

Everything Was Coming Up Roses Until . . .

Everything was going as well as it could. After my first year of working in a new community, my family had adjusted, my work was challenging and enjoyable, councilmembers were pleased with my performance and had given me a large raise, and clinical depression had laid its insidious hold on my mind.

For many years, I had seen stories of people suffering from depression and had been exposed to coworkers who suffered through tough personal experiences that led to bouts of depression. All the time, these incidents seemed detached from the real world and only of interest when they affected the work performance of those around me. The concept of depression is little-known and misunderstood because this condition often is kept confidential and seen as something to be hidden. This ignorance, and many unnecessary dismissals and suicides, point to the folly of archaic attitudes and outmoded or inadequate education on mental depression.

My Story

I knew something was wrong when I could not sleep. It had begun several months before, when I first felt a pain in my chest. We had just lost a dear 42-year-old friend to bone cancer, and her pain began exactly where mine did.

This also was during the final days of basketball coach Jim Valvano and his courageous fight with cancer. For whatever reason, my mind had convinced itself that Ron Niland was dying of cancer. The idea of one's mortality

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An Illness

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Can Bring

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Profound

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Change

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To Your Life

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Ron Niland

always is difficult to deal with. However, it was the thought of my family in need and of missing seeing my two young children grow up that drove me over the edge.

Managers today face enormous pressures from the complexity of the issues before them. Everyone has a capacity to deal with stress, and when that capacity is breached, trouble ensues. Robert Handly, in his book *Anxiety and Panic Attacks*, likens the result to a "rain barrel" that overflows when too much water pours into it.

For several days, the effect of not sleeping was barely noticeable. But by the fourth or fifth day, my insomnia had thrown my body chemistry so out of whack that I could not function normally. Depression, as I later learned, affects people in various ways. My emotional life became flat, and a sense of impending doom gripped me. I went to my personal physician, whose routine testing showed no signs of illness. This was not enough to satisfy me, however, as the power of the irrational mind had taken control. I was prescribed anti-anxiety medication when my "spells" came on, but the medication brought only temporary relief. Now, my fear of the spells generated even greater periods of dread, which in turn continued my slide down the slippery path of clinical depression.

What Happened at Work And at Home

After several days, my department heads could see that the normally outgoing city manager they had worked with had changed greatly. I decided that I needed to do something radical: I went to a psychiatrist. This was my lowest point, for I had finally recognized that I could not lick this problem on my own.

I met with my department heads and filled them in on the situation. The response was heart-warming. They banded together, and although there was no titled assistant city man-

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ager, they said they would use the finance director as the hub for information sharing and the conduit to the city council. My next step was to call in the mayor and the council and to brief them fully and ask for their patience. It was a critical moment when, as a group, they insisted that they would do whatever was necessary to continue normal operations but that they wanted me back when I felt able. In short, they made me feel needed, and for this I will be forever grateful.

The toughest part of my illness, the greatest burden on anyone, was borne by my wife. She suddenly was thrust into a world of uncertainty, thanks to her husband's inability to work or to be "normal" at home. It was she who had the difficult job of explaining to the children that their father was looking for a time away from them, and there was no good way to explain it. She was the rock that held the family together, and no words ever will express my appreciation for her support.

Two weeks later, after I had spent some time at my parents' house rehabilitating, I finally understood people who had considered or carried out a suicide attempt. This concept had been so alien to me before my illness that I often had mused about what possibly could make someone consider such a thing. Now I knew.

Three weeks after my diagnosis, I

Of Note

Each year, depression costs employers \$43.7 billion. The National Mental Health Association and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology have identified these costs to include excess absenteeism and productivity reductions due to depression (55 percent), medical and treatment costs (28 percent), and depression-related suicides (17 percent). Those most affected by depression are employees in their most productive work years, with 70 percent of depressed adults younger than 45.

Source: March 1994 HR Report, published by ICMA, Washington, D.C.

Forms of Help Available to People with Clinical Depression

- Medication.
- Psychotherapy.

Ways in Which Coworkers and Family Members Can Help

- Respectfully encourage the person to get professional help.
- Encourage the person to continue treatment and to take his or her medication as prescribed.
- Maintain as normal a relationship as possible.
- Acknowledge that the person is suffering and in pain.
- Offer encouragement, and pay genuine compliments.
- Show respect, and make the person aware of his or her value to others.

The Supervisor's Role in Guiding the Employee with Clinical Depression Toward Treatment

- Recognize performance problems, and refer an employee for an assessment. Follow company procedures to refer to an employee assistance program, a physician, or a mental health professional.

Source: DOWNTIME: A Worksite Guide to Understanding Clinical Depression, 1993. Used with permission from Wellness Councils of America, Omaha, Nebraska.

was working a limited schedule and could begin to see light at the end of the tunnel. It had taken about three weeks for the antidepressants to kick in, but my outlook progressively got better every day thereafter. I was amazed at the number of people who had gone through similar periods of depression and had called to offer support. I was proud of the staff and joked with staffers that department head meetings ran smoother and were much more to-the-point. (This was more true than I wanted to admit.) The council welcomed me back, and routines at city hall quickly went back to normal. Somehow, personally and professionally, things were better. I was more aware of the people around me. I started enjoying the simple pleasures of my day. My life was back together, and in spite of the terrible ordeal, I am a better manager and person today.

As a result of my bout with clinical depression, I have become most interested in the subject and have done much research. I was astounded by the statistic that 20 percent of the population will be affected at one point or another in their lives. Doctors believe there is a hereditary connection (incidentally, a close member of my family had suffered from depression just over a year before I did). My ignorance at that time had led me to dismiss his problem as absurd and to disbelieve that anything could have that much effect on his ability to function. Little did I know that this response of mine was the worst one possible. Most depressed people need hope, not a lecture, and someone to see that they get the necessary help with their illness.

Mount Airy's Program

My depression led me to seek ways to help others with similar problems. I believed that in my organization of 160 employees, if statistics were correct, at some point or another 30 employees would suffer clinical de-

pression. I decided that the city probably already had lost good employees who could have been productive workers had we recognized and treated the symptoms of their personal nightmares.

First, Mount Airy provided an educational session for all employees at which we showed the Wellness Councils of America's video, *DOWNTIME: A Worksite Guide to Understanding Clinical Depression*. Employee attendance was required for all departments at the showing, after which there was a question-and-answer period. On another front, the city hired a psychologist to come to city hall one day a week and meet with employees for whatever reasons they felt were necessary. It was stressed that if employees wished to consult the psychologist and went voluntarily, all sessions would be kept confidential, with time off from work granted during the psychologist's working hours. This counseling service also has been made available to family members at no charge.

Mount Airy's staff psychologist works closely with a local psychiatrist

If You Need Information . . .

For information about how corporate wellness programs can keep your workforce healthy, and to order a copy of *DOWNTIME: A Worksite Guide to Understanding Clinical Depression* (\$65 for book and video), contact the Wellness Councils of America, 7101 Newport Avenue, Suite 311, Omaha, Nebraska 68152, 402/572-3590.

Ask for your copy of the brochure *Corporate Wellness: Its Bottom-Line Impact*, which is free to ICMA members.

and, when necessary, refers employees to that doctor. Fortunately, visits to the doctor are funded through the city's wellness program, as many employees in lower pay ranges might not choose this benefit if they had to pay for it. All sessions are confidential unless work performance requires them, in which case the department head receives a report. We hope that Mount Airy has become a caring and healing organization.

As a result of our sessions with the employees, we have had seven people come forward and seek help. Four of these people have needed continued care, but *all* are productive members of our organization today. This program has been cost-effective for the city and has helped improve the morale of city employees. **PM**

Ron Niland is city manager of Mount Airy, North Carolina.