

Flat out and fed up?

– Why depression is becoming one of the biggest work life balance issues –

The link between depression and work life balance may not seem immediately obvious, but there is no doubt that it is a growing problem for many people. This article looks at why that may be, what it means for us all and also gives some strategies to battle this debilitating condition.

One of the problems with depression (and anxiety – as the two are often related) is the fact that embarrassment often keeps the problem hidden. People seldom want to admit to suffering from depression. There is something of an air of “pull yourself together” about it. And yet it is out there. The annual 24-7 survey conducted by the Work Life Balance Centre¹ has shown an alarming increasing in depression and anxiety as symptoms of a stressful working environment. In the survey for 2003/04 40% of the sample identified depression as a problem. This increased to 44% in 2004/05, and rose again to 49% in 2005/06. Anxiety symptoms have shown similar rises.

The Depression Report published by the London School of Economics² makes for grim reading. It points out that one in six of us would be diagnosed as having depression or chronic anxiety disorder, and that in Great Britain “some 40% of all disability (physical and mental) is due to mental illness.” Indeed some 6 million people are suffering from depression or anxiety disorders (or both).

While this may be a tragic statistic what does it really mean for the country as a whole? To begin with people suffering from depression and anxiety find it difficult to keep their jobs, and can lose the will to go back to work. Even when working they are more likely to have time off sick. The Depression Report provides some startling costs for all of this and concludes that the total loss of output due to depression and chronic anxiety is some £12 billion a year. Of this the cost to the taxpayer is some £7 billion. And all of this is in stark contrast to the estimated cost of providing a proper therapy service - £0.6 billion a year.

What has all of this to do with work life balance? Well two seemingly contradictory things. When people feel ground down by too many demands placed upon them, when they feel they are trying as hard as they can but are getting nowhere, or when the competing needs of work and family stretch them to breaking point - it is no wonder that many become depressed. Whether this is a clinical diagnosis from the GP or a self-diagnosis of “feeling down” or suffering from “the blues” it is an issue that needs to be addressed.

On the other hand the meaning and motivation people get from fulfilling their jobs, from having the purpose of work, and the camaraderie and social contact that often goes along with it can act as a powerful aid to recovery. And recovery is possible. This is not a hopeless situation. There are actions that both employers and employees alike can take to help improve the situation. The rest of this article summarises these strategies and while for the sake of brevity the detail given here is not complete they form a sound basis for further discussion and for moving forward with positive momentum.

Strategies for Change

Here is a brief review of the strategies employed at the Work Life Balance Centre when working with people suffering from depression (whether clinically diagnosed or not).

1) Get some help

Depression is not something to be taken lightly and does not get better on its own. You need help and support – preferably from a professional experienced in dealing with people suffering from depression or anxiety. One of the most effective forms of help is cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT), which is the basis of much of the work carried out at the Centre. Talk to your GP or your occupational health department (if you have one) to see if they can point you in the right direction. In addition there are plenty of websites describing the symptoms of depression, and the properties of CBT so get well informed.

¹ 24-7 survey conducted annually by Work Life Balance Centre, available from www.24-7survey.co.uk

² The Depression Report: A new deal for depression and anxiety disorders. The Centre for Economic Performance's Mental Policy Group. Published by London School of Economics and Political Science. June 2006.

2) Exercise regularly

All change requires energy and effort – especially the change involved in combating depression/anxiety. The problem is that depression robs you of energy making it much harder to get better. One of the first strategies we employ when working with people suffering from depression is to get some exercise first thing in the morning. This can be anything that involves movement - sit-up, shadow boxing, running, cycling (moving or static), or even just turning on some music and dancing. You will feel so much better afterwards – and much more receptive to the strategies you will need to employ in deal with your issues. (Please speak to your GP about the right kind of exercise for you if you have any additional health issues.)

3) Watch the alcohol

Forget the idea that drink will cheer you up. Heavy drinking will only make things worse and alcohol mixes very badly with many medications. While an occasional glass of wine, or a small amount of your favourite tippie can be an important treat, if you drink to excess not only will your problems still be there when you sober up but so will your hangover.

4) Think about your thoughts

Depressing or anxious thoughts can run like an unwelcome recording in your head. “I’m going to panic in a moment”, “It’s all pointless”, “I’ll never be happy”, “If I do that I’ll faint”, and many other negative messages serve to make things so much worse. Become more aware of when you play these recorded messages to yourself – and hit the stop button as soon as you hear them. Get into the habit of finding a positive alternative for your recording like “I know I can cope”, “I’m stronger than I think – I can deal with this”. It make take many attempts before you are able to silence the negative voice but persist and you will win through.

5) The best list ever

Trying to rein in the negative thoughts is only part of the story; you need to start recording some positive messages to replace them. This exercise is a quick and easy way to begin this process. Write out a list of 50 good things about your life. They can be from your childhood or from today – the timing does not matter. And they can be about anything – holidays, presents received, school, favourite books or movies, friendships, family, pets, - whatever springs to mind. Work hard to get 50 of them and then keep the list going be adding more every few days. In fact why not do some things just so you can put them on the list.

6) Me first

Take some time to look after yourself. Pamper yourself. This is very important. Many people who are depressed often have low opinions of their own worth so you need to make sure that you realise your value. If you act like a doormat you will be treated like one so make sure you invest some time in doing things just for you. Self-respect is a key component of good mental health - and only you can cultivate it. When writing your list (see above) add some points in about yourself – what a good parent, friend, spouse or partner you have been. Look at your accomplishments and include those. When you treat yourself well is it amazing how other people will follow your example.

7) Food, glorious food

Eat regularly and well. Unfortunately depression can put you off your food, or make you feel too lethargic to prepare it. You need to try really hard to overcome this, as a lack of regular food intake will make you feel worse. Also too many high sugar snacks will only add to the problem as after the initial rush wears off you will get sugar crash – often feeling worse than you did before. Try fruit instead – the slow release sugars will sustain the “high” over a longer period. If you have been depressed for a long time and your appetite is very suppressed then treat yourself to the kind of comfort food you enjoy as a way of getting your eating habits going again.

8) Create mini milestones

Whenever you feel overwhelmed by something whether it is coping with a difficult piece of work, redecorating your home, or simply getting out of bed, it will be much easier if you break it down in smaller steps. Create a series of mini milestones on the way to the end result and then tackle them one at a time. Don’t make these steps too ambitious at first, as it is important to get into the habit of achieving the goals you have set. This will help to motivate you and give you the energy you need to keep going. As you gain momentum you can make the challenges a little bigger. And remember to always celebrate every success. Rewarding yourself for the progress you have made is an important part of recovery.

9) Get enough sleep

When you suffer from depression it can be very difficult to get to sleep - leaving you lying there for hours tossing and turning. Then of course during the day you feel like a zombie because you are exhausted. Try to establish a relaxing night time routine. Go into wind down mode an hour before going to bed. Have a relaxing bath, or sit quietly and read. (Aromatherapy oils are a good aid to sleep, have them in your bath, or on your pillow.) Have a warm comforting drink (nothing with caffeine) like milk with honey or nutmeg. Once in bed deliberately picture yourself in relaxing situations and scenes. If troubling thoughts crop up remember to press the stop button (see 4 above) and go back to the relaxing pictures instead.

10 What is your body language saying?

The next time you are in a group of people, see if you can spot those who are feeling happy and those who are miserable. It is not that hard. There is something about the body language and facial expression that gives it away. Hunched over shoulders, stooped back, lowered head, a dragging walk, grim expression, down turned mouth, sad looking eyes. They are all clear signals of what is on the inside. Instead of waiting to feel better to look better - try things the other way around. Looking more confident and alert can actually make you feel better. Deliberately stand, move and hold yourself as if you are already happy, and see how much better the world can feel. If you find this hard, think of someone who usually looks cheerful and lively – and copy their stance and expression. Fake it to make it – and you'll be amazed at the difference.

What next

There are no quick fixes for dealing with anxiety and depression but the dedication and persistence needed to move forward into a better life are well worth it. They do not have to rule your life forever. You can bounce back. Professional help can make all of the difference. For employers making such help available through the workplace will benefit you financially, and in terms of performance and productivity.

For those suffering from depression the sooner you begin your journey back to health the better, so do not delay and get the help you need. And good luck.

For more information about these issues for your employees or to enquiry about coaching sessions for yourself contact Julie Hurst on 01530 273056 or email to hurstj@worklifebalancecentre.org.