

Mental Health: No Longer Just a State of Mind

WRITER
CAROLE SPIERS

The words “mental health” even today, and despite increased awareness programmes, still carry with them a degree of stigma.

I was reading an article yesterday about a new book on this very topic by the American comedienne, Ruby Wax, who made a career in the UK on the alternative comedy scene. She writes about her challenges with depression, now and in years gone by, and the times when she thought she might lose her job if she admitted her mental health issues to her employer.

Today, many celebrities will admit that depression forms a part of their lives and one that has to be dealt with on an everyday basis. Earlier this year, the actress, Catherine Zeta Jones, Academy Award winning star of the musical Chicago, checked herself into a treatment facility as part of a programme to monitor her bipolar 11 disorder.

The actor, Stephen Fry, who is now President of Britain's mental health charity, MIND, admitted recently that he has been on the verge of taking his own life on more than one occasion.

Every organisation is affected to some extent by mental health problems. In the UK, at any one time one worker in six will be experiencing depression, anxiety or stress-related problems. Mental health problems are endemic in every workplace in every country.

The total annual cost to UK employers of these problems is estimated at around £26 billion. Simple steps to improve the management of mental health in the workplace, including prevention and early identification of problems, should enable employers to save 30 per cent of these costs.



Taking action to promote wellbeing amongst staff, in order to give better help to those experiencing distress and to support those who need time off before returning to work, can only make good business sense. The plain fact is that the cost of neglecting mental distress cannot, and must not, be ignored any longer.

If you are worried that your job might be at risk because of depression or similar problems, here are some things that you can do to help yourself:

- Make sure that you exercise every day.
- Make your health the first priority in your life.
- Try not to be a perfectionist. Recognise that sometimes “good enough” is adequate. Be aware when things start to overwhelm you and make sure that you allocate sufficient time for yourself. Learn to switch off at the end of day and try not to take work home.

Arrange to have a well thought out, structured conversation with your manager. Think about when and how to do it, how much information you want to share, in confidence, and exactly with whom you wish to share it. It can be

rewarding for both sides for you to discuss your mental health, how it relates to your work and what help you might need, if any, so that you can carry out your responsibilities efficiently.

You need to talk about your working conditions if they are not conducive to your work. The right environment or the way your work is organised can make a tangible difference to your productivity. A flexible working pattern may well help in the short term. Ask one of your colleagues to look out for any obvious signs that you might be feeling unwell and, if you are actually off work, then make an effort to keep in touch so that you do not feel isolated. Agree an action plan of required changes to your work schedule with your boss if these will help and then arrange a time to meet again to follow up on your conversation.

Of course, deciding whether or not to tell your employer and colleagues about mental health can be difficult. Some of my clients say it has been really helpful to talk openly to their manager and others not. That, sadly, is the reality of the situation.

Individuals should not feel alone as there are many other people who feel like they do, albeit for different reasons. However, it is in the interests of employers to work alongside all of their managers and employees, on all levels and to make “reasonable adjustments” to work schedules and conditions where necessary and not to discriminate against anyone.

Key points:

- Anyone can experience mental health problems.
- An open discussion can be beneficial.
- Enlightened employers will make adjustments.

about the author



Carole Spiers' credibility is rooted in 20 years of success as CEO of a leading UK stress management consultancy. As a world authority on corporate stress, BBC Guest Broadcaster and author, Carole's mission is to empower organisations to achieve sustainable success through a healthy workplace culture. Her stress management expertise is in demand around the world. Carole is a high-energy motivational speaker able to combine inspiration with insight. Her charismatic style has made her into a sought-after keynote speaker working with equal success in the contrasting cultures of the UK and the Middle East, with top corporations.

Carole is a vice president of the International Stress Management Association. For more information on the stress management training and nationwide counselling service, please contact the association at info@carolespiersgroup.co.uk or via www.carolespiersgroup.co.uk. Special offer for Executive Secretary readers: need to manage stress? Contact her for a free special report *45 Essential Strategies for StressRelief for the Busy PA*. Email sb@carolespiersgroup.com.

