

Depression and the Workplace – The Difficulty in Fighting Back

When depression and work come into conflict, there are no rules governing the behaviour of the parties involved. But how an organization responds in such cases is paramount in the recovery of an individual suffering from depression. You would like to think that basic values such as understanding, compassion and human decency would prevail. Unfortunately, this is too often not the case and the exorbitant cost and toll of what results is often hidden from the public eye.

Recently I was involved in a discussion where two individuals, both being treated for depression, were dismissed by their employers. One had formalized legal action and was headed towards a British Tribunal hearing. She was having great difficulty resulting from the treatment of her employer and the obvious health issues she faced. But she was determined that her employer would 'not get away with this.' On the other hand, the second individual had quickly determined that he had to move on, and that for the first time in many years, he had a "good night's sleep." He felt he was much better off not being in such a poisonous environment.

It was in this context that I attempted to provide some insight from my own experience and I certainly would not fault either's decision. In my own personal case, I followed the legal route. Now, four years later, I have become an example of how simple ignorance and inability to manage these disabilities in the workplace can result in terrible tragedy and cost – both human and economic.

The Personal Cost:

My own personal background is based on successfully developing a career in the private and public sectors which lead to relatively senior roles within these organizations. I certainly was very proud of the contributions I had made and had achieved a great deal. My life, regretfully, had revolved around my work and when difficulties with market conditions and organizational change affected my ability to contribute at the same level, being my own worst critic, I entered into a severe cloud of depression.

Following a period of short-term disability, I attempted my return to work. Two meetings with my employer occurred in the first week. The only way in which I can describe these meetings is through a perhaps poor analogy but one which has stuck with me: It was like having been in rehabilitation for alcoholism for six months and then being greeted by your boss with "Let's go out for a drink." The response was that inappropriate. I was being asked to voluntarily leave the company and to help convince me to go, I was barraged by a severe questioning of my character, my accomplishments, my pride and dignity. I felt I had no choice but to fight back!

Now, almost four years later I find myself reflecting on my course of action and why this has become so difficult to bring to a close. I wrote back to my British friend and in-doing-so, I began to understand why:

As you know, in my case I stood up and fought a very difficult battle thinking that once it was over, I would feel some vindication. And it was quite the battle with many hundreds of thousands of dollars

spent on legal fees and which ultimately was settled at the last moment, albeit, behind closed doors. I certainly did not get the feeling of vindication I thought I might except for the fact that my immediate family saw that I had stood up to something which was terribly wrong, and I fought back and was proven right in the end.

Try not to let this become your identity or your sole purpose. The whole incident warped my sense of being and filled me with self-doubt and as we all know, an experience like this is not a good mix with depression and anxiety. Perhaps you can understand that rather than things getting better, they became much worse.

A close friend reminded me "do you want to be happy....or do you want to be right?" I was entirely focused on trying to be right. Being so caught-up in each moment, I allowed this period of time to somehow translate into defining me as a person, defining my life as a person. That is how crazy it became and that is why I so don't want to see it happen to you or to others. We can't allow one event in our lives to define our lifetime. Depression skews our perception of things and that is what is so horrible about this disease.

My point in all this is not to distract you from the direction you are taking. As I always felt, we must stand up for ourselves when we are treated unjustly and it is the courage of people like you who help send the message that this type of treatment cannot be tolerated. But we do place a large burden on ourselves in taking this type of thing on and it can be very, very difficult.

There are some unfortunate realities in taking the legal route: a) they do know you are ill, b) they will use every means possible to use that fact to their advantage (and it is absolutely mind-boggling to see the extent they will go to, c) even those having the greatest employment record will see an attempt to have it discredited, d) it is a very personal experience, e) people who you felt were very close to you suddenly become very distant (especially colleagues who are concerned about their own positions), f) often these are quietly settled in the final moments, after a purposely drawn out process and assuming one has just cause.

I don't know what the statistics are but my own feeling is that those responsible within the organization face little, if any, repercussions for their actions. This represents the saddest reality and only adds to what is likely a 'poisoned' work environment where ignorance is allowed to prevail. Ultimately, this is where my expectations were not met. Business goes on!

If you are at all like I was, your judgement and expectations can be severely clouded and this can result in a great deal of disappointment in the end.....even in a favourable decision. It is so important that you have a support group - family, a close friend, a legal representative who can honestly assess and validate your claim, medical support and the stamina to proceed. Set realistic expectations of what you would see as a settlement and review it with them. My expectations were not monetary (other than to recognize fault) and perhaps that is why I have had such difficulty bringing this to a close. But I will say, I do have a strong feeling that I stood up to something that was so terribly wrong, and silently, I am proud of that. But what a personal toll it has had.

Cherish your health and your overall life-experience. And remember, we cannot take on the world on our own. But we can all do our own little part to promote changes in understanding and attitudes and to provide support to others.

The Global Cost:

When I reflect back on my employers actions, I cannot help but think how things could have been so different. Just some understanding, compassion and allowing me to ease back into my role would have resolved the situation. Any other illness would have been easily accommodated and this should have been no different. My heart was in this company and I would like to think that an employer would be there especially for employees who have shown such a commitment. Instead, stigmas, ignorance and short-sightedness often prevail and the overall cost of a single miss-handling of such situations is astronomical.

In cases such as my own, I can be quickly overwhelmed by the overall costs that can result, not forsaking the human suffering that occurs during the process. Legal fees, medications, psychological and psychiatric assessments and counselling, disability benefits, hospitalization, settlements, and the list goes on. But the saddest part is that this could and should have been prevented.

An employer is not responsible or expected to be the 'care-giver' to its employees. But they do have an interest in preventing and managing, in an appropriate way, these disabilities in the workplace. To get a greater understanding of the cumulative cost such actions can have on business organizations and our society in general, the Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health (www.mentalhealthroundtable.ca) is dedicated to be "an instrument of information analysis and ideas concerning the linkage between business, the economy, mental health and work." Here is where human tragedy and the overall global costs meet.

There are further commitments being made which highlight the overall importance which is being given to mental illnesses. The Mental Health Commission of Canada (www.mentalhealthcommission.ca) is focused on bringing these illnesses 'Out of the Shadows – Forever' and recognizes that individuals with mental illness "have the right to be treated with the same dignity and respect as we accord everyone struggling to recover from any form of illness."

In the end, this must be my vindication – In my own, small way, to promote the need to educate employers regarding the important role that they can play in reducing one of the greatest challenges facing today's society.....and their workforce! The importance of this issue will exponentially increase given the current economic situation. And employers have so much control in determining the outcome.....just by following the basic principal of respecting the value of treating others with human decency.