

Sept. 2014 Column Spotlight: HR in Focus - E. Kevin Kelloway

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TOPIC - Tackling mental health issues: How effective is your workplace strategy?



E. Kevin Kelloway - HR in Focus

The recent and tragic suicide of famed comedian Robin Williams has focused the attention of the media on mental health issues. Although the life of a Hollywood celebrity is far removed from most of our lives, suicide and the psychological conditions that lead to suicide are no strangers to Nova Scotians.

A 2004 report issued in conjunction with the launching of the provincial suicide prevention strategy noted that suicide was the second leading cause of hospitalization due to injuries (falls were number one) during the previous 10 years. Although the rate declined over the study year, on average there were just over 650 hospitalizations each year as a result of attempted suicide.

These figures should not shock us as the Canadian Mental Health Commission reports that one in five Canadians will experience a psychological disorder at some point. The most common of these disorders (anxiety, depression and substance abuse) are, not surprisingly, precisely the conditions associated with suicide and attempted suicide.

So how does this become a human resources issue? In a previous column, I had reviewed the role of the workplace in dealing with mental health issues and suggested a threefold approach. First, organizations have a duty to prevent psychological disorders by reducing stress and promoting resilience among their employees. Second, employees and, particularly, supervisors should be trained in intervention; in other words, knowing how to identify individuals who are reaching their “breaking point” and knowing what resources are available to help employees in crisis. Third, organizations have a duty to accommodate individuals suffering from psychological disorders. This threefold approach — prevention, intervention and accommodation — provides the basis for a comprehensive approach to

workplace mental health.

There is one more concrete action that human resources professionals, union representatives and others concerned with employee well-being should undertake: a review of the health plan or health benefits made available to employees. Most of these plans incorporate a single (yearly or lifetime) maximum such as \$1,500 that can be spent on psychological counseling as well as other services that are not typically covered by MSI. These caps, for the most part, have not kept pace with inflation and increasingly will purchase little more than an initial assessment and diagnosis, with no resources left to actually treat the problem. Reviewing benefit plans with an eye toward ensuring access to services is a concrete and actionable step that can assist employees in getting the help they need, when they need it.

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