What do mental health statistics mean for your work team?

In any given year, one in four adults in America (61.5 million people) experience a mental illness and about 18 percent of American adults (42 million people) live with an anxiety disorder. This includes, but is not limited to, panic disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, phobias, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder. The numbers surrounding mental health can be difficult to grasp.

Though millions of people are affected, mental health statistics become more relevant when you scale them down to better fit your own environment. For example, if you have 20 people in your office, how might those stats translate? In the next year, it's possible that five of your co-workers could experience a mental illness, and one of them may be living with an anxiety disorder right now. When you think of mental health statistics in this context, the numbers hit closer to home.

Mental health issues are likely to affect your workplace at some point – if they haven't already – making it important to develop both an awareness and sensitivity around mental illness. Use the tips below to prepare yourself for supporting your work team, should mental health issues arise.

- **Learn about the various forms of mental illness likely to impact your workplace.** Some of the more common diagnoses include: schizophrenia, major depression, bipolar disorder, and anxiety disorders, such as panic disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), generalized anxiety disorder and phobias.

- **Recognize the common warning signs of a mental health condition.** Examples include severe mood swings, extreme difficulty in concentrating, and excessive sadness or withdrawal for more than two weeks.

- **Determine what your role should be.** Your role will likely vary. You will want to help your employees take advantage of the various counseling and EAP resources available to them through your organization. You may also take on an educational role, as you help build mental health awareness amongst your team. Your role may even be disciplinary, if gossip, resentment, teasing, insensitivity, or other issues surface. Above all, your role should involve being a caring and supportive leader. Check in regularly, ask how you can help, and share your concerns without being dismissive or judgmental.

Developing an awareness and sensitivity around mental illness will help you effectively manage the situation, should a team member begin showing signs of a mental health issue. By taking the time now to understand the statistics and equip yourself with the training and knowledge necessary to be a supportive manager, you will be better prepared to help your employee – and your entire work team – successfully navigate through a challenging period. With one quarter of your team likely to experience a mental health issue in the next year, putting the right support in place now is an important investment.

When a mental health condition impacts the team

Employees suffering with mental health conditions may be able to manage their condition without leaving the office, while others may need to reduce their work hours or leave the workplace entirely. Whether an employee with a mental illness is actively seeking treatment, currently undergoing it, or planning on taking a mental health leave, the rest of your team will likely be affected. Imagine the following scenario:

Co-workers may see an employee who is still in the office, but who is clearly distracted. The employee may frequently come in late or miss work, and other team members are increasingly covering the employee's tasks and responsibilities while he or she attends to personal matters. Consequently, co-workers may begin to feel resentful, and if the nature of the employee's condition is known, you may start to recognize the harmful effects of stigma associated with mental health issues.

As a manager, how can you support the employee with a mental health condition as well as your team?

Ways to help your team

According to Susan Blumenthal, MD, one way to reduce the stigma of mental illness is by educating others that "mental disorders have a biological and neurological basis and are not a character flaw or personal weakness." While you certainly don't want to intrude upon anyone's privacy, you can raise awareness of and sensitivity to mental health issues through training.

Actress Glenn Close co-founded BringChange2Mind, an organization dedicated to fighting the stigma associated with mental illness. Consider sharing this mission with your team and asking everyone to take the BringChange2Mind pledge, which includes the following powerful statements:

- It is likely that someone I know is living with a mental illness and that fear of stigma may be preventing them from accepting their illness and seeking help.
- I *can* make a difference by learning about mental health issues and the devastating effects of stigma.
- If someone I know exhibits sudden changes in behavior, I *will* pay attention and reach out to them.
- If someone I know is experiencing suicidal thoughts, I *will* take it seriously and make *every effort* to ensure they get help.
- I will *not* perpetuate or tolerate stigma of *any* kind and will commit myself to changing the way society views people living with mental illness.

For other helpful articles and resources on managing stigma, understanding mental illness, and dealing with mental illness in the workplace, visit shepellfgi.com.

Ways to help your affected employee remain productive and engaged

Helping your team become more understanding, sensitive, and aware of mental illness in general can also help the employee who is living and working with mental illness. After all, a supportive work environment is much healthier than one filled with fear, misinformation, stigma, and gossip. However, your employee could benefit in additional ways:

- Always respect privacy and suggest face-to-face meetings in a private area away from colleagues.
- Ask how you can help. Would more flexible hours be helpful? What start times work best? Would online access and a few days of telecommuting be of assistance?
- Ask your employee for input and suggestions and offer reassurance that you are readily available to help.

Looking for additional support? Your Employee Assistance Program can help. You can receive support through a variety of resources. Call 1 866 468-9461 or visit shepellfgi.com.

- You and your employee can also reach out to your Employee Assistance Program for support and guidance 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Your entire team will be impacted by a colleague's mental health issue, which is why it is so important as a manager to help everyone involved. With the right approach, the entire team can emerge stronger and healthier.