

Legal Connections



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STARTING THE CONVERSATION: ADDRESSING MENTAL HEALTH CONCERNS IN THE WORKPLACE

Fear, stigma, shame and guilt are often emotions shown by individuals who struggle with their mental health. Fear of someone finding out and confidentiality concerns are indicated as the biggest barriers to individuals reaching out for help. Businesses need to increase education, awareness of and access to proper treatment for these issues. While these conversations are beginning to happen, the workplace is still often seen as a place where individuals are trying to maintain a standard of being hardworking, overachieving and a perfectionist. Ipsos recently conducted a study where one in four respondents named their workplace as a source of anxiety. With the large amount of hours spent at work, the workplace must be an environment to speak to these issues. Businesses should have a plan in place to address them and create a culture where



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wellness and access to help is encouraged and accessible. Although hard to measure, work has a tremendous impact on personal identity, self-esteem and social recognition.

Recognizing the signs and symptoms of a mental health issue in yourself, let alone in someone else, can be a challenge. Often, individuals

feel uncomfortable or unsure of how to bring up their concerns to a colleague they suspect may be struggling; it can be a bit of an awkward conversation to have with a coworker, regardless of how well you know the individual. Early warning signs may be difficult to identify, but you may notice an individual struggling with a mental health issue experiencing:

- Increase in drug or alcohol use
- Withdrawing from normal activities
- Change in sleep habits

- Feeling hopeless
- Low energy
- Uncharacteristic emotions
- Confusion/forgetfulness
- Normal activities are a challenge
- Thinking of harming oneself
- Hearing voices or delusions

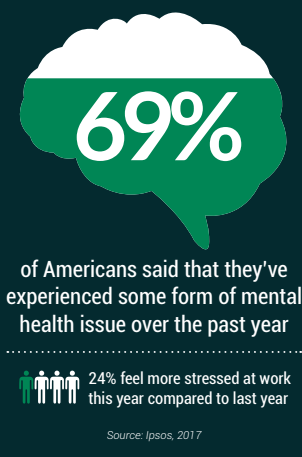
The consequences of mental health issues in the workplace can lead to increased health care costs to the organization from absenteeism or illness, as well as reducing work performance and productivity. Businesses must have a plan in place to help those suffering from a mental illness in order to keep staff morale high and to keep employees committed to the organization. This can also help reduce potential ethics violations and disciplinary complaints.

We do know that mental health issues are not going anywhere any time soon, and will most likely continue to rise. We must strive to create a workplace culture that

“Creating a business culture that promotes mental and physical well-being is an investment in your staff that will ensure employee satisfaction.”



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normalizes wellness initiatives, and where asking for and seeking help is not seen as a weakness. Providing an ongoing forum for these issues to be highlighted and not swept under the rug will only improve the health of professionals, increase productivity, while upholding the ethical standards of the business. ■

LEARN MORE about addressing the stigma associated with mental illness. Join us Oct. 24 for My Story: A Wellness Journey. Register today at cbalaw.org.

IMPLICIT BIAS: CAN UNCONSCIOUS ASSUMPTIONS AFFECT YOUR DAILY INTERACTIONS?

Most people don't look forward to implicit bias training. Why? Because most trainings can be summarized like this: "I am racist. You are racist. We live in a racist society. Good luck!" The trainings often focus only on awareness and not on problem-solving, which causes people to feel frustrated and annoyed.

Something needs to change. In addition to focusing on the reality of bias, these trainings must also provide practical solutions to making difficult conversations easier between people of different races,

genders and beliefs. This will, ideally, allow people to recognize these biases in their own lives and turn toward positive change.

What is the simple key to success in these conversations?

In my TED Talk, Finding Confidence in Conflict, I shared the conflict management framework called Compassionate Curiosity. It has 3 steps:

1. Acknowledge Emotions
2. Get Curious (with compassion)



KWAME CHRISTIAN
Director, American Negotiation Institute

3. Joint Problem Solving

This framework can be utilized internally before difficult conversations to make sure your heart and mind are aligned and externally during the difficult conversation to put you in a position to get what you want and need without jeopardizing relationships.

Compassionate Curiosity is a powerful tool that we can use to address our own implicit biases before and during the conversation.

First, you need to acknowledge the biases that could be at play within the conversation, either for you or your conversational counterpart. Implicit biases are usually not something you are consciously aware of, so taking the time to evaluate your actions and instinctive attitudes is important.

Second, you need to get curious about the origins of your biases and investigate how they impact the way you navigate these conversations. It's important to engage in this process with compassion so you don't vilify yourself. Self-vilification leads to shame and shame leads to withdrawal.

Lastly, you need to prepare by creating strategies to break through the biases before you address the substantive issues at play in the conversation. Once you've completed this process of preparation you will be ready to engage in the conversation.

Think of it as the conflict before the conflict. If you fail to recognize the first conflict you will struggle in the second conflict. This small tweak can work wonders when it comes to having difficult conversations with people with different backgrounds. ■



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