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These insights were prepared by Shannon McCoy, an employee of the Government of Canada, at the request of Mental Health International and its Executive Chairman, Bill Wilkerson, LL. D. (Hon), to post on www.mentalhealthinternational.ca and www.targetdepression.com to share with employees and their employers in managing the effects depression and anxiety.

By Shannon McCoy

I believe this personal description of 5 things I found to be helpful and the 5 which were not, can be useful to those who may currently be experiencing difficulty, as well as to those who may experience it in the future. This account could also be helpful in bringing awareness to employers on the mental health issue.

A. HELPFUL

1. Occupational Health Therapist

Seeing an occupational therapist was not likely to be helpful. Or so I thought. I couldn't have been more wrong. The experience allowed me to get out of my headspace and see things from the employer's perspective as well as my own.

For the first time, I was able to step outside of my own thought process which was focused solely inward, constant fight or flight mode. I began to realise that I am still an employee, and still could be useful even though I may be in the throes of illness.

If I want to remain a productive employee, if I want to move upward and onward in my career, I must start to manage my symptoms and once again be a valuable member who has the same shot as everyone else putting in the work and effort.

My mental state does not eliminate my obligations, though it did impede me from operating at my regular potential and speed let alone my best. The therapist was able to provide some options for handling situations as they arose concerning my specific concerns and conditions. Five years later, I still use this advice.

2. Accessible and Fast Mental Health Services

I have taken advantage of the EAP on an annual basis since 2007. One can speak to a qualified specialist over the phone 24/7 in addition to booking an appointment with a professional for up to 8 sessions.

Shannon's Story – A Personal Account of Balancing Mental Wellness in the Workplace

Workplace advocates and programs have been incredibly helpful in supporting me with balancing mental illness and a career. Community programs are beneficial, but can be hard to access in a timely manner, and not all are affordable.

Fundamentally, the point is this: having someone available on the phone and in the workplace has been incredibly helpful.

3. Confidence and Confidentiality

Having management who can be trusted, and in return, can trust their employees is invaluable. Trusting that my boss would be supportive, confidential, respectful and honest with me eliminated a lot of pressure. This was an important aspect which granted me a sense of ease, tapered my symptoms, and allowed me to maintain my dignity in the workplace.

4. Modernized View and Practices

Telework was probably the most helpful aspect for me in my most sensitive times. Having the ability to work from home when I needed to gave me a sense of security that I would otherwise lack or struggle with when in the office.

Sometimes I simply cannot face the world; however that doesn't mean I cannot work. Many government employees are fully capable of carrying out certain tasks in a telework environment. I am far more productive in the comfort and quiet of my home on days where facing the world is my chief struggle.

In the office I'm more likely to focus on not having an anxious episode, or finding my words when someone comes by to talk to me, on days like this it's hard to produce anything of quality and substance.

The quality of mental health advocates has been incredibly helpful for me, especially if they are in upper management. I can't quite further explain it other than it gave me a sense of security, that someone in upper management, a leader, was willing to listen, offer advice and support.

Of course all advocates at any level are essential. I'm simply detailing my personal experience. Much like first aid trained staff, mental health advocates are often the first responders in crisis at the workplace.

Programs, such as support groups or even one on one service, activities like meditation and breathing exercises, yoga and active workstations have been incredibly helpful for me. Burning away or channeling some of those anxious thoughts and behaviours helps me to maintain a level of productivity in the workplace.

Spaces -If telework is not an option, or if one is sensing the throes of an episode coming on, spaces to retreat to are an excellent option. One can check out for 5 mins to breathe, go work for an hour or two, make some phone calls, whatever, a space to go and gather yourself I have found to be invaluable.

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Understanding and respectful boss – This should really be #1, however I thought it best to keep for last in describing my view of the modernization of the workplace hoping it would leave a lasting impression.

I believe that all managers should be well versed in sensitivity and the human condition. In my 13 years with the federal service this has proven to not be the case. More managers than not seem to practice a very outdated approach, which is not conducive to morale, let alone productivity.

When my boss had conducted her/himself in a respectful and compassionate manner, my recovery time was a fraction of what it had been under a boss with opposite values. I was eager to please and produce. It helped me to feel ok at work, and therefore I was ok. I didn't fret the flare ups because my stress was diminished. I consider my time with these managers as a gift.

5. Developing and Maintaining a Support Circle and Toolkit

Having someone to speak with or go to in times of need is a vital part of what I like to call 'my wellness toolkit'. After years of practice, trial, error and refinement, I now know - without a doubt in my mind - who the members of my support circle are.

These are people I can go to without worry of judgment, have a chat, get advice and/or support when in crisis, or anytime. To have one in the workplace is an absolute advantage. Whoever can be there when you need them; that's a support circle.

I have also learned not to shy away from asking for help; took a whole lot of practice, but I'm there. I reach out to the primary members of my support circle when I feel the need. I also reach out to EAP and other programs for professional level help.

As for the other tools I keep in my wellness kit, I use a variety of therapy techniques which I have found helpful. My personal favourites are mindfulness techniques, deep breathing and heart rate variability exercises. Music, reading and other sound or visual therapies can be quite affective as well. Last but not least, positive self-talk, even if it's forced is useful.

I actively acknowledge and then discontinue the negative thought process, whether it's about me or someone else. An example would be instead of thinking on how disappointed I am about gaining weight, I tell myself, "That's because I'm on the road to wellness and I enjoy food again". It's now a habit for me, and I feel good about my thought process.

B. DETRIMENTAL

1. Invasive Actions Aggressive measures taken by my manager were indeed detrimental to my mental health. Being forced into meetings and threatened with disciplinary measures if I did not divulge certain information. This should always be the very last resort for managers and dependent upon the specific case the manger faces with the employee.

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Speak with your employees, face to face and more than once if necessary. Have trust in them, until a reason is given not to uphold that trust. Abrasive and extreme actions do not foster productivity, in fact they hinder it.

2. Cliquishness - This behaviour is rampant throughout the federal government. Management is eager to include those they prefer and exclude those who may not necessarily fit-in, those who are new, or those who whom they've already formed an undesirable opinion of.

Cliques and isolation of individuals present a problem, and not just with those who struggle with their mental health. This will make someone who experiences issues, experience them more deeply and frequently. Exclusion is never a good thing.

3. Absence of Communication and Expectations – In government there is a high turnover rate. It's a wonderful and awful thing all at the same time. Routine and structure play a very important role in my wellness.

It's important for me to know who I can go to concerning work related tasks. More often than not, I am left without direction, or even a basic understanding what is going on within my team.

This causes a lot of needless pressure. Fear of over stepping bounds, making errors, or worry of bothering ones superiors.

Clear expectations are easy to chat about, and should be discussed without fear of reprisal. Standard Operating Procedures are also simple enough to create, maintain and share.

4. Lack of Equality- I have experienced situations where colleagues have been granted privileges such as telework, extended lunch breaks, opportunities to work on certain projects, etc. But because I disclosed to my management that I have a disability, I was not allowed the same extensions.

Rather, I had to go through drawn-out and stressful process of Duty to Accommodate, which (in my experience) can take over 5 months to complete. In the mean time I am forced to be in the office, even if I should experience symptoms.

5. Bound to Process- This point ties into many of the above mentioned negatives; where formal processes occur before human conversation. All discussion is managed through e-mail, giving the employee a sense that they are being monitored rather than being supported. In addition to lack of compassion.

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Forcing the employee to get doctors notes from various sources in order to “prove” their illness. Making the employee wait lengthy amounts of time for their accommodation(s). Forcing the employee into formal processes to consider whether reprimand is required or not due to their illness, and then having that employee wait months for a response.

In conclusion, I hope this personal account serves a positive tool in balancing mental health and wellness in the workplace. Let's foster health in all forms together, and together we can achieve a healthier future. – Shannon McCoy

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In support of, and grateful to Shannon McCoy

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