

Managers & Supervisors

THE FIRST RESPONDERS

Managers and supervisors are in many ways first responders to mental illness in the workplace. Depending on your training, experience, and knowledge of mental illness, you can make all the difference between early and constructive intervention that leads to recovery and uninterrupted productivity -- or a downhill slide.

A sympathetic workplace that reaches out is vital to the recovery of someone facing mental illness. Research has proven that in your position as manager or supervisor, you are going to be the key role model. It takes work to know how to do it right. It very seldom comes naturally. And, it's certainly not something you learn in school.

In the workplace, roadblocks to recovery include:

- Stigma from ignorance and stereotypes;
- Perceived or actual lack of support;
- Fear of negative reactions from colleagues if the illness is disclosed;
- Uncertainty about types of assistance that can be provided;
- Fear of losing one's job.

Providing education to all employees about mental health can help raise awareness and encourage individuals to seek help. Because everyone's circumstances are different, a plan to help someone with a mental illness, or someone who has a loved one with mental illness, will need to be tailored to the individual. A good question to ask yourself is: "What would we do if it were a physical illness?"

Here are some tools to help support an employee:

OFFER SUPPORT: Ask if there is anything you can do to support that person. The employee may not wish to take you up on your offer, but it is important to make clear support is available. Specific support might include referring that person to resources at work, such as an Employee Assistance Program (EAP).

DEVELOP A PLAN: Flexible plans that meet the needs of both the employer and the worker, rather than one-size-fits-all rules, are much more likely to succeed. Talk about the plan together as you work through the steps to remaining at or returning to work.

CEOs AGAINST STIGMA

NAMI KEYSTONE PA

BE INCLUSIVE: Fear of stigma – actual or perceived – can affect a person’s confidence. Speak openly about mental health conditions in the workplace and encourage others to do the same.

STAY IN TOUCH: If an employee has taken time off for recovery, keeping in touch will make the return to work easier for everyone involved. Maintaining a connection can help employees feel valued. However, it is important not to make the employee feel pressured to return to work before he or she is ready.

ADDRESS THE CAUSES: If there is a specific work-related factor that the employee feels has contributed to his or her condition, listen and be open about making changes. At the same time, if you have built a good relationship, the employee will be far more open to your honest feedback.

SET CLEAR EXPECTATIONS: Writing a return-to-work or stay-at-work plan sets clear expectations for everyone. Flexibility is key. Allow for any changes that may occur during recovery.

MAINTAIN CONFIDENTIALITY: The details of an employee’s condition and treatment must remain confidential unless he or she gives permission.

Managers and supervisors may need to make changes to an individual’s workload or schedule to accommodate a need. Implementing these adjustments should be a joint effort and one that is documented. Reasonable adjustments might include:

- Flexible working hours
- Shift or location change
- Adjusting working environment
- Establishing goals to assist the employee with workload
- Reducing workload
- Providing access to a professional
- Identifying and modifying tasks

The benefits of a stigma-free workplace include retaining skills and experience, avoiding costs associated with retraining or hiring new employees, and building a workplace culture that demonstrates a dedication to all employees.

Be the catalyst for eliminating stigma!

*Adapted from NAMI Massachusetts
Information provided by HeadsUp.org/au*

