BioSpectrum
the business of Bi
24 years of leveraging the business of Bio
www.biospectrumindia.co

Tackling depression at workplace

17 February 2020 | Views

Supportive actions and a change management perspective



Depression has become an endemic problem at the Indian workplace. According to a 2019 study by HR tech startup Hush, one out of every five employees in the corporate sector experiences depression. In addition, almost half of the participants in the study were found to experience some form of workplace depression. Depression has severe negative consequences for the wellbeing and quality of life of an individual. It results in serious losses as employees exhibit low energy, tardiness, absenteeism, social withdrawal, anxiety, mood swings, poor work quality and decreased productivity. According to estimates by the World Health Organization in 2017, depression and anxiety cause a global economic loss of US$ 1 trillion annually. With an increasing number of employees experiencing depression, workplace depression is likely to contribute significantly to this number. These staggering facts are both a cause of concern as well as a wakeup call for immediate corrective and supportive action.

Several factors originating from the workplace can trigger or augment depression. Employees are constantly under stress due to highly competitive and demanding jobs, with high work pressures and sometimes unrealistic timelines. Work demands impact work-life balance negatively with many employees regularly enduring the guilt of not having time for their family. Employees may also be working with unsupportive coworkers and bosses or facing financial instability which further adds to the problem. The result is prolonged feelings of being helpless, trapped, overwhelmed, incompetent and stressed. Employees are scared of opening up about their struggle with depression with their coworkers and bosses as they fear that they may be further isolated, marginalized and systematically moved out of the organization. If not provided support, they can sink further in depression resulting in loss of job or even life. Given the seriousness and pervasiveness of the issue, it is becoming critical for organizations to take action.

What can organizations do to handle depression at work?

1. Commit resources for support, develop support systems: Hire a clinical psychologist and counselor. Partner with organizations and NGOs specializing in the domain for continuous support to the organization.
2. Educate and incentivize: Conduct workshops to educate employees to identify signs of depression and what actions they can take to help themselves and others. Train employees to support their peers, bosses and subordinates who are suffering from anxiety and depression. Incentivize this supportive behavior through R&R programs.
3. Get top management to open up: Get top management team and respected influential people within the company to share personal stories of stress and anxiety on a regular basis. This will help reduce inhibitions about opening up about such problems and will create a safe space for sharing.
4. Generate regular conversations around depression: Develop and share educative communication through various media on a regular basis. Dedicate regular time slots for open discussions on depression.
5. Provide flexibility: Enable employees to work from home or do flexible hours to reduce pressure.
6. Policy support: Create HR policies to help and support employees with mental health issues. Allow leaves for mental health issues and ease such people into getting back to work.
7. Be proactive:
8. Identify symptoms of depression: Encourage employees to undergo a psychological assessment to identify predispositions to depression. Use the data to create support plans.
9. Review high-pressure jobs: Identify high-pressure jobs in the organization. Develop action plans and support systems to ease pressure in these jobs. This could be done by rationalizing the demands of the job by either providing more manpower to the job roles or by reconstructing job roles to reduce some responsibilities.

Implementing supportive actions is an exercise in change management

Tackling depression in an organization is actually a change management problem and should be handled with a change management mindset. Organizations are not impassive recipients of any action. They have a history, a certain way of working and thinking, and may not always be open to new processes, systems or changes. When it comes to depression, most organizations are psychologically not prepared to handle such a conversation. Thus, for the actions suggested above to make any real impact, a broader systemic change is required in organizations to create the right environment. This implies changes at the individual psychological level, as well as at the interpersonal and cultural levels. Models of change management can be useful guidelines in this respect. Incorporating our suggestions into a model of change management can get more effective outcomes, and can help organizations take more certain and steadier steps towards creating a supportive organization to tackle depression.

Prof. Smita Chaudhry - Associate Professor - Human Resources, FLAME University

Prof. Diganta Chakrabarti - Associate Professor - Human Resource, FLAME University

Dr. Ankita Tandon - Fellow (FPM) from Indian Institute of Management Kozhikode