

Mental Health and Work

As a leader, being able to recognize the signs that a staff member or student might be struggling with a mental illness can be a significant aspect of early intervention and access to appropriate supports and treatment. Gaining an understanding of mental illness can better position you to facilitate the appropriate steps to assist Faculty and staff members in not only recovering their health, but also their work performance.

It is critical to keep in mind that, while you may observe a broad range of behaviours, it is not your role to attempt to diagnosis or identify the cause of the problem. Creating opportunities to have meaningful discussions about concerns and the help available will greatly reduce the apprehension individuals feel when struggling with mental illness. It is important that an individual confronted with a mental illness work with their physician to determine the appropriate course of treatment. However, how you react and the steps you take to support a staff member or student dealing with a mental illness will be key factors in reducing the stigma.

Please see below, courtesy of *Mental Health Works 2008*, some guidelines to help you in better understanding possible early warning signs of mental illness in a work context.

One key indicator is that someone may begin to act uncharacteristically; an energetic person may seem lethargic for a considerable time, or a person who is usually mild may make grandiose claims about their abilities.

Behaviour changes such as these may reflect personal difficulties that will be resolved quickly. They may be signs that the person is no longer happy in their job. The individual might be going through a particularly stressful time in their life for any number of reasons. These behaviour changes might, however, indicate that the person is experiencing a mental health problem that goes beyond being "stressed-out" and that requires professional help. It is important that an individual suffering from mental illness work with their physician and various treatment providers for an appropriate recovery program.

There are a number of warning signs that can indicate that a person has a mental health problem, such as:

- *Consistent late arrivals or frequent absences*
- *Lack of cooperation or a general inability to work with colleagues*
- *Decreased productivity*
- *Increased accidents or safety problems*
- *Frequent complaints of fatigue or unexplained pains*
- *Difficulty concentrating, making decisions, or remembering things*
- *Making excuses for missed deadlines or poor work*
- *Decreased interest or involvement in one's work*
- *Working excessive overtime over a prolonged period of time*
- *Expressions of strange or grandiose ideas*
- *Displays of anger or blaming of others*

It is important to emphasize that people behaving in these ways may be simply having a bad day or week, or may be working through a particularly difficult time in their lives that is temporary. A pattern that continues for a longer period, however, may indicate an underlying mental health problem.

Taking Steps:

First and foremost, it is important to create an environment where individuals feel comfortable and safe in seeking assistance. If you suspect that a staff member is struggling with mental illness, there are a number of different resources available to assist you in taking the appropriate action. In most cases, it is best to make the Faculty or staff member aware of your concern for them and their work-related performance. This discussion needs to be handled carefully and be tailored to the specific situation. Human Resource Services can provide guidance and suggestions about how to initiate the conversation, and will assist staff members in seeking appropriate treatment. The Workplace Advice Line, a consultation service, is also available through our EFAP provider.

Information on recognizing students in distress can be found at www.uwell.ualberta.ca, and support services for students is available through Counseling & Clinical Services at the University Wellness Centre.

Contact Information:

Organizational Health and Effectiveness
Phone: 780.492.7124
www.hrs.ualberta.ca/worklife

Employee and Family Assistance Program
Homewood Health
Phone: 780.428.7587
www.hrs.ualberta.ca/efap

University Wellness Services
Counseling & Clinical Services
Phone: 780.492.5205
www.uwell.ualberta.ca

Graduate Student Assistance Program
Homewood Health
Phone: 780.428.7587
www.hrs.ualberta.ca/efap/gsap.pdf

Postdoctoral Fellows Assistance Program
Homewood Health
Phone: 780.428.7587
www.hrs.ualberta.ca/efap/pdfs.aspx

