

How to deal with depression in the workplace

By [John Botha](#)

29 Jul 2019

The World Health Organisation estimates that around 300 million people across the globe suffer from depression. This has become the leading cause of disability worldwide. While there are effective treatments for depression, anxiety, emptiness, a lack of energy and hopelessness all of these symptoms can have a significant impact on an employee's performance at work, as well as adverse effects on interpersonal relationships among workplace team members.



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The different faces of depression

Absenteeism, taking more time to perform tasks, negligence and difficulty engaging with others are just a few examples of the impact of this debilitating condition. It is evident that there are many reasons why employers need to be equipped to deal with depression at the workplace. Managers and supervisors need to be empowered with the right EQ and interpersonal skills to engage and build trust with employees in dealing with this. In addition, there are clear legal obligations on the employer to adhere to prescribed legal protocols as set out in schedule 8 of the Labour Relations Act (LRA). Incapacity, due to ill health, is addressed in this Act.

Employers are required to support the employee about diagnosis, treatment and reasonable time for treatment. They are required to exhaust all alternatives before making a decision to dismiss. By taking a personal interest in employees, employers are enhancing their employee value propositions and also building trust with other employees. After all, this is why it is called an employment *relationship*.



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Here's an account of how a particular family was impacted by depression and how the employer stepped up to assist.

Peter's story

My mother was a high school teacher. She has been a single parent since I was 6 years old. She was physically and mentally abused by my father before he left us and continuously lived in a state of anxiety about how she would provide for us off her meagre teacher's salary. My mom was strong on the outside and suppressed all her emotions to make all seem fine to me.

It was 10 years later, when I was 16 years old, that severe major depression struck her. I recall being called by the principal of the school – when I arrived where she worked – I found her curled up in a corner in the ladies restroom crying uncontrollably and being unable to be consoled. This was the start of around five years of medical treatment, sleep therapy, counselling and regular cycles of breakdowns. The stress it placed on us pushed us to the breaking point and were it not for a few colleagues of hers who supported us emotionally and financially, we would not have made it through.

Eventually, my mother was medically boarded and received a teacher's pension. It was not enough to sustain her and I had to support her until she passed away at the age of 76. This experience will be with me for the rest of my life and the importance of the role of the employer to the entire family, when depression hits, cannot be underestimated.



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Depression is a very real disease and needs to be dealt with as any other ailment that you can see outwardly. Unfortunately, many employees are loath to speak about this as they feel that it's 'just in their heads' and that they will be seen as not doing their jobs properly if they disclose it to their employers. However, if left untreated, depression will end up having a drastic effect on an employee's work performance – as can be seen in Peter's story. If you're open with your employees, you will encourage them to come forward and ask for your help in dealing with issues such as this. At the end of the day, you will create a happy workforce that is productive.

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