Mental Illness and Occupational Health

By Dr. Mary Anne Alexander, MD

It can no longer be disputed that mental health at work is a significant problem for occupational health clinics across every industry. Increasing numbers of employees are suffering from conditions such as depression, anxiety and bipolar disorder, significantly impacting their personal and professional lives, and resulting in huge productivity losses for their employers. Despite its significance, it remains a workplace issue that is largely avoided and overlooked by occupational health professionals of every kind.

This paper will look to provide occupational health professionals with the tools they require to start the conversation in their organization about mental health. Organizations need to move toward a systematic process around employee mental health that is able to provide education, increase awareness, and provide employees with the support they require to overcome these devastating illnesses and return to a healthy and productive way of life.

Why Mental Health at Work Should Be a Priority

There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that there are very few occupational health issues that have a greater impact than employee mental health. Psychological health and safety issues have a wide range of effect – from absenteeism and presenteeism, to workplace grievances and conflicts, to reduced productivity and effectiveness. Some estimates suggest that mental illnesses reduce GDP in the US, Canada and Europe through lost work time by as much as 4% – $570 billion from the US economy alone. Researchers have also determined that of the most costly health conditions (including both direct and indirect costs), depression was number one, and anxiety number five. Make no mistake, this is a huge problem and it is getting bigger every year.

The Biggest Priority That No-one Wants to Talk About

The crux of the issue, however, is not the massive scale of the problem, it the discomfort that many feel when discussing mental health in the workplace.

• Employees don’t want to discuss it – there is a stigma attached to mental illness and there are concerns that they could lose their job.

• Supervisors don’t want to discuss it – they don’t want to be seen to be prying into an employee’s personal life, and are unsure about how to handle such a situation.

• Even occupational health practitioners don’t want to discuss it – diagnosing and treating cholesterol, hypertension and heart disease is relatively easy, but depression and anxiety are often missed.

As a result of this informal pact to simply avoid the subject, most organizations have no systems in place to identify or support employees with mental health
issues. When occupational health professionals rely on individuals to identify their own mental health issues, or rely on supervisors to identify potential issues, they are being stymied by this discomfort around openly discussing depression and anxiety.

The way forward, then, is to have a systematic approach – one that doesn’t rely on one-to-one relationships, but instead creates a framework where the identification and support of mental health issues is a normal part of an organization’s occupational health program.

A Systematic Approach to Employee Mental Health

What is required is a multi-pronged approach. Mental health at work is an issue that will not be solved by an individual’s efforts, but instead will have to come from a coordinated effort across the whole of an organization to educate employees and increase awareness of the problem.

Senior management must prioritize mental health

Efforts to improve employee mental health will only be successful if it is embraced at every level of the organization. It must come from the top down – all employee newsletters should discuss mental health initiatives, senior management must reinforce the importance of identifying and treating mental health within the organization.

The availability of mental health resources should start early

As soon as an employee is hired, part of the onboarding process should be completion of a behavioral health module (or some other form of education) to highlight the importance of mental health in the organization.

It should highlight the resources available to the employee if they do have a problem, and clearly define the steps that should be taken to ensure that they get the help that they need.

Managers and Supervisors should receive appropriate training

When employees are promoted to supervisory positions, they should receive additional behavioral health training to (a) reinforce awareness of the resources that are available, ensuring that they have all the tools required to support any employees in their department with mental health issues and (b) educate supervisors on how to identify when employees may be affected by mental health issues.

Proactive employee monitoring and outreach is a necessity

An outreach program should be in place that automatically monitors factors such as absenteeism or productivity and flags employees that may have mental health issues. The employee can then be contacted via employee questionnaire or survey to ensure that they are given the opportunity to discuss any underlying issues that are causing the reduction in attendance or productivity. Note: this outreach should be carried out by a mental health professional, rather than a direct supervisor, as to avoid any situation where the employee may be uncomfortable discussing personal issues.

These are simply the first steps toward having a system in place to identify mental health issues in the workplace, but the important point to remember is that there must be a system. Relying on supervisors to discuss these issues with employees is not sustainable and creates uncomfortable situations for all parties – supervisors that are worried to discuss personal issues, and employees that are fearful of losing their job. With a system in place, and an educated and aware workforce, it no longer becomes a personal discussion and instead becomes a system of identifying potential issues and providing the required support to deal with them.
There Is No Quick Fix

Although we have seen that there is obviously a dire need for occupational health support of employee mental illness, it is important to note that there are no quick fixes in mental health. Even if your organization becomes adept at identifying employee mental health issues and provides the required support and treatment, it can still be many months before an employee is able to return to their normal level of productivity and effectiveness. Treatment, also, can be expensive. However, when the long term expense is measured against the current negative impacts of depression and anxiety, there is still no question that this type of systematic effort is absolutely necessary.

Conclusion

In all organizations, across all industries, there are rising levels of depression, anxiety and bipolar disorder within the workforce. This increase in mental health issues has tremendous knock-on effects, resulting in billions of dollars in lost work time alone. Unfortunately, this is a problem that occupational health professionals, supervisors and employees are all reluctant to discuss openly, but it is too great a problem to continue to ignore. By increasing education and awareness of mental health in the workforce, it is possible for organizations to reduce the stigma associated with these conditions. The implementation of a systematic approach to the identification and treatment of mental health issues can make it easier for all parties to help get employees healthy, not only for the benefit of their working lives, but their personal lives too.

Author Bio

Dr. Alexander has worked in the Occupational Health and Safety field providing outstanding medical care as well as managing the integration of technology into the practice of medicine for many years. She is currently the President of MD Prime Analytics, and a medical product consultant at Medgate. For 10 years, Dr. Alexander was the Deputy Medical Director of the Fairfax County Public Safety Occupational Health Center in Fairfax, Virginia providing occupational and primary care medical services to public safety personnel in addition to being the functional lead on the integration and implementation of information technology initiatives.

Dr. Alexander received her undergraduate degree from the University of Virginia and graduated from the University Of Louisville School Of Medicine. Dr. Alexander was awarded the Saul Zukerman Humanitarianism in Medicine Award and was a national winner of the American College of Physicians’ Associates Clinical Vignette Paper Competition.

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