28 percent is in loss of productivity and 17 percent is associated with the cost of replacing workers who have died because of their illnesses.

"More and more employers are definitely understanding how critical it is to pay attention not just to the public health of their employees but to their mental health as well," said Kathleen Boushie, director of human resources at Meridian Health, which owns three hospitals in Monmouth and Ocean counties.

"In any situation where any employer is not paying attention to stress or emotional problems, they are not going to deliver on quality services and not going to be as competitive."

A mental illness, such as depression, could strike as a result of an employee's marital problems or some other issue, said Demers. Or it could be a chronic mental illness that has not gotten enough attention.

Signs of an employee's mental health problem can surface at work. They can include a lack of motivation or difficulty concentrating attributed to depression, Demers said. It could be a sudden change in behavior. "It is an indicator for you," said Demers.

Workers may be silent about their problem. Often, employees are afraid they will be stigmatized at work or are embarrassed if they seek help, Demers said.

"If you feel something is happening to you that you can't control, some kind of physical problem and you don't want to tell anybody, what do you do? You withdraw," Demers said. "You can withdraw by not coming to work. You can withdraw by not talking to people."

Demers said employers can, and should, try to help. Supervisors and human resources executives can do some fact-finding if they notice a problem, she said.

Ask an employee if there is something they should be aware of that is going on in his or

her life, Demers said. "Sometimes you can assist people when they talk to you about it," she said.

Employers are working to make sure there are resources available, including employee assistance programs, so workers can get the help they need.

"Generally, with a little assistance, people can be able to address the issues they are dealing with in their personal lives and in their families and be able to continue to function productively in the work force," Boushie said.

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