



Emotional wellness in the workplace

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By Izabela Jaroszyński

DURHAM -- Depressed. Paranoid. Scared.

These are not the words normally associated with a Stanley Cup winner, but for Ron Ellis the words were a reality.

For 10 years, the former hockey player battled with clinical depression -- shutting himself off from family and friends, and twice having to be hospitalized. He points to the struggle to overcome clinical depression as his life's greatest challenge.

Now recovered, Mr. Ellis speaks publicly about his experience, hoping to bring awareness about the issue of mental health to those suffering from it and their loved ones.

"It's an illness, not a weakness," he said during a workshop held in Ajax last month. "It's caused by a chemical imbalance."

Mr. Ellis is not alone in his struggle with depression. Health Canada estimates that one in five people in Ontario will suffer from a mental illness in their lifetime. Only about half of those will get the help they need. Left untreated, mental illness can affect many aspects of a person's life, including the ability to fully perform at work.

"Many people are afraid to ask for help because of the stigma they believe it will bring," says Dr. Carolyn Bryne, dean of health sciences at University of Ontario Institute of Technology.

Dr. Bryne, who has worked as a psychotherapist in the area of mental health, has considerable expertise in understanding depression and its impact at the workplace. She says that the best thing employers can do is create a culture of understanding within their workplace so that mental illness is not marginalized.

"Employees worry about the stigma," she said. "They think they might be seen as weak or get passed over for a promotion if they admit to having a problem. For this reason, many tend not to talk about it at work."

But studies show that employees who get help for their emotional issues will perform better in the workplace and will take less leave time in the long run. In fact, employees who are diagnosed and treated will save their employer an average of 11 days a year in prevented absenteeism and between \$5,000 and \$10,000 per year in the cost of prescription drugs, sick leave, and average wage replacement.

Bill Zolis points to these statistics as reasons why employers should make an effort to address the issue of mental health.

As an employee benefits consultant for the Callery Group, Mr. Zolis wants employers to "wake up a bit" and realize that mental health is vital to a productive workplace.

"We have to have owners and CEOs become aware that it's a problem," he said. "About 40 per cent of disability claims are due to mental illness."

Having himself suffered from panic attacks, Mr. Zolis understands the benefit of working in an environment that has resources available to help those that need it.

Troubled employees, he said, have higher absenteeism, more personal accidents, lower productivity, and low morale.

He advises employers to look into establishing Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), which offer confidential telephone and face-to-face counselling support for an employee's everyday concerns. The service is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and can take place at the employee's convenience.

While the return on investment may not be obvious at first, it will be in the long term, Mr. Zolis says.

"If you even get one or two people in your group to use it, isn't it worth it," he said.

Dr. Bryne says the biggest signs of a possible mental health problem is absenteeism, changes in energy and commitment, and changes in behaviour.

She says that employers need to start with their own attitude when creating a greater understanding in the workplace. When approaching an employee or co-worker out of concern, Dr. Bryne suggests doing so in a matter-of-fact, non-judgemental way.

"Say what a great employee that person is and how this behaviour is so different than normal," she said. "Always refer the person to a place to get help."

Because of social stigma, however, people are hesitant to tell their colleagues that they are worried about them, Dr. Bryne said.

That is why it is important for high profile people like Mr. Ellis to stand up and speak out about their own personal experiences, she said.

"It makes everyone feel more comfortable talking about it."

-- with files from Keith Gilligan.

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