



It's Not Just

“The Blues”

Legal administrators should be aware of the symptoms of depression and the impacts that colleagues suffering from it can have within their organizations.

BY ERIC HIPPLE

Since his wife filed for divorce several months ago, Mike has lost a lot of weight; his suits hang off his once-bulky frame. Mike's face looks hollow and gaunt, and he's having trouble getting his work done properly and on time.

Jessica keeps complaining of headaches and stomach aches. She has called in sick seven times during the past month. Today, when she returned from a two-hour lunch, you could have sworn you smelled alcohol on her breath.

Both Mike and Jessica are showing possible symptoms of depression, which costs businesses tens of billions of dollars in the United States each year, mostly due to reduced productivity. But not only are Mike's and Jessica's careers in jeopardy, their lives may be in danger.

Depression is one of the strongest risk factors for attempted suicide. So, how can you help a potentially depressed attorney or staff member in your organization? Legal administrators – especially those with human-resources responsibilities – must be aware of the symptoms of depression and the effects that colleagues suffering from it can have within their organizations.

EDUCATE YOURSELF

First, educate yourself about depression. Contrary to traditional thought, depression is not a personal

failing; it is a clinically defined mental disorder that occurs when the brain's chemistry becomes unbalanced. Fortunately, depression is highly treatable. Though each sufferer and situation is unique, common depression risk factors and symptoms include:

- **Recent Loss** – through death, divorce, separation, broken relationship, injury, loss of job, money, status, self-confidence, self-esteem, or loss of religious faith
- **Change in Personality** – sadness, withdrawal, irritability, anxiety, tiredness, indecisiveness, apathy, and loss of interest in friends, hobbies, or previously enjoyed activities
- **Change in Behavior** – inability to concentrate on work or on routine tasks, chronic tardiness or calling in sick, drug or alcohol abuse
- **Increase in Physical Complaints** – headaches, back pain, stomach aches, etc.
- **Change in Sleep Patterns** – complaints of insomnia, often with early waking or oversleeping, nightmares
- **Change in Appearance and Eating Habits** – noticeable weight gain or weight loss, picking at food or overeating, unkempt appearance
- **Low Self-Esteem** – expressions of worthlessness, shame, overwhelming guilt, self-hatred

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Warning flags for possible suicide include talking about dying or disappearing ("If I didn't wake up tomorrow, my family would be better off"); making specific plans for suicide; previous suicide attempts; giving away favorite things; making out wills; arranging for the care of pets; extravagant spending; agitation; hyperactivity; restlessness or lethargy.

NEXT STEPS

OK, so you see some symptoms of depression in people with whom you work. Now what? Consider these steps:

- Approach the employee sensitively, informally, and privately to establish the root of the problem – remember, he or she may not be suffering from depression.
- Be approachable and ready to listen.
- If a work issue is causing the depression, use your managerial power to remedy situations that have caused the condition.
- If your company has an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), remind the employee that it is a free resource available to him or her. An EAP counselor also can advise you how best to approach the employee.
- Keep an open mind and be flexible. Education is the best way to reduce the stigma associated with depression.

Referred to the EAP, the employee is now receiving treatment. What does this mean? How do you help? Depending on the severity of the depression, treatment may include talk therapy and/or medication. During the employee's recovery, please keep in mind:

- Antidepressant medication usually takes a few weeks to take effect. Don't expect dramatic results right away.
- The sufferer may need to switch medications and/or dosage levels several times to find the right "fit" for his or her unique brain chemistry. Please

be patient and aware that the patient may be suffering some side effects as the body adjusts to the medication.

- In severe cases, including those of sufferers who attempt suicide, hospitalization may be required. The employee also may need to take a disability leave.
- The employee may need a flexible work schedule during recovery. In many cases, the structure and distractions of work can help the healing process. Work with the employee to determine the right amount of work as he or she heals.
- Please be sensitive to the employee's right to privacy. Consult with an EAP practitioner about the best way to handle the situation with coworkers and/or clients.

TAKING ACTION

Despite mounting evidence that depression is a medical condition, just as diabetes and high blood pressure are, a stigma still surrounds mental illness. Employers and coworkers often feel uncomfortable broaching the subject with their colleagues. But for the sake of your business and for the employee in question, intervention often is necessary. Remember, silence can be deadly. ✱

about the author



Eric Hipple is the author of *Real Men Do Cry: A Quarterback's Inspiring Story of Tackling Depression and Surviving Suicide Loss*. A former quarterback for the National Football League's Detroit Lions, Eric experienced a debilitating downward spiral after his 15-year-old son died of suicide. Eric works with the University of Michigan Depression Center as an outreach coordinator, traveling nationwide to speak to teens and adults about ways to recognize the signs of depression and risks for potential suicide. For more information, visit his publisher at www.QoLpublishing.com.