Entrepreneurs, You Can Recognize, and Help Your Team Members With, Depression

Depression can be a struggle for employees and costly to a company’s operations. Here are 5 steps leaders can take.

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Ban.do is an L.A.-based design company specializing in stylish gifts and accessories which was founded by entrepreneur Jen Gotch. But for Gotch, something besides business concerns stood in the way of her business, and it had nothing to do with design: She’d been diagnosed with depression at 23.

She subsequently started her business in 2008. Then she got divorced. Only then, about two years ago, did she start being open about her depression on Instagram.

She did this because she wanted to get the word out about the many people she’d come across, especially entrepreneurs, who felt the way she did. As part of that effort, she even incorporated the language of depression into her designs, marketing necklaces that said “Depression,” Anxiety” and “Bipolar.” Her aim was to help topple the tower of stigma she’d seen trapping so many people for so long.

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“It was something we always expected to be a quick in and out, but hours after the necklaces went live, and subsequently sold

out, we realized we had happened upon something that could grow to be much more meaningful to our team, our brand, and our community," Gotch wrote on her website.

Her customers and her team took note of her openness to discuss and normalize mental illness – and chances are, they probably took a deep breath as well.

The reason is that, aside from simply helping friends and co-workers, entrepreneurs would be wise to recognize depression in their team members. I say this in my personal role as an assistant professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School: I recognize the personal reasons leaders would have for responding to signs of depression among their staff.

But I also speak as an entrepreneur because such mental issues can be costly to a company's operations: In the modern workplace, depression results in sick days, absenteeism and lack of "presenteeism." Employees can become less engaged, attentive and productive.

How to help

To help team such members, entrepreneurs should consider the following steps in their workplaces and culture:

1. Recognize the signs of depression and intervene.

As Archit Gupta, founder and CEO of ClearTax, wrote in *Entrepreneur* last year, "Mental well-being of employees plays a major role in overall company productivity, as well as maintaining a conducive work environment, and hence should not be ignored."

If leaders believe that a team member could be depressed, they should invite the employee into their office privately to help

him or her understand that the company will be supportive. Signs of depression to look for include long bouts of sadness, boredom and distractedness. Employees might appear more tired than usual, experience changes in weight or look disheveled.

Related: The Best Place to Support Mental Health? The Workplace.

The best way to address these indicators is to ask the person to coffee or a meal away from other co-workers and say: “I’ve noticed that you’ve been looking a little down lately. Everything OK?”

2. Provide a communication platform for workers.

Dr. Andy Crighton, vice president and chief medical officer at Prudential Financial, described a program which featured broadcast video interviews via the company’s intranet. In these interviews, senior executives recounted their personal stories of how the health and wellness program at the company helped them in various ways.

The program, for instance, provided: professional counseling, access to an alcohol rehabilitation program and support with the transition back to work. The company overall emphasized wellness as a priority, and that had a positive impact on company culture.

Entrepreneurs could also borrow from this model and host a similar video platform of their own.

3. Provide psycho-education tools to assist team members with

recovery.

Entrepreneurs should educate their teams about depression in general. What are its physical causes? Why does it affect certain people so strongly? What about veterans' high suicide rates?

As one study showed, spreading information will likely prevent relapse. Entrepreneurs can engage trained third-party professionals to send these messages and resources to employees.

It's wise to send out a monthly reminder about accessing these resources. Another idea is to coordinate a town hall meeting that focuses on mental health as well as to set up depression-screening resources, and perhaps a feedback system. This could be an app or online resource that lets employees tell management how they're feeling.

In September 2017, I worked with LinkedIn to offer 20 videos offering basic advice on depression that could be helpful in the workplace. By listening to these brief videos at their own leisure, people can learn how to speak to their teammates about depression, make adjustments at work and learn what types of treatment to seek.

4. Advise employees to take strategic "unfocused" time off for themselves.

Taking a walk every afternoon or engaging in a yoga class can help your team members unplug. "Outside" is key: Running outside and on curvy paths will make team members more creative than running on a treadmill or around the block. This will also refresh any brain that's prone to depression. In fact, the brain functions best when it is in cognitive rhythm.

Alternating between focus and unfocus throughout the day will refuel a brain.

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5. Designate a meditation room.

Meditation has been shown to have a positive effect on depression. Dominica Roszko runs a consultancy for veterinarians and pet care business owners, as well as a company that promotes clean eating. She realized that she and her business partner (now husband) needed a lifestyle change, and the two started meditating. Whole companies have encouraged similar actions among their employees.

Pearson, Salesforce, Google, Yahoo, Nike and HBO have all designated official meditation spaces in their corporate offices. Entrepreneurs at smaller companies can do the same, to decrease employees' anxiety and improve their analytical thinking.

Above all, entrepreneurs should remember that the challenge of their mission may contribute to depression in their employees. But there are things they can do to intervene and make a positive impact on people's lives – and ultimately on the business itself.

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