

The role of managers in promoting social acceptance among people with depression in the workplace

by Sara Evans-Lacko and Martin Knapp

Our research highlights the important role that managers and organisations can play by creating supportive working environments that promote social acceptance for employees with depression. By doing so, employees will feel more comfortable in discussing any potential mental health issues early on. Our findings suggest that some responses, such as flexible working hours, may be helpful but are not necessarily adequate, and also emphasise the importance of support and openness of managers in addition to flexible working hours.

Depression is the **leading cause of disability worldwide**. Although 30 million people in Europe and 350 million people worldwide struggle with depression, many workplaces underestimate its impact. Given the high prevalence and the significant economic consequences associated with depression, employers and managers need to take a proactive approach to supporting employees with depression.

Despite a lot of publicity surrounding mental illness and the growth in efforts to reduce stigma, such as the **Time to Change campaign**¹ there is **still a major stigma** associated with depression and many employers are not dealing with it adequately.

To look at this issue more in depth across Europe, we analysed data from 7065 employees and managers recruited from seven European countries: the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Spain, Germany, Turkey and Denmark to better understand the social impact of depression in the workplace and the role of managers and employers in facilitating a positive work environment and access to appropriate and effective treatment in order to mitigate the risk and impact of depression in the workplace.

We found that 20% of employed people report having a previous diagnosis of depression. Among employees with a diagnosis of depression, 20-55% take time off work due to the illness. University-educated professionals are less likely to take time off work when depressed and, if they do, are reluctant to tell their employer the reason why. There were some differences between countries, for example:

- Italians are less likely to reveal a prior diagnosis of depression compared to people in the UK and Turkey
- Managers in Denmark are more sympathetic towards depressed employees and less likely to discriminate against them than their European counterparts
- Managers in France and Spain are the most likely to recommend that the employee seek help from a healthcare professional for their depression.

We then looked at what types of manager and workplace factors might be most helpful for people with depression. Being offered flexible working hours and time can be helpful, but this is not necessarily the best strategy, especially in isolation, because it doesn't promote social inclusion, which is what a depressed person needs. A better option to tackle mental illness in the workplace is for managers to offer direct help to depressed employees. Managers who avoid discussing an employee's depression are only adding to the general ignorance of mental illness and not helping either the company or the staff member.

Other research has emphasised the importance of positive attitudes in relation to social acceptance of people with mental illness as a key factor driving stigma and discrimination and has shown a direct link between attitudes and the experiences of people with mental illness (see

Evans *et al.* 2013, 2012). Social acceptance of people with mental illness, however, has not improved in recent decades.

Although there are some examples of good practice, absenteeism and early retirement as a result of mental illness, especially depression, seem to be increasing across Europe⁵. Manager responses which focus on offering help to the employee with depression can be help to develop positive perceptions in the workplace and also, openness and disclosure of employees with depression.

Full paper

Evans-Lacko S, Knapp M. Importance of social and cultural factors on attitudes, disclosure and time off work for depression: findings from a seven country European study on depression in the workplace. PLOS ONE, 2014

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