



QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ON MENTAL HEALTH FOR EMPLOYERS

Why should businesses and industries be concerned about the mental health of their employees?

Millions of dollars are spent annually by industry to ensure the safety of machines and work areas. Yet, the huge majorities of industrial accidents are not due to machine malfunctions; they are due to worker error. Safety programs urge workers to be careful. But people who quarrel with co-workers, who can't sleep, or who are worried and anxious are apt to forget safety rules and be involved in an accident. Additionally, each year business and industry "pick up the tab" for many of the indirect costs of mental illness.

- \$10.4 billion are lost to disability: employees' inability to work at full capacity because of absenteeism, inefficiency or inability to hold a job.
- \$4.9 billion are lost due to death: suicide, accidents and physical problems brought on by emotional problems.
- \$4.5 billion are lost due to patient care activities, including wages lost due to hospitalization, or by people who must care for a mentally ill person.

The employer bears these costs directly in five areas:

- unnecessarily high labor costs
- turnover
- low productivity
- poor public relations
- excessive employee
- excessive absenteeism

What can be done about on-the-job stress? Or the stress that is brought on by job dissatisfaction?

If the symptoms of stress (headaches, stomach problems, hypertension and depression) are brought on by job dissatisfaction, a worker can do one of two things: get another job, or try to alter the work environment. Often the first choice is a "cop out," just another way of not taking charge of one's life. Trying to effect positive change, on the other hand, allows an individual to take responsibility for his actions; it creates a sense of power.

Talk to the boss. Maybe the boss doesn't know how much work you have to do. Readjust your goals; maybe you shouldn't expect to be vice president in just two years.

Realizing your strengths and weaknesses will help you live through the most stress-filled parts of your job.

Don't take your work home with you. Learn to relax, to eat right and get enough exercise. Learn to say no: just because your boss is a workaholic, doesn't mean you have to work 75 hours a week for him. Industry also has an obligation to its employees. In 1977, Dr. James W. Greenwood of IBM estimated that stress costs American industry up to \$20 billion in insurance claims, costs of insurance premiums, costs of losing and retraining employees, low worker moral and poor business decisions. The end result is lower productivity. By coordinating programs with

local mental health services, industry can take proper steps to reduce job-related stress. Employee assistance programs can also provide an effective method for dealing with both job and family problems which can contribute to excess stress.

Why are businesses and industries beginning to provide mental health programs and increased mental health insurance coverage for their employees?

Studies have shown that when American businesses and industries address the need for adequate mental health services for employees, substantial cost savings are achieved. From data compiled by a number of large companies, the Washington (DC) Business Group in Health concluded that the benefits of psychiatric coverage were:

- improved employee productivity
- reduced absenteeism
- improved employee moral
- reduced hospital/surgical/medical utilization
- lower insurance premiums

Specifically, the Kennecott Cooper Corporation of Utah found that their mental health program for employees produced a 52% attendance improvement, a 74.6% decrease in weekly indemnity costs; and a 55.4% decrease in medical/surgical costs. Kimberly-Clark's Employee Assistance Program showed a 70% reduction in on-the-job accidents for the year after participation compared to the year before. Additionally, the Equitable Life Assurance Society found that **for every dollar of treatment costs incurred by their "Emotional Health Program" there was a \$3.00 return in increased productivity.**

Can people who have suffered from mental health problems succeed in the workplace?

Evidence is growing that people who have been treated for mental health problems, when placed in appropriate job situations, are equal to other workers. Where there is some support for such individuals such as a transitional employment program, employers have found that they have altogether satisfactory work records.

One manufacturing executive, who has a number of years of experience hiring people who have been treated for mental health problems, said that in several areas they are better than the average employees." In the area of attendance, I definitely think they are better. Absenteeism is much less of a problem for them. And, I think their motivation is better."

He also expressed something all employers should keep in mind when they consider hiring individuals with disabilities. In order to place their clients, some counselors over-promise, saying the clients are ready for employment when they are not, or saying they are able to perform at levels they cannot achieve.

Employers should also have realistic expectations. "I also think that, as employers, we only have the right to expect and demand performance that is equal to the average. Now, in many cases, we get better. If we get less, we'll let the individual go, just as we would anyone else."

But the important thing is that such workers "have the right to work just as everyone else does. And if we don't allow them that right, we are preventing them from living in the real world.