

Managing an Employee Who May Be Depressed: Steps to take if an employee may be showing signs of depression

1st May 2020

Depression is a widespread problem in the workplace, costing employers billions a year due to absenteeism and presenteeism (being unproductive at work).

Being familiar with the signs of depression will help you effectively manage the situation if someone on your staff may be suffering from depression. A person who is depressed may exhibit some of these signs:

- a drop in productivity
- taking more sick days than most employees
- making more mistakes than usual
- unusual messiness in personal appearance or at the employee's workstation
- difficulty with memory, concentration, or decision making
- a lack of energy, sluggishness, or appearing to tire easily
- restlessness, irritability, or moodiness
- outbursts of anger
- changes in appetite or weight
- loss of interest or lack of pleasure in ordinary activities
- crying episodes
- expressing feelings of hopelessness, pessimism, guilt, or worthlessness
- suicidal thoughts or talk of suicide

If a member of your team is showing signs of depression, it is important to act promptly. Do not assume the problem will go away or get better on its own. Many employees are unaware that they have depression. The sooner you act, the sooner your employee will be able to get help.

Steps to take if you think an employee may be depressed

Meet privately with the employee if you see a change in behaviour, a decline in performance, or an altered pattern of interaction with the team.

Take them aside and talk in a place where others can't hear you. You will want to protect their privacy when you discuss your concerns.

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Bring up your concerns in as tactful a way as possible, and be specific. You might say, "You became tearful and left the conference room yesterday when the client criticised your presentation. That isn't like you. You're usually very calm under pressure. Is something going on?"

Listen carefully to their concerns.

Avoid offering suggestions like, "Pull yourself together" or "Can't you snap out of it?" This is exactly what a depressed person is unable to do, and suggesting it will make the person feel worse.

Don't make assumptions or try to diagnose the problem. There can be liability in crossing this boundary or in taking on the role of a personal counsellor to the employee. Your role is to recognise that something is wrong and to respectfully steer the employee to a helpful resource such as the assistance programme.

Offer encouragement. You could say, "You are a valued member of this team. Even though you haven't been yourself lately, I'm sure it's temporary. It might help to talk to someone or reach out to access some resources to help you start to feel better."

Keep the focus on performance. Give specific examples of how the problem is manifesting itself, such as, "I have noticed that your production numbers are down, and customers have complained to me that you aren't getting back to them soon enough. That's not the kind of work I've seen from you in the past."

Let them know that there is a place to turn for help. Encourage your team member to contact their health care provider, a mental health professional, or the assistance programme. Explain that the programme is private and strictly confidential. Confidentiality is extremely important because many employees fear the stigma associated with depression in the workplace. You could say, without implying that the person has a mental health problem, "I want you to know that you have a resource—a benefit through work—that you can use to get support and help. People who have used this resource in the past have found it helpful." Explain that the programme can provide counselling or advice about additional resources. Give the employee the telephone number of the programme.

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Discuss the employee's situation with your human resources (HR) representative early in the process. Find out what forms of support you can provide.

Following up

Continue to provide support to the employee without being intrusive. Encourage them to stay with the treatment and follow the treatment plan.

Provide them with more direction if necessary. Many individuals suffering from depression find it hard to make decisions even if that is normally one of their strengths. Work with the employee to see if they need more specific direction from you.

Offer encouragement. Share positive feedback with the employee about their skills, talents, and capabilities.

Talk to your HR representative about ways of offering ongoing support to the employee. An employee struggling with depression may need to have a flexible work schedule until things improve. Before offering job adjustments or accommodations to the employee, first talk to HR.

If an employee needs more support than you can provide

An employee who is suffering from depression may need more support than you alone can provide. Be aware that many people suffering from depression resist talking about it, especially at work where they may fear repercussions.

Nearly two-thirds of people with severe depression are not getting treatment, according to experts. An employee showing signs of depression may not follow up on your suggestion that they contact the assistance programme for support, or their performance may continue to suffer even if they seem to accept your encouragement and guidance.

If, despite your support, an employee continues to perform at a lower level over time, you may have to address the performance issue according to your organisation's established practices. Consult your manager and HR for guidance on how to address the issue.

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