

AN EXPLORATION OF JOB ACCOMMODATIONS FOR EMPLOYEES WITH DEPRESSION

DOUGLAS BRIAN HANSON MA, CCRC, RCC



Solutions to Workplace Barriers

- **The key solution to overcoming barriers is the provision of education to enhance the knowledge, awareness and understanding of depression by supervisors, co-workers and service providers.**
- **The endorsement and active participation of top management in the development of a corporate culture supportive and understanding of the salient issues and needs of all employees with disabilities.**
- **Co-workers are “key” to the success of accommodations, and, as such, interventions needed to be realistic and acceptable to them.**
- **Early identification, diagnosis and intervention strategies for employees with depression should be initiated in order to circumvent the development of more severe, chronic depressive symptoms.**
- **Rehabilitation professionals trained in psychiatric rehabilitation, depression counselling and mental disability management are essential to the accommodation process.**
- **Effective tracking and monitoring of risk factors, incidence, demographics, interventions and accommodations by the employer allows for the development of the most effective and efficient rehabilitation interventions.**



Purpose

- To identify, critically review and develop job accommodation guidelines to support the removal of employment-based barriers (i.e. attitudes, lack of knowledge, finances, and system support) for individuals disabled with depression.
- To raise awareness of the barriers and recommended accommodation solutions to the employment of individuals disabled with depression.

Significance

- There has been little direct work to study how job accommodations for mental illnesses are actually evolving in the field.
- The results will be of benefit to policy makers, researchers, practitioners, employers and individuals.
- This study establishes directions for further research..

Method

This qualitative study involved a retrospective exploration of the phenomenon of job accommodations for individuals with depression. Twenty-one participants (experts) who had recognized training and experience in the treatment, rehabilitation and accommodation of individuals with depression were interviewed. Experts were selected from Canada, the United States and Australia with an equal number having MA, PhD, and MD academic training. The sampling method was intensity sampling, similar to purposive sampling, of experiential experts. Snowball sampling was introduced as the interviewed experts recommended other colleagues as participants. Data analysis followed the principles of qualitative coding.

Results

- Lack of education, knowledge and awareness of depression by employers, co-workers, service providers and individuals with depression serves as barriers to those experiencing depression.
- Stigma causes employees with depression to often feel threatened, guilty and ashamed. These employees often feel isolated and are apprehensive about disclosing their disability for fear of being discriminated against and losing their jobs. The social stigma of depression causes a lack of meaningful relationships with supervisors and co-workers. This absence of workplace relationships was cited as being the main cause of “most illnesses in the workplace.”
- Financial resources are inadequate for governments, companies and individuals to fund effective psychiatric (depression) treatment and vocational rehabilitation programs.
- Employer characteristics and expectations are workplace contextual factors that are often neglected when job accommodations are being considered.

Recommended Workplace Accommodations

- *Temporary changes in job requirements* are effective accommodations for individuals experiencing social, emotional and intellectual limitations. These accommodations incorporate psychological and cognitive demands, schedule modifications, modifications to work policies and procedures, altering job performance expectations, providing physical assistance and initiating changes in corporate norms.
- *Workplace social support* involves supervisors and co-workers being informed of the impact relationship difficulties can have on the employee with depression, and ensuring these difficulties are resolved with the employee prior to he/she commencing a graduated return to work (GRTW). Contextual workplace factors, such as a supportive culture and employer policies and disability management practices encouraging respect, trust and communication were salient determinants of successful return to work programs.
- *The most important factor in the accommodation process is the social impact of the accommodation.* This is referred to as “*relationship accommodation*”. However, employees must be receptive to disclosure of their disability to supervisors and essential coworkers for functional limitations and accommodations to be discussed.
- The symptoms of depression can manifest as low impulse control, agitation, distractibility and difficulties being around others. These *social limitations often necessitate social skills training* in order to reduce the risk of relationship difficulties developing.

Conclusions

To effectively solve the problem of workplace depression an employer based mental disability management approach is recommended which incorporates:

- The commitment of top management
- Education and awareness training from top management down emphasizing a biopsychosocial approach to depression
- A supportive corporate culture
- Employer policies and practices encouraging respect, trust and communication
- Effective tracking and monitoring of risk factors, incidence, demographics, interventions and accommodations
- Early identification of and interventions for employees with depression
- Employer encouragement, support and concessions for supervisors and co-workers involved in the accommodation of employees with depression
- Rehabilitation professionals trained in psychiatric rehabilitation, depression counselling, and mental disability management