Coping With Depression at Work

by ERIC PATTERSON

Working with Depression

When depression is in your life, it wages a war against you. You know it adds a long list of negatives and subtracts a longer list of positives. If depression had its way, you would lay in bed all week with no activity, no socialization and no chance to feel good about yourself. If you surrender to depression, depression wins the war.

Depression is only a part of your life, and you want to keep it that way. You constantly take steps to hold on to the positives in your life. You call your friends often to maintain the socialization. Exercise has become a larger part of your life because you have been reading about the benefits. Therapy has been helpful in focusing on steps to improve your self-esteem. What about work?

For many, work is a mixed experience. You may think that the cons of work outweigh the pros. You may think that it would be better to quit your job and stay home rather than go for another week, day or hour. For some, staying home is the best decision they could ever make. These people are in the minority, though. For the majority, work is one of the most positive coping skills your life can have.

Benefits of Working

Are you skeptical about working? Are you not so sure that working is a sure-fire depression buster? Consider these benefits of working:

- **Structure and routine** – Depression thrives in situation without routine. When there is no routine, depression can have even more influence over your thoughts, feelings and behaviors. Work adds a natural routine through its structure. You know that you have to be there at 9 am everyday so you go through the motions of waking up, getting ready and getting out the door. This may seem tedious at times, but it outweighs the risks of too much free time.

- **Socialization** – Having a strong support system is essential for being a happy, well-rounded person. The problem is that, as adults, it becomes more difficult to meet new people on a regular basis. Without the access to new people, your support system will shrink from death, moves out of the area and growing apart. Work does well to force social interaction and build connections to people from similar backgrounds and ones in similar situations. Like any situation, not all coworkers will make ideal friends, but the social stimulation is always a plus.
- **Finances** – Perhaps the most obvious benefit of work is the money. Not that money is the ultimate goal in life, but when you need to eat, buy clothes and pay the rent, money comes in handy. Having stable finances allows you to better manage other stressors around you. When money is tight, all other stressors become amplified and depression grows.
- **Identity** – Who are you? Are you a chef, teacher or contractor? A career adds to your identity and provides a foundation for self-esteem and worth. People that cannot identify themselves in a profession can feel more out of place and awkward in a variety of settings. This discomfort paired with low self-

esteem strengthens depressive symptoms.

Next page: tips for succeeding at work.

Tips for Succeeding at Work

Now that you know the pros of working outweigh the cons, you want to make work as comfortable and successful as possible. Here's how:

- **Know yourself while you know your symptoms.** Depression changes on a regular basis. It is rarely ever constant. Feeling tired and a slight loss of motivation one day can transform into complete inability to function just a few days later. Look for patterns in your symptoms. Along the way look for triggers in your depression. Triggers are people, places and things that increase your symptoms. Do your symptoms flare around the time the quarterly reports are due? Did you call off the last three Mondays because the thought of the starting another week was too overwhelming? Understanding patterns, triggers and trends gives you the information you need to build a plan.
- **Plan for goals that are realistic.** The expectations you put on yourself and others shape the way you see the world. If you expect to "push through" another work day with willpower and determination, you will likely be let down and disappointed. If you expect your coworker, assistant or your boss to notice that you are having a bad day and go easy on you because of it, you will experience disillusionment, which can only increase depression. Be fair to yourself and others. Accept the notion that work will not be perfect at all times, and you will not be perfect, either.
- **Practice and perfect your self-care.** This is necessary in and out of the workplace. Self-care can be completed in a variety of thought-based or behavioral ways. Thought-based are convenient because you can do them throughout the day without others knowing. Make a mental list of the positives in your workplace or the people you come in contact with throughout the day. Spend a few moments imagining that you were elsewhere for a taste of escape. Behavioral self-care includes finding times during the day to complete a simple relaxation technique. You can do many in a cubicle including deep breathing and progressive muscle relaxation. Ask a friend to walk during lunch for the double benefit of exercise and socialization.
- **Do not keep it like a secret.** Advocating for yourself in the workplace is a fantastic thing to do. Do you have a Human Resources member, a union representative or an understanding supervisor? Talk to them. If you carry a mental health diagnosis from a medical provider you are included the in the Americans with Disabilities Act. You cannot be fired from your position solely based on your disability. In fact, you actually qualify for special accommodations. Use the information you have gathered from your symptoms tracking and communicate this to the appropriate person. Chances are excellent they will provide you with valuable resources like an Employee Assistance Program that provides counseling or information about Family Medical Leave Act which can extend your time off work if needed.

- **Prepare and prevent.** Waiting until after the poor performance review has already been filed with HR is too late to begin communicating your mental health issues at work. Reacting then or when symptoms are high will put you at a disadvantage because it could be seen as a reaction or excuse. Be upfront, clear and appropriate while using a suitable level of self-disclosure. Explore and experiment with ways to discuss your mental health. Options include: "I am concerned that my depression may negatively impact my future work performance. Can we work on some goals or plans for when symptoms flare?" Saying "I have noticed that Monday mornings tend to trigger higher depressive symptoms for me. Is there a way I could work afternoons instead?" is more desirable than "I am too sick to come into work today." Honesty is always better than dishonesty. Even if your employer does not meet your requests fully, they will have a better understanding of your current mental and emotional state.

Conclusion

You may have some hesitation discussing your mental health at work. This is a natural concern as some even struggle to disclose their issues to trusted family and friends. If you have been reluctant to let your workplace

know, think again. The impact you can make to reduce the stigma of mental health in the workplace will benefit you and those that come after you. With honesty, planning and preparation, the success you find in the workplace can follow you home.