

## **Dealing with Anxiety and Depression in the Workplace**

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One of the greatest challenges facing employers in an environment where staff numbers are reduced and when performance and productivity levels need to be higher than before is how to deal with stress and anxiety among staff before depression takes hold. Depression, often called the common cold of mental illness, may be defined as an illness that involves the body, mood and thought (National Institute of Mental Health). Good mental health at work enables a person to cope with the demands of their role, ensuring they are productive and positive when they are at work. One way to think about mental well being is looking at how well a person functions, does their job and interacts with others at work. The good news is that, in more than 80% of cases, treatment is effective, so knowing when to identify when a staff member is stressed, anxious or depressed and then having the skills to deal with it effectively is the best course of action for any employer.

Depression begins with stress, which is when the perceived demands of the job are greater than the person's perceived ability to cope. The importance of the outcome will determine the level of stress experienced. It is when stress levels are not managed by the person or continue for an extended length of time, that the person moves into the anxiety arena. This is a state of fear which affects the person on a range of levels, including productivity, ability to relate to others, loss of appetite and others. It is when this feeling of anxiety persists for a period of time that a person can enter the depression area, with the level of depression ranging from mild to severe. Overall then, mental health describes how we think and feel about ourselves as well as how able we are to cope with change and significant life events that we encounter. This paper will look at the facts about depression, symptoms in the workplace, the role of the organisation and best practice examples in this area.

### **The Facts about Depression**

- It is estimated that 5-10% of the population suffer from depression at any given time
- Research shows that by 2020 depression will become the second most common illness in the western world
- Mental health problems account for up to 30% of consultations with GP's in Europe
- Depression is an illness that involves the body, mood and thoughts
- In Ireland, 85% of people agree that anyone can experience mental health problems, but 62% would not want others knowing if they had a mental health problem
- Experts estimate that approximately one out of every two families will have some member of the family who suffers from depression at one point in their lives
- Depression at work manifests itself through changes in performance and behavioural change
- Success at work depends on everyone's contribution. Organisations cannot afford to ignore depression at work
- When you are stressed, your brain works differently. You are more likely to resort to 'all or nothing' thinking, which causes catastrophic thinking and difficulties solving complex problems
- It is not a passing mood. It is not a personal weakness. It is a major, but treatable illness

- Patients with depressive symptoms spend more days in bed than those with diabetes, arthritis and back problems
- Women are twice as likely to experience depression as men
- The average period of time that a person suffers from depression (apart from endogenous depression), if left untreated, is 8 months
- When a person is stressed, their brain works differently. This can often lead to 'all or nothing' thinking which reduces effectiveness in solving problems.
- Two thirds of both men and women say work has a significant impact on their stress levels

### **Signs of Depression in the Workplace**

Usually the symptoms of depression develop over time. Typically, the employee experiences anxiety and mild depressive periods that range from weeks to several months. The time when an employee is most likely to suffer from depression is when they are aged between 24 and 44 years old (Byrne et al, 2005). Depression in the workplace shows itself through changes in performance and behaviours which include (Healthy Place.com, 2006) :

1. Decreased or inconsistent productivity
2. Absenteeism, lateness and frequent absence from work area
3. Increased errors and lower quality of work
4. Procrastination
5. Withdrawal from co workers
6. Overly sensitive or emotional reactions
7. Decreased interest in work
8. Slowed thoughts
9. Difficulty learning or remembering
10. Slowed movement and actions
11. Frequent comments about being tired

### **The Role of the Organisation**

Clever, progressive organisations are those that help their staff to meet the challenge of increased demands, reduced staffing, fear and increased levels of negativity in the economy and the country as a whole before it is too late. Some of the approaches that need to be considered in order to do this include training and development, having good policies and procedures in this area and focusing on employee engagement. Case examples from GlaxoSmithKline, Eircom and Diageo will be highlighted to illustrate what these organisations do to ensure high levels of resilience and engagement among their workforces.

### **HR Policies and Procedures**

Putting in place policies and procedures that ensure the well being of staff is taken seriously by the organisation sends a clear message to the workforce of the support for the individual's mental well being at work. A review of current systems and how they work in an environment where more and more people are experiencing stress at work would be a useful starting point. Determining what is and what isn't working currently in terms of for example, EAPs, feedback about work pressures to line managers, absenteeism rates and stress related sickness levels allows for the amendment and introduction of policies appropriate to

the organisation. Having a mental health policy is something that demonstrates an employer's commitment to taking care of employees that work within the organisation. Such an initiative shows that the organisation recognises and accepts that mental health is an important issue and emphasises the organisation's commitment to promoting the mental health of its workforce. A focus on raising employee engagement levels is one that research shows to have a powerful impact on wellbeing and motivation at work. Organisations that invest in ensuring employees feel included and part of the organisation they belong to reduce feelings of isolation, stress and separation which are often associated with poor mental health and depression at work. The Diageo case example highlights the approach and benefits which resulted from a clear investment in engagement in this organisation.

### **Management Training and Development**

Employee education about depression and its treatment needs to be included in the training plan of the organisation, with the starting point of effective stress and depression prevention practices at work being good people management. Employees must learn to self identify depressive symptoms (Johnson and Indvik, 1997). By recognising symptoms within the individual's own performance early and by educating staff as to the supports provided by the organisation, problems are less likely to escalate further. Upskilling managers to identify stress and anxiety among their teams and to intervene when needed in order to prevent the situation getting worse is one of the most effective ways of supporting people at work and ensuring staff feel engaged, cared for and motivated to continue to perform to their maximum capabilities.

Training managers and supervisors to identify the symptoms and recognise when intervention is necessary is a vital first step. Several researchers have shown that (Johnson and Indvik, 1997) organisations that train their managers to avoid the following practices are likely to reduce the instances of depression among the workforce:

- Setting short work deadlines that are not realistic
- Giving staff complex work responsibilities, but no decision making authority
- Giving staff routine and monotonous jobs only
- Poor management practices where managers are seen to be unfair or non supportive of staff
- Failing to give praise and recognition to staff

Therefore, many of these stressors are avoidable in terms of upskilling managers to give regular feedback, listen to staff, be fair in their dealings with those in their teams and to set realistic, challenging goals that stretch the person to a level where they feel competent to achieve the targets. Also, the level of trust that staff have for the organisation is central to building resilience among the workforce. A critical element of this are the levels of trust that exist between managers and staff. By investing in the development of people management skills and competencies, the quality of this primary relationship is enhanced.

## **Focus on Employee Engagement**

The Corporate Leadership Council surveyed 500,000 people across a range of businesses, in the years 2008 to 2010. The levels of staff who were highly disengaged was 10% in 2008, 20% in 2009 to 33% in 2010. They also showed that discretionary effort dropped by 53% since its peak in 2005. Therefore, the severity of this issue is clear, highlighting the absolute need for organisations to prevent these levels of disengagement falling further in the year ahead.

Organisations that invest in developing higher levels of engagement among the workforce so that employees feel more connected to the organisation are less likely to experience high stress levels, as there is a negative correlation between stress and employee engagement levels at work. By focusing on increasing levels of engagement, staff are encouraged to and more likely to discuss when they are feeling stressed and what help they may need to deal with the pressure, thus preventing it from becoming a more serious problem.

A wellbeing focus is one whereby organisations adopt a range of measures aimed at ensuring employees have higher levels of overall health and resilience at work. In a survey by Towers Perrin (2008), 4 out of 5 employees (80%) believe their employers should encourage employees to adopt healthy lifestyles. Programmes run for staff include ones on how to manage stress and pressure, learning relaxation and resilience techniques, healthy eating and exercise programmes etc. The onus in these types of initiatives is to encourage staff themselves to take ownership of their own well being, while the organisation supports them in this process. By investing in the care of the individual through initiatives such as these, progressive organisations understand the correlation between wellbeing, trust and performance levels.

The following case examples highlight what progressive organisations are doing in the areas of HR policies and procedures, training and development and employee engagement initiatives in order to create workplaces that encourage and support wellbeing and resilience as critical elements of business performance and organisational values.

### **Best Practice Case Examples**

#### **Eircom**

In Eircom, there is a recognition that success can often depend on the ability of employees to cope with stress and change. In Eircom, there is widespread recognition that the stresses of ordinary life can affect an employee's performance at work, so the importance of identifying stress at an early stage in order to allow the employee to avail of appropriate assistance and resolve the issues causing the stress is critical.

The overall wellbeing of the employee is crucial within the organisation to maintaining and managing resilience in the workplace. Eircom, through the area of 'Human Resources' and particularly through its ' Safety, Environment and Wellbeing' team offers a range of supports to the employee. The following outlines the key areas of support:

#### Employee Assistance Programme

The Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) is a national, confidential service which offers support free to Eircom employees who may be experiencing work related or personal problems. The service in its current form has been in place for over 10 years. There are four dedicated Employee Assistance Officers (EAOs), each with considerable experience in the area. The programme offers assistance to employees on a broad range of issues including work issues, addiction, relationship issues, financial issues, bereavement and stress. Where the EAP initiates a referral to counselling services in many cases a large portion of the financial cost is paid for by an employee medical fund called Medisan. This fund is a vital resource for the EAOs as it provides financial assistance for members towards a range of medical costs as well as income assistance when on reduced pay.

There is also a comprehensive internal website that allows employees and managers access important information on issues that may affect them. These include general health, mental health, family support and financial matters. One important aspect of the website is the support offered to managers. Managers are often the first to recognise if an employee is experiencing difficulties in the workplace. Therefore the Employee Assistance Programme has developed guides for managers to help them respond appropriately to various events.

The user-friendly format of the site allows the employee to initially explore solutions to issues of concern. At each point there is a link to the EAOs' contact details should a more personal response be required. The Eircom EAP offers a comprehensive service to employee's, managers, family or colleagues. They guide the manager in developing return to work programmes for employees who have been absent. This holistic approach offers a duty of care that is inclusive and recognises that there are often many aspects to a person's problems. Where stress becomes an issue for any employee the EAO works closely with the person and initiates a referral to the Well at Work for an immediate assessment, where appropriate.

### The Well at Work

The Well at Work provides an overall corporate health audit for Eircom offering specialist occupational support to all employees. Referrals are made via the Human Resources team and the EAP. The range of services provided include medical assessments, psychological evaluations and referral to a range of specialist medical services. Importantly, where an employee indicates that they are experiencing stress, an immediate referral is made to the Well at Work. The referral will involve an initial consultation and review by the Occupational Health Adviser who will evaluate the situation and identify the appropriate course of action. The employee is provided with regular communications and advice throughout the referral process. A case management approach ensures that all available resources are provided and a holistic approach is adopted throughout. The Well at Work's corporate annual health audit provides guidance as to actions that need to be undertaken by the organisation to ensure best practice in this area is maintained.

### Positive 2 Work.

Eircom is the lead partner in the Positive 2 Work initiative. The initiative, involving IBEC, ICTU, and Skillnets provides a range of training programmes to build resilience at work. Topics covered include stress management, conflict resolution, dignity at work, mediation skills, assertiveness, personal effectiveness etc. Employees are provided with time off to

attend training during work hours with a view to building personal effectiveness and better coping skills

### Wellbeing

The Eircom Wellness Programme provides advice and guidance to employees on a range of health related matters. A website provides information, on well-being and general health issues including diet, exercise, support groups etc. Eircom has initiated a better health awareness programme and has launched a number of road shows at key employee locations to provide specialist advice and guidance on a range of health issues. Road shows during 2011 involved the Marie Keating Foundation and the Irish Heart Foundation.

### Safety in the Workplace

Eircom is committed to ensuring the physical and psychological safety of all employees. The company provides training and guidance in dealing with potentially difficult situations including verbal and physical aggression or situations involving a threat or actual physical violence. Similarly, when a workplace accident occurs, the EAP offers post critical incident counselling and support on a confidential basis which will help to support the employee through a difficult time.

Overall, there is a serious commitment to ensuring that the mental and physical health and well being of Eircom employees is a high priority throughout the organisation. The comprehensive range of supports and assistance that are there for staff in this area sends a clear message within the organisation that this is an area worth investing in for both the individual and the organisations benefit.

### GlaxoSmithKline

A companywide survey within GlaxoSmithKline of senior leaders in the global organisation highlighted that only 22 per cent of employees are highly engaged, resilient and energised. To address this issue and to help employees to become more resilient at work, a new and comprehensive workshop was designed to support healthy, high levels of performance among staff by releasing the energy of all employees, at work and at home. These workshops were called Energy for Performance and focused on developing the natural energies of each individual so that they could work to their true potential

As a result of this global initiative, work related mental health cases have decreased by 60% in 4 years; self reported pressure due to work life conflicts have fallen by 25% and staff satisfaction levels have increased by 21%. Adrian Chojnacki, VP Employee Health and Performance in the UK was quoted as saying "We want an organisation that is full of people who are efficient and effective energy managers. We really want to release the potential energy of all employees. To do this we have to engage with the senior teams first, but our goal is that ultimately everybody will understand the principles of managing themselves differently."

The Human performance Institute (HPI) has licensed this resilience building workshops to GSK. The workshop uses a science-based, multi-disciplinary approach to achieving high performance training. 'Applying the sciences of performance psychology, exercise physiology and nutrition, the programme enables participants to be physically energised, emotionally connected, mentally focused and more fully aligned with their core values and beliefs', says Bob Carr, vice President, Employee Health and Performance. "This allows for the unleashing of the full potential and passion of our entire organisation."

These workshops are based on physical, mental, emotional and spiritual energy. The feedback from the workshops run so far is unusually emphatic and positive, with descriptions such as 'life-changing' cropping up often enough to convince the sceptic that this course is something more than just another hints-and-tips programme.

Participants are first taken through a 360-degree energy management assessment that reveals through contributions from peers, managers and family how they currently invest their energy (a real 'face-the-truth' moment, according to one participant). With a mix of class sessions, gym visits and work at home, the workshops enable participants to 'face the truth, define purpose and take action' in all areas of energy management, covering topics such as nutrition and eating, physical training and practical help and support in creating an energy management plan – again, focused on the individual's needs.

“All this has the aim of helping people to succeed sustainably in all areas of their lives,” says Sue Cruse, director, Leadership Health and Sustainability, Employee Health and Performance. Indeed, as the workshop promotion material says, it is 'highly useful for anyone who wants to take their current energy, performance and achievement to the next level – personally and professionally'. In other words it's about building individual empowerment.

While it would be impractical for all employees to attend the workshop, Employee Health and Performance within GlaxoSmithKline, has developed a half-day workshop in the area of personal resilience which uses the principles of the programme.

Therefore, GlaxoSmithKline have focused on developing the personal energies of staff in their organisation to ensure individuals can build on develop something that is already a natural strength for that person. By giving people the tools to identify their own energies and ways of working, happiness, creativity, engagement, performance, resilience and overall wellbeing levels are enhanced throughout the organisation.

## **Diageo**

Every year Diageo conduct an annual employee survey to help understand the views of employees. This feedback helps to determine the areas that are really important from an employee perspective. In 2009 this survey showed that employees were feeling insecure about the future and uncertain about the direction the business was going in. The following year, Diageo strengthened their approach to create much more of a partnership approach with employees with a clear focus on building engagement levels among the workforce in 2010 and 2011. This became a strategic priority in the organisation, as the value of having highly engaged employees was widely held by senior management throughout the business. Diageo then worked with a number of employee volunteers, known internally as Engagement Champions who played a lead role in helping to understand what was really important from an employee perspective. The internal employee survey engagement results increased significantly in 2010, indicating that employees really value the changes made, and feel more connected to the business as a result. The elements of this partnership approach are described below.

A highly visible and connected leadership team, aligned to the common goal of inspiring people throughout the organisation, was created. The strategy was re launched with the goal of creating a picture of the future which would engage all employees. The new strategy was launched at a Conference called the 'You' Conference where the role of each person committing to real outcomes was a central theme. A particular area of focus was put on developing middle and senior business leaders to play a key role in coaching employees to

create genuine connections to the business at an individual level. Every leader in the business was challenged to prioritise the engagement of their employees as a key part of their role, drawing up a defined engagement plan (90 day plan) which outlined key deliverables in their areas. The organisation then recognised and celebrated examples of brilliant execution. Managers were measured against how they delivered against these plans. This investment reflects the conviction among top management that employee engagement is, and will continue to be, critical to the ongoing success of the business.

Creating a sense of shared ownership and individual accountability among all employees for the future direction of the business and the achievement of business goals was a key focus for the organisation. As part of this shared ownership, every employee committed to undertaking personal actions to achieve business goals. Communication and involvement are core aspects of the drive towards increased engagement, so in the past year, this included an annual employee conference event run over two days to ensure that every employee had an opportunity to connect with the business goals. The Managing Director writes to all employees monthly to ensure that every employee knows how the business is tracking against its key performance measures. Frequent informal connection events including Leadership Forum meetings are often run for middle managers to ensure that they are kept fully up to date with business priorities and are equipped to onward engage their employees. An interactive employee newsletter is published every two weeks, sharing news and information, related to the business and employees. Celebrating success and saying thank you are core elements of this communication strategy and include frequently taking time out to say thank you to employees at MD coffee mornings, informal social events every calendar quarter and other events such as the employee Arthurs Day event, to name but a few.

Overall, Diageo believe that involving employees in the decisions that affect them and having a say in how things are done makes Diageo Ireland a great place to work. Employees are treated as an integral part of the organisation and know they are critical to its success. Employees play a key role in how the business is managed and run through having a real voice throughout the process.

At Diageo Ireland, there is a strong commitment to the people who work in the organisation. The result of this investment showed a significant increase in employee engagement levels. Also in 2011, Diageo were ranked second on the large employer list in the Best Companies to Work For Survey and won the most trusted leader award for their MD, John Kennedy. This compared with a ranking of seventh place in 2010. Overall then, the initiatives taken by Diageo to raise the levels of engagement and buy in from employees led to measurable results as indicated by these ranking changes in just one year. The partnership approach adopted is one that will be built on in the future to ensure this trend continues and the area of employee wellbeing, satisfaction and involvement with the organisation continues to go from strength to strength.

### Conclusion

A 2007 HSE Report on mental health in Ireland concluded that there is a negative association among Irish people regarding those diagnosed with mental health problems. Therefore, there is a need for those at work to be more aware of how widespread this issue is so that the stigma attached to it can be reduced. People need to be able to talk about their mental health and to have an employer and personal manager who is equipped to have this conversation with their team regarding how they are coping at work and what supports they may need from time to time to manage their workload and the pressures within the role.

Social isolation is often associated with those who are suffering from depression, therefore progressive employers offer assistance to staff who may need it but also encourage managers and their teams to engage and interact with each other. Although employers who encourage their people to talk and become more open about their mental health may not have the complete answer, it will certainly help with reducing the negative connotations associated with this subject and help to promote a more supportive, inclusive working environment. Research shows that productivity, absenteeism, and potential continued employment can be positively impacted with proper treatment for depression (Lerner et al 2004). Good policies, procedures, training and organisational supports in this area make real sense for both the individual and the organisation.

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