

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

I manage a small business with a few people who report to me. During the last six months, one of my accountants – Mona – has gone through a divorce, and I know that she is depressed. I've asked her how she's doing, and she always says, "fine." But I can tell that's not true. She seems to have trouble concentrating on her work, and breaks into tears often. Her productivity has gone way down, and this has required that another employee and I pick up the slack. I feel bad for Mona, and care about her. We've worked together for years. Also, I don't want to add to her troubles, but I'm responsible for this business running smoothly and right now it's not. Any suggestions?

-- Keith

Dear Keith,

You may not be surprised to know that depression costs American businesses more than \$44 billion a year in lost productivity, according to a 2003 study reported in the Journal of the American Medical Association. Phone interviews with more than 2,000 subjects found depressed workers experience fatigue, irritability, loss of concentration, and trouble relating to co-workers; symptoms that negatively affect their ability to do their jobs at an optimal level.

Depressed employees reported losing about 5.5 hours each week in reduced job performance.

Research also shows that depression affects approximately 9% of the workforce at any given time. More than nineteen million Americans suffer from significant depression.

What is very sad about Mona's situation (and other people's who suffer from depression) is that there are many things one can do to heal. Of course, a major problem with depression is that people who suffer from it forget what it's like to feel good. They have lost sight of their human ability to heal and change, a phenomenon that Albert Camus reminded us of when he wrote, "In the midst of winter, I finally learned there was in me an invincible summer."

Depressed people are hopeless about the future, and feel powerless to change their lives. The depression saps them of the psychological and physical energy necessary to pull themselves out of this emotional abyss. Often they are not aware of the fact that depression is treatable, and that it is quite possible to recover and live a happy, productive life. Many people have, and Mona could become one of them.

Have a private conversation with Mona. Let her know that you are concerned about her. The tone of your letter convinces me that you do care about her as a person, and not just as your employee. Tell her that you have observed her sadness, and her loss of productivity. Be gentle and supportive, and let her know that you are there to help. Assure her that everyone feels down from time to time, but that you have observed that her crying episodes and difficulty concentrating have been going on for more than six months.

Suggest that she see a counselor in your company's EAP (Employee Assistance Program) if you have one. If not, suggest that she set up an appointment with her family physician or make an appointment with a qualified therapist. Mona can be best helped by psychotherapy, and possibly, a trial with an antidepressant medication that her doctor can prescribe. If her depression is related to the loss of her marriage, she may benefit by participating in a divorce support group.

Many communities have these kinds of resources, and you can help her network to them. Both you and Mona can better understand depression by reading one of the many excellent books on the subject, or by going online and finding out more about depression and recovery. You can start by going to the National Institute of Mental Health website (www.nimh.nih.gov) and following the links to "For the Public" and then "Depression."

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2004 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.