

DEPRESSION IN WORK ENVIRONMENT – ITS CAUSES, SYMPTOMS AND PREVENTION

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Purpose: This paper addresses the problem of depression. Depression is one of the most common mental health problems faced by employees, regardless of their position. WHO research indicates that various forms of depression will become, along with cardiovascular diseases, the most frequent health condition of people in developed regions of the world. Treatment in most cases restores health, yet it is highly disturbing that half of the patients do not undergo treatment for various reasons, thus depriving themselves of the chance to return to normal life and work. The purpose of this paper is to highlight this very important problem.

Design/methodology/approach: Literature research of the subject was carried out.

Findings: The risk of incidence of depression at work can and should be minimized. First of all, overall physical and mental health of employees should be taken care of. Therefore, we should take care of healthy sleep, healthy diet, practice sports and tourism, and find time to develop our passions and interests outside of work. Of course, the key issue here is the work environment. It is important for the employee to follow the basic rules of hygiene at mental or physical work. That is, not to burn the candle at both ends, not to overwork, not to set excessive, and thus often unrealistic goals to achieve, use rational breaks at work and, above all, take care of good relations with our colleagues. Also, report problems with professional work on an ongoing basis.

Practical implications: The issues discussed in this paper significantly affect the improvement of methods related to work environment management and the desired shaping of attitudes and behavior of employees regarding the approach to the issue of depression, a problem related to work environment that has been downplayed so far.

Originality/value: A holistic approach to depression. Defining it as an interdisciplinary problem. It should be handled by doctors of various specialties, especially psychiatrists, of course, but also general practitioners, neurologists, gastroenterologists, cardiologists and many other physicians. It also requires the attention of non-medical specialists.

Keywords: company management, depression in work environment, human factor.

Category of the paper: General review.

1. Introduction

The times we live in intensively create, and thus impose on us, an idealistic vision of success, an image of a man fulfilled in every area of life, including, of course, at work, a vision to which many people want to aspire. However, it is often done at the cost of losing touch with our own needs, values and expectations. Achieving satisfaction with our actions and work becomes impossible because it is difficult to give and see the meaning of activities that do not arise from our needs, but have been imposed on us from outside. Leading a life that does not make us happy and does not please us, using too many “must”, “should”, “have to”, instead of “want”, “need” and “desire”, it is very easy to start implementing someone else's life plan that, in time, will turn against us.

If we add to this the threat related, for example, to the present situation of living in a pandemic, enormous stress related to the fear for our life and health and the life and health of our relatives and loved ones, as well as work overload, for example when working remotely or in isolation, overtime, high requirements of superiors – the risk of chronic fatigue, burnout and depression increases in consequence. The real experience of inner emptiness also becomes our part.

Depression is a growing problem. It is one of the most common diseases in the world, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). According to forecasts, by 2020, it will rank second among the most common diseases, and by 2030 – first. About 350 million people worldwide suffer from depression. In Poland, it accounts for 3-4 per cent of all reported mental disorders, and probably about 1.5 million people suffer from it (WHO, 2021).

Depression is most often diagnosed between the age of 20 and 40. The economic costs of treatment of depression in Poland range from PLN 1 billion to 2.6 billion (studies by IZWOZ, 2014). Across Europe, this sum is approximately EUR 170 billion (WHO data, 2014). In two years, the number of antidepressant packs sold increased by 2 million. In 2017, Poles spent PLN 346.2 million on antidepressants (IQVIA research). In 2016, approximately 5,500 suicides were committed in Poland.

Women suffer from depression more frequently. It is usually diagnosed in young and middle-aged people, but it also more and more often affects seniors. Unfortunately, the pandemic has had a negative impact on mental health – stress and fear related to concerns about our life and health and the life and health of our loved ones has left their mark. New data shows that approximately 42 per cent of Poles notice that their mental condition is deteriorating due to the COVID-19 pandemic (WHO, 2021; MEDONET, 2021).

As global research shows, depression is one of the most common mental health problems faced by employees, regardless of their position. WHO research indicates that various forms of depression will become, along with cardiovascular diseases, the most frequent health condition of people in developed regions of the world. It is believed that the causes of the growing

epidemic of depression are accelerated pace of life, chronic stress, competition, the pursuit of success and fear for the future. Treatment in most cases restores health, yet it is highly disturbing that half of the patients do not undergo treatment for various reasons, thus depriving themselves of the chance to return to normal life and work.

One can function for a long time feeling blue, ignoring symptoms and leading a life devoid of joys, colors and tastes. When everyday matters become a challenge and the suffering is unbearable, it is high time to see a specialist. However, we should not wait until that moment. Help that can turn things around may come sooner. And going through the whole therapeutic process minimizes the possibility of recurrence of the symptoms of the disease.

Summing up, depression is a disease that can and should be treated, its symptoms can be both recurrent and chronic. Currently, increasingly better methods of therapy are available, which, on the one hand, are more and more effective, and on the other hand are less and less burdensome.

2. Depression – terms and definitions

First of all, it should be clarified that depression is an ambiguous term, very often used, but also misunderstood. In colloquial language, it is very often used to refer to any type of low mood, malaise, dejection, regardless of the cause of this condition.

In psychiatry, this term is used to describe mood and emotional disorder, it is considered a disease entity (Pużyński, 2009; Święcicki, 2002).

The literature on the subject emphasizes that depression is more than just a painful emotional experience – it is a symptom complex that lasts longer than common dejection, disturbs social and emotional life, biological functions, cognitive processes and causes changes in human behavior (Kliszcz, Nowicka-Saure, Trzeciak, Sadowska, 2004; Sprawka, Wysokiński, Orzechowska, Talarowska-Bogusz, Typel, Gruszczyński, 2008).

Depression can be tricky in many cases and can resemble many different diseases. These often include ailments of the digestive system, circulatory system or the heart. Sometimes, it is accompanied by severe headaches, stomach aches, particular muscle pains, problems with the respiratory system, balance disorders or skin problems that seem unrelated to this disease.

Therefore, depression can certainly be labeled an interdisciplinary problem, that should be handled by doctors of various specialties, primarily psychiatrists, of course, but also general practitioners, neurologists, gastroenterologists, cardiologists and many other physicians (Kliszcz, Nowicka-Saure, Trzeciak, Sadowska, 2004; Sprawka, Wysokiński, Orzechowska, Talarowska-Bogusz, Typel, Gruszczyński, 2008). A person suffering from depression should be treated in a holistic way, which is why non-medical specialists should often participate in its

diagnosis and treatment. Despite the more and more widespread knowledge and available information on depression, it is still largely perceived as an embarrassing disease that should not be discussed.

3. Depression – symptoms

Depression very often disturbs the functioning of the patient in four spheres: it affects their mood, thinking, behavior and life activity.

Mood-related symptoms of depression include gradual loss of joy and pleasure in life, inability to enjoy the things and events that were previously perceived as joyful, which sometimes even leads to their complete disappearance. Low mood and emotional response, combined with indifference, a feeling of overwhelming and omnipresent emptiness. Often, a changeable, irritable mood, difficulty in controlling it, as well as deep and penetrating sadness, crying that is more and more difficult to control, sometimes also the inability to control one's emotions, impulsiveness inconsistent with previous behavior.

According to specialists, anxiety is not a typical symptom of depression, but it is very common. A person suffering from depression may be accompanied by the so-called general anxiety, consisting in a constant feeling of fear, although it is difficult for them to determine what specifically they are afraid of. Anxiety is often chronic, its intensity gradually increases and decreases. It is the so-called free-floating anxiety, often located by the patient somewhere in the middle of the body, for example in the chest (Borowiecka-Kluza, 2021).

Another symptom of the disease is depressive thinking. It is a pessimistic assessment of one's past, present and future. It is accompanied by a loss of self-confidence, lowered self-esteem, a feeling of being worthless and even unnecessary. Sometimes depressive delusions, i.e. false judgments, in which the patient believes, despite unsuccessful attempts to confront them with reality. They are delusions about feeling guilty, being sinful, punished, or about poverty, destitution, lack of any future prospects for oneself and one's family. The appearance of such delusional thoughts is an unquestionable symptom requiring immediate psychiatrist consultation (Kocur, 2021; Borowiecka-Kluza, 2021; Greenberg et al., 2015).

Further symptoms of depression may be manifested in activity limitation. It is characterized by a gradual loss of previous interests, difficulties in undertaking various activities and actions, up to the extreme abandonment of these activities, for example, inability to get out of bed, perform the simplest hygienic activities, such as getting dressed, washed or combed. Gradual loss of vital energy and decreased sensitivity to emotional stimuli – apathy. Increased tiredness, chronic fatigue with limited daily activity. Sometimes psychomotor agitation with a sense of increased internal tension, anxiety and an inability to find a place for oneself.

There may also be changes in the patient's behavior, manifested in attention deficit disorder, deterioration of memory and cognitive functions.

Sleep disorders in depression are often manifested by difficulties in falling asleep and maintaining sleep, and often sleep becomes shallow and interrupted. Frequent waking up in the morning (3.00-5.00 a.m.) is also common in depression patients, with the possibility of falling asleep again in milder cases of depression, or with the inability to go back to sleep in people with severe depression. However, sleep disorders in the case of depression may also occur in the form of excessive sleepiness, both at night and during the day.

Possible symptoms of depression also include decreased or lost appetite, patients often force themselves to eat and feel that the food is tasteless. This is sometimes accompanied by significant weight loss (a few kilograms a month). However, sometimes depression may be accompanied by excessive appetite, characterized by overeating, which is uncharacteristic of the patient's previous behavior and, combined with a lack of physical activity, can lead to weight gain. In such a case, specialists talk about the so-called atypical depression.

A noticeable decrease in libido is also often observed in depression. Decreased or lost interest in sexual activity may intensify the depressive sense of diminishing one's self-esteem, femininity, masculinity or generally understood attractiveness. And this, in turn, may result in an even greater weakening of libido. Sexual life is not a source of pleasure, satisfaction. It can additionally increase the experience of depression.

According to specialists, the so-called daily mood swings are characteristic of typical forms of depression. Patients usually feel worse in the morning and at noon and it is very difficult for them to start the day. However, in the evening they feel a little better and are more active. But there are also patients suffering from depression, who feel better in the morning than in the evening, or do not experience daily fluctuations in their mood (Borowiecka-Kluza, 2021).

4. The origin and causes of the disease

Depression at work can have many different causes and, in many cases, it is very difficult to identify one main cause. Nowadays, excessive stress is the main cause of mental disorders resulting from the work environment. Employees are faced with ever higher requirements, that are sometimes difficult to meet. This may be accompanied by the fear of losing a job that we really care about. Let us not forget about the fast pace of work, the feeling that there are no irreplaceable people and, very often, disturbed balance between private and professional life. Depression is often manifested in the form of workaholism, resulting largely from the lack of personal life and non-professional passions.

The dependence between depression and work also manifests itself in inappropriate interpersonal relationships, conflicts with colleagues and superiors. It may also be a consequence of lack of support from superiors, or a lack of understanding of our actions by subordinates. In addition, slander, rumors, or the so-called rat race are not conducive to the creation of proper relationships at work. There are also activities aimed at deliberately destroying or lowering the professional position, used by colleagues. They negatively affect the attitude to life of the attacked people. Extreme situations, that can contribute to depression at work, are also pathological behaviors, such as harassment and mobbing.

As mentioned above, the relationship between work and depression is relatively complex. If any alarming signals are noticed, that may contribute to the occurrence or development of the disease, appropriate measures should be taken immediately to eliminate them (Borowiecka-Kluza, 2021; Greenberg et al., 2015).

5. Depression and professional work

Research shows that we have never been so stressed before. One in four of us will experience some form of mental disorder in our lives, and today the number of people suffering from depression is over 350 million and is constantly growing. The statistics are frightening and leave no doubt that we live in a civilization of anxiety.

According to a CIPD report, the number of people experiencing anxiety disorders, neurosis and depression at work has increased from a quarter to a third over the past five years, making mental health problems the leading cause of absenteeism. This has an impact on the global economy. WHO warns that the decline in productivity caused by the growing scale of mental disorders generates costs estimated at one trillion dollars annually (WHO, 2021).

At work, depression often manifests itself in a decrease or loss of motivation to work, a significant reduction in employee productivity and, in many cases, it leads to long-term inability to work. Difficulties in decision making, procrastination and avoiding professional duties set in. Since everything comes with a lot of effort, it becomes impossible to make a creative contribution to work. Research shows that with the onset of a disease, work efficiency drops by an average of 5.5 hours a week, which can practically be considered as a one-day absence of the employee. Withdrawal is noticeable. It does not have to be associated with complete social isolation, but in contact with a depressed person you may experience some kind of aloofness and a tendency to solitude.

Stressogenicity in some professions is a common problem, investigated by researchers analyzing the psychophysical burden among teachers, emergency services and health care workers. Research shows that nursing home workers are more likely to suffer from depression than the average population. Work in gastronomy is particularly strenuous for women; high rate

of depression is observed among waitresses and kitchen assistants. Social workers, who have few positive reinforcements, also show high rate of depression. Health care professionals, including nurses, are another group. Nurses, while performing their work, must be ready to be in constant contact, not only with the people who suffer and expect help, but also with the dying and their families. They have a constant sense of responsibility for their health and life and perform their duties in a shift system that adversely affects their physical and mental health. Artists and teachers are the next groups. Research conducted in Great Britain shows that more than 40% of teachers quit within the first 5 years of starting their career. Depression also affects secretarial staff, skilled workers, accountants and cashiers (Hallstrom, McClure, 2007; Kužel, Krajewska-Kułak, Śmigielska-Kuzia, 2015).

Unfortunately, it can be observed that depression is a fully democratic disease, because neither the financial status, nor the prestige of the profession or education protect us against it.

6. Prevention of depression in the work environment

As it has been mentioned above, depression affects all spheres of our lives, including the quality of our work. That is why the question how to effectively deal with depression in the workplace becomes so important.

Can our company be an employee-friendly place? Nowadays, employers and employees face many new challenges, but also creative possibilities for solving this pressing problem.

- ✓ Being an “employer with a human face” or simply a responsible employer, aware of the needs and expectations of their employees, is not only very necessary today, but also profitable from the point of view of the company. The FTSE 100 Index shows that organizations using phrases, such as “mental health” and “wellbeing” in their annual report at least twice posted profits up to three times greater than others. Unfortunately, there are still very few enterprises with a developed strategy for the promotion of mental health among employees. It should be added, though, that this situation is slowly, but surely, changing for the benefit of all concerned (Kocur, 2021; Borowiecka-Kluza, 2021; Lerner, 2008).

It is important to realize how much depends on the employers themselves. Work, as such, is good for our mental health, but there are many factors that increase the possibility of illness, including:

- bad policy regarding employee safety and health,
- bad communication, conducive to the formation of a network of gossip and rumors,
- management by conflict,
- lack of employee participation in the company's activities,
- low level or lack of employee support from superiors,

- inflexible working hours, the need for shift work,
- unjustified accumulation of work,
- time pressure exerted on employees,
- vague orders, tasks,
- too high expectations towards employees,
- or finally pathologies, such as: humiliation, persecution, mobbing.

That is why it is so important to ensure appropriate employee-friendly atmosphere in the company. It can be done by creating a sense of security, mutual trust, in which employee participation in important matters of the company can develop. The sense of meaningful work, the ability to decide on the organization of your work and adapt it to your own pace. These are just some of the many factors that can protect employees from more serious health consequences.

- ✓ However, when employee health problems do emerge, it is important to immediately get adequate support and as much help as possible. As research shows, as many as 80% of employees admit that chronic stress at work clearly affects their relationships outside work, including family ones the most (Mental Health America study) (CIOP, 2021; Grygorczuk, 2008; Greenberg et al., 2015).

The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work proposes that organizations take specific actions to promote the mental health of workers:

- “organizing ‘health circles’ to detect and discuss problems and to find solutions based on employee participation,
- setting up policies on mental health and related issues, like violence and harassment at work, or integrating mental health issues in the general OSH policy within the company,
- providing training for management on how to recognize stress symptoms in employees and how to find good solutions for diminishing employees’ stress,
- conducting a staff survey, using anonymous questionnaires, to find out what employees worry about at work,
- evaluation of measures and programs implemented by getting feedback from employees,
- running web portals informing all staff members on all the measures and programs that are being carried out in the workplace, aimed at enhancing mental wellbeing,
- providing courses/training for employees on how to cope with stressful situations,
- free counseling on diverse issues regarding private or working life for all employees, ideally available during the working day” (CIOP, 2021).

Changes that many employees are afraid of by nature, even changes for the better, should be introduced in an evolutionary way, in small steps, so that employees do not feel overwhelmed, threatened or simply afraid of them. Caring for the right atmosphere, balance at work and rest for employees is becoming more and more common in modern enterprises. Employee-friendly workplaces offer specially designated areas for relaxation, free massage,

meditation or short fitness trainings. Some companies have dedicated places for short naps. The Salesforce corporation went even further – during breaks at work you can participate in inspiring workshops and lectures, conducted, among others, by Zen masters.

Globally, WHO has implemented several international plans to promote mental health in the workplace: Global Plan of Action on Worker's Health (2008-2017) and Mental Health Action Plan (2013-2020), which include, among others, the identification of social factors related to mental health, including such important ones as housing and work environment, anti-discrimination and stigmatization of sick people, as well as increasing access to help, both in medical facilities and workplaces. Support is also promoted in cases of abuse and chronic stress. On the other hand, as part of the Mental Health Gap Action Program (mhGAP), the World Health Organization provides tools supporting the early detection and prevention of addictions and suicidal tendencies, (CIOP, 2021; Dekkers-Sánchez et al., 2013; Ekberg et al., 2013; Flook et al., 2013; Krasner et al., 2009; Cleirigh and Greaney, 2006).

With such a large scale of the problem related to the ever-growing incidence of mental disorders, including depression, there is no time to think about when to start introducing changes – because they are necessary today.

7. Practical advice

- ✓ The disease must be diagnosed – to do this you need to seek the help of a specialist. Depression is one of those diseases, that must not be ignored and whose diagnosis and treatment must not be delayed. Including, if the doctor recommends it, pharmacological treatment and psychological support.
- ✓ It must be remembered that coping with depression is absolutely not an easy task. There may be days when it will seem that nothing can be improved and nothing is good enough. It's just a temporary illusion, if you take medication and get psychological support, it will pass.
- ✓ In getting out of depression, it is very important to take care of yourself in every sense of the word, physical, mental or social. We should take care of ourselves as we would take care of the person most dear to us.
- ✓ Taking care of ourselves physically is the basis of health, but – unfortunately – people forget how much physical health affects our mental wellbeing. The simplest and most important things are the right amount of restful sleep, a healthy and balanced diet and physical activity.
- ✓ Mental self-care includes reducing stress and being good to yourself, including forgiving yourself.

- ✓ Sessions with a therapist. It will only be effective if we follow the recommendations of specialists honestly and diligently and trust their experience.
- ✓ Taking care of yourself socially means good interpersonal relationships. People, who experienced depression themselves, are often helpful, they will listen and share their experience. But also a new circle of people, for example acquaintances from a class of pilates, swimming, yoga or other creative activities. Such contacts should not be deprecated in advance.
- ✓ You should talk about your feelings, meet with your family and friends.
- ✓ Open up to the beauty of the surrounding nature, to cultivate a garden or even a green corner on a balcony or terrace. Go for a walk in the forest, listen to the birds singing and give yourself a chance for it to work (Gembalska-Kwiecień, 2017; Kocur, 2021; Galinsky et al., 2008).

8. Final conclusions

As presented above, depression is a growing problem of our time and a serious disease, so democratic that it can affect any of us. However, if we follow the recommendations set out above, we may protect ourselves against it.

The risk of incidence of depression at work can and should be minimized. First of all, overall physical and mental health of employees should be taken care of. Therefore, we should take care of healthy sleep, healthy diet, practice sports and tourism, and find time to develop our passions and interests outside of work. It is also worth investing in good relations with our loved ones, especially with family and friends, who can prove to be an invaluable support in difficult times.

Of course, the key issue here is the work environment. It is important for the employee to follow the basic rules of hygiene at mental or physical work. That is, not to burn the candle at both ends, not to overwork, not to set excessive, and thus often unrealistic goals to achieve, use rational breaks at work and, above all, take care of good relations with our colleagues. It is also important that we report problems with professional work on an ongoing basis.

However, when the work environment clearly leads to depression at work, a change of work should be considered. Such a solution, although radical at first glance is, in many cases, necessary to free oneself from toxic work and maintain good mental health.

Last, but not least, it should be emphasized that, in the case of a diagnosed depression, caused by factors related to work, the above recommendations are insufficient. Depression is a disease and it is necessary to introduce appropriate treatment, including both pharmacological agents and psychotherapy (WHO, 2021; Kocur, 2021; Borowiecka-Kluza, 2021; Kessler et al., 2006).

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