

Fighting depression at work

While there is much discussion about the impending labour shortage, another unsettling and silent fact is beginning to surface.

The World Health Organization predicts that by 2020 the second most common disability, after heart disease, will be depression. While heart disease is less stigmatizing and easier to confront in the workplace, mental illnesses are usually more difficult to detect and address.

But a new publication by researchers at the Centre for Applied Research in Mental Health and Addiction at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, B.C., is designed to help battle workplace depression. And it comes at a critical time.

A Health Canada report estimated that mental illnesses (depression being one of the most common) cost the private and public sectors \$14.4 billion annually. It is becoming clear that the workplace will need to incorporate educational programs so employees will be able to detect signs of depression early, seek professional help and be provided with co-worker and manager support on the job to reduce the organizational costs of mental illness.

The authors of *Antidepressant Skills at Work: Dealing with Mood Problems in the Workplace* — clinical psychologists Dan Bilsker, Merv Gilbert and Joti Samra — describe depression as a chronic low mood disorder lasting for weeks or longer. Since it's difficult for an afflicted individual to self-diagnose, signs of depression are often detected by family, friends or co-workers.

Symptoms described in the manual include a loss of motivation and concentration, sleep disturbances, fatigue and thoughts of suicide and death. There are two types of depression — mild and major — and the signs of the mental disorder are the same although the symptoms in major depression are more serious.

Skills not pills

The manual emphasizes “antidepress-



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sant skills rather than antidepressant pills.” It is segmented into three sets of skills followed by practical exercises.

Solving the problem effectively

The first skill involves identifying a problem and documenting the way an individual feels when encountering such a problem.

Next the depressed person brainstorms solutions to resolve the problem. During depression, even the smallest difficulty may be hard to overcome and the manual suggests starting with a simpler problem.

The key is to build upon one's accomplishments. The individual identifies the various actions (such as passive, aggressive and assertive) and the possible results of each action. The reader of the manual is directed to compare actions, choose the action with the best result and make a plan that has a time limit to reach the end result. Once the goal is reached or time has run out, the depressed individual is to evaluate the goal and move on.

Thinking realistically

The second skill is an exercise in changing unrealistic thoughts into realistic ones. The individual performing the exercise is to identify and write down his thoughts during a depressive mood. In depressed individuals there is often no basis for his excessively negative thoughts and the manual directs the person to challenge and re-eval-

uate his cognitive processes and replace them with more realistic ones. Often an individual with depression will think a situation is much worse than it actually is.

Reactivating a life

The last skill suggests a person with depression must get active even though there may be a lack of motivation. The manual suggests choosing only a couple of activities with specific and easily met goals so the individual does not feel overwhelmed. This allows for a better success rate and sense of accomplishment. As self-esteem and motivation increase, the difficulty of the goals in an activity can also increase.

Samra points out the skills and procedures in the manual are derived from scientific studies involving cognitive behavioural therapy, an often-used tool in clinical practices. She also notes only one in 10 people suffering from depression are using employee assistance programs offered through work. Samra said there are numerous reasons for this, including the stigma attached to mental illness, a lack of information and the cost of accessing proper treatment.

Anti-Depressant Skills at Work is designed to educate and reduce depression so the afflicted individual will regain a sense of well-being and productivity in the workplace. In addition, practicing the skills in the manual may help reduce absenteeism and presenteeism for those suffering from depression, thus benefiting the organization.

***Anti-Depressant Skills at Work*, a 68-page book, can be downloaded for free at www.carmha.ca. It's also possible to purchase print copies of the book through the website.**

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