

THE NATIONAL LAW REVIEW

Time to talk? Time to listen too

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Last week it would have been difficult to miss the statistics: mental health affects 1 in 4 of us. In reality, it affects far more indirectly. Many people will have been affected by the mental health of a colleague, a friend or a family member. In addition, anyone with experience of mental health problems will know that conditions such as anxiety and depression affect everyone differently. What helps one person won't necessarily be an appropriate form of support for another.

The prominence of Time to Talk Day in the news, on social media and perhaps in your workplace shows that attitudes towards mental health are changing. The mental health campaign "Time to Change" seeks to end the stigma that surrounds mental health, and the impact of this movement is invaluable, but to an individual with depression or anxiety, is being told it's ok to have a mental health problem necessarily enough to make them *believe* it's ok? Enough to make them *believe* they will be taken seriously and heard? Talking about mental health is an excellent start, but listening to those who struggle with it is just as important.

It is hard to describe how difficult it is for somebody struggling with depression to admit that to another person. It's a cruel twist of fate that one of the common side effects of depression is an overwhelming sense of shame in having that condition in the first place. How do you admit that to somebody? Shoe on the other foot, how do you ask somebody to confide in you about something so personal? Even closest friends and family, let alone your employer?

I believe the key is trust. An employee is more likely to discuss matters around mental health if they have trust that their employer will listen and support them on a practical level. Make mental health a priority at all levels of the business, let employees know how they can speak to somebody in the business on a strictly confidential basis and reassure them that whatever the issue, they will be supported. The more employers can do to create a culture of trust and support around mental health, the more employees will feel comfortable disclosing those issues and reaching out for support. But trust is a broader issue than just mental health, so if you let your employee down in other respects, their willingness to trust you to handle their health issues appropriately will still be damaged.

Sometimes, just knowing that your employer is aware of what you are going through and that it is okay, makes a huge difference. It provides reassurance that when you arrive at work, no matter what happens or what obstacles you might face during the day, it's going to be fine because you will be supported. Some employees may be reluctant to let their colleagues know what is going on, but if they feel comfortable confiding in somebody they work closely with or who supervises them, the sense of support it provides can be invaluable.

Everyone is affected by mental health problems differently, but here are a couple of workplace pointers I would suggest:

DO:

- Highlight the importance of mental wellbeing and how your employees can look after their mental health inside and outside of work.
- Encourage all employees to be aware of their colleagues' mental wellbeing. People who work together on



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a daily basis may notice a struggling colleague more quickly than those at a management or senior level. This doesn't mean getting them to report tiny changes in behaviour or anything quite so Nineteen Eighty-Four, just encouraging employees to look out for each other and ask those three important words: "How are you?"

- Let employees know how they can talk to somebody in the business on a confidential basis about anything that might be affecting their mental wellbeing.
- Take the time to listen to employees who come forward to discuss their mental health issues. No individual experiences a mental health problem in the same way.
- Tailor any support plan to the individual employee. Ask them what support might help them and discuss a way to put that into practice. If an employee struggles to come to work on a Monday, discuss options for them to work from home on that day. If leaving the house in the morning at rush hour is difficult, consider whether you can temporarily change their working pattern so they can arrive and leave outside peak travel times.
- Discuss what steps employees are taking outside work to support their recovery. These steps will likely support their recovery in the workplace. If somebody is struggling to come to work because they are having trouble sleeping, talk to them about options which would help with that. Do they normally enjoy going for a run or to the gym? Doing these activities in the morning might support their recovery *and* help them get halfway to the office or avoid rush hour. You don't need to be an expert on self-help, but just asking the question can both get an employee thinking about steps they can take and demonstrate a genuine interest in their wellbeing.
- Encourage the employee to speak to their GP if they haven't already. It's important that anyone with a mental health problem has access to professional support to aid their recovery.
- Be patient and understanding. Recovery is two steps forward and one step back. There are good days and bad days, and on those bad days it's more important than ever to reassure your employees that they are still supported.

DON'T:

- Assume that just because somebody looks perfectly fine from the outside, they feel fine on the inside. Some mental health conditions can have physical manifestations, but others don't. Some people who have had depression or anxiety for several years are adept at masking their feelings. There are many people with depression or anxiety who can, for the most part, function at a very high level. "You seem fine" can shut down a conversation about mental health for good.
- Make any discussion a one-off. If an employee discloses a mental health issue and comes to you for support, stay engaged with them and support them throughout their recovery. Schedule regular meetings with the employee and keep an eye on how they are doing. If they are absent, drop them an email to ask if they would like to have a call with you or whether there is any support they need.
- Be unreliable. Managing an employee with poor mental health can be onerous, but to maintain trust with an individual who is disclosing such a personal matter it is important to be reliable. If you are meeting with them, don't be late. If you say you will put a support plan in place and confirm by a certain time, make sure you do that.
- Assume that because an employee has a mental health problem, they need or want time off work. Some people may need time off work to rest and recover, but for others being at work is extremely beneficial for recovery. Time off can cause feelings of guilt, isolation, lack of motivation and loneliness. Time spent at work in a supportive environment means interaction, motivation, a sense of accomplishment, purpose, a positive distraction and integration into something bigger than themselves.
- Related to that, assume that they will themselves be unreliable and so, for example, cannot safely be given work which is pressing or complicated or extended. Even if you think you are doing this for all the right reasons, unilaterally adjusting work types in this way merely increases their sense of isolation and anxiety.

Hannah Field contributed to this piece.

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