

## **WORKING ON DEPRESSION**

### **– A practical guide to management of depression in the workplace**

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Return To Work Matters – [www.rtwmatters.org](http://www.rtwmatters.org) -is a professional networking and resource site serving return to work professionals, facilitating injured or ill employees to recover their health and get back to their jobs.

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## I. INTRODUCTION - WHY IS DEPRESSION RELEVANT TO MY WORK PLACE? IS IT COMMON?

Depression is a leading cause of suffering, dysfunction and disability.

It is also becoming more common.

Each year depression will affect about one in ten people in the workplace. It is most common between the ages of 30 and 40 when workers are in their prime.

People with illnesses that affect mood will miss an average of 27 to 65 days per year. Depression reduces productivity.

Many people who have depression are not properly diagnosed. Of those who are, many do not receive adequate treatment. This causes employees unnecessary distress and affects the bottom line of business.

### Can I do anything about it?

Yes – a lot can be done!

At least 80% of people with depression can be treated successfully with medication, psychotherapy or a combination of both.

Workplaces should be able to respond to this health issue in the same way that they respond to more traditional problems such as back injury.

This booklet is designed to help you recognise, manage and prevent depression in the work place.

*Depression is a treatable disease – but it is under recognised!*

*8 out of 10 people with depression will benefit from treatment*

*Aim to be able to respond to depression like more traditional health problems such as back pain*

### What causes depression?

It is more useful to consider possible risk factors for depression rather than thinking of it as a disease with a specific cause. There are many risk factors that make someone more likely to develop depression.

Employers should be aware of and manage these risk factors. Some factors such as a family member with depression or previous episodes of depressive cannot be changed. Others like poor perceived job control and unclear and unattainable goals can be.

Non modifiable factors (cannot be changed)

- Genetics (having a close family member with depression);
- Female gender (twice as likely to become depressed than males);
- An upbringing with poor or neglectful parenting;
- Predisposing personality types;
- Anxiety that starts early in life;
- History of trauma or abuse;
- Having had a serious episode of depression previously; and,

- A serious physical disorder, such as long term back pain.

#### Modifiable but not work related factors

- Poverty;
- Divorce and other severely stressful events;
- Substance misuse;
- Low self esteem;
- A sense of helplessness or hopelessness;
- Social stigma; and,
- Poor social support, such as poor family or social networks.

#### Modifiable workplace factors that can be addressed by employers:

- Workplace stress;
- Burnout, where employees become physically exhausted and may doubt their competence;
- Job dissatisfaction;
- Job insecurity, for example through down-sizing;
- Poor perceived job control ;
- Inadequate employment;
- Poor effort reward balance;
- Unfair treatment by supervisors;
- Unclear or unattainable work goals; and,
- Unemployment.

*Jake was finding it harder to concentrate at work, and was becoming increasingly tired during the week. His office was downsizing and the thought of being made redundant was often on his mind. He was getting more irritable at home with the children and his wife was getting frustrated because he was not doing his fair share of work around the house. Jake was finding that he felt flat much of the time, and would often feel sad for no apparent reason. His wife started to think he was going down the same path as when he had been depressed five years ago.*

*As part of the downsizing his department was merged with another sales team and he got a new supervisor. The new supervisor instituted clearly defined sales targets and offered bonus incentives to sales staff that were performing well. Jack was surprised to find he ranked second highest in the sales targets and was very pleased with his bonus. Even though he was busier at work, he felt more productive and lively. He soon found that he had more energy and was more engaging at home with his family. His wife was pleased that he seemed to be enjoying work again and that they had stopped bickering.*

*Knowing risk factors for depression may help identify those at risk*

*There are many factors in the workplace that can cause depression – be aware of them!*

*Women are more likely to become depressed than men*

*Remember that burnout can cause depression*

## II. RECOGNISING DEPRESSION

Depression causes changes in the mind and the body and affects each person differently. Some people with depression may feel sluggish and much more tired than usual. Others will feel sad almost all the time, cry a lot, and be swamped with feelings of hopelessness. Being aware of how depression affects people may help you to recognise it in the workplace.

### What are the symptoms of depression?

The following are symptoms that may be experienced by someone with depression:

- A loss of interest in activities that are usually pleasurable (such as hobbies);
- A constant feeling of being down;
- Reduced energy levels or increased levels of fatigue;
- Weight loss / weight gain;
- Increased or decreased appetite;
- Increased or decreased need for sleep;
- Feelings of oppressive sadness or worthlessness;
- Feelings of guilt;
- Feelings of hopelessness;
- A general feeling of being lost;
- Reduced ability to concentrate or think;
- Decreased libido (sexual desire); and,
- Recurrent thoughts of death, self-harm or suicide.

### What are some clues that suggest someone in the workplace may be suffering from depression?

- Difficulty concentrating on tasks;
- Turning up late to work;
- Looking more tired than usual, or complaining about being tired more frequently;
- Getting angry or frustrated more regularly, with self or colleagues;
- Looking sad and down most of the time;
- May comment about feeling hopeless or useless;
- Social isolation, perhaps evidenced by eating alone at lunchtimes;
- Difficulty in meeting deadlines ;
- Difficulty with multitasking; and,
- Drinking more alcohol, this may be observed over lunch or Friday after work drinks.

### Why would someone who is depressed still come to work?

Even when people are severely depressed they may continue to attend work. Reasons for this may include:

- Fear of losing their job;
- Desire to keep a structured life or sense of normalcy;
- Need for money;
- Insufficient sick leave;
- A sense of duty to employer or colleagues; and,
- A desire to help customers.