Understanding Depression

Why do we, as contractors, need to understand depression’s symptoms and causes? Because this can affect our families, our friends and our businesses. There’s a possibility that you, a family member, friend, employee, etc. is living with depression. Here’s how pervasive it is:

- The World Health Organization estimates that more than 264 million people (or 4.4 percent of the global population) live with depression.
- Approximately 30 percent of individuals living with substance use disorder(s) also live with depression.
- 16 million American adults experienced a depressive episode during the past year.
- Women are 70 percent more likely to experience depression.
- Young adults ages 18-25 are 60 percent more likely to experience depression than those over 50.

Depression is one of the most common mental illnesses (second only to anxiety disorder for Americans) in the world. With the current pandemic only making it more difficult for those afflicted individuals, it’s as important as it’s ever been for us, as leaders, to recognize what depression is, the common symptoms to look for and how it is treated.

Common depression symptoms include changes in sleep, changes in appetite, lack of concentration, loss of energy, lack of interest in normal activities, low self-esteem, and feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness. Depression is different than “just being sad.” Feeling sad is a normal reaction after going through a loss or setback, but that feeling generally passes with time. Depression is an illness of the brain that lingers and can have an overpowering effect on many parts of a person’s life.

The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) describes depression as “a mood disorder which causes distressing symptoms that affect how you feel, think, and handle daily activities.” Depression is a complex disease with many different potential causes. Scientists believe many of the following factors may contribute to depression:

- Trauma
- Genetics
- Life circumstances
- Brain structure
- Other medical conditions
- Drug and/or alcohol abuse

Like most diseases, depression can come in many different forms and ranges of severity. Most doctors use the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) as approved by the American Psychiatric Association. There are many types of depression, but below are some of the more common types:

- **Clinical depression** - also known as major depression or major depressive disorder. It is the most severe type of depression.
- **Persistent depressive disorder** - also known as dysthymia, it is a continuous long-term depression.
- **Bipolar disorder** - also known as manic-depressive disease. This disorder is associated with episodes of
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mood swings ranging from depressive lows to manic highs.

- **Seasonal affective disorder (SAD)** - a type of depression related to changes in seasons (typically colder months when there is less sunlight).

- **Psychotic depression** - a severe form of depression that includes some form of psychosis (hallucinations, delusions, paranoia etc.)

- **Perinatal depression** - also known as postpartum depression. This disorder occurs during or after pregnancy and affects 10-20 percent of all childbearing women.

- **Premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD)** - a severe, sometimes disabling extension of premenstrual syndrome that causes extreme mood shifts.

- **Situational depression** - a short-term, stress-related type of depression that can develop following a traumatic event (or series of events).

Like most illnesses, depression is treatable. With proper diagnosis and medical treatments (including a balanced diet, adequate rest and regular exercise), most individuals living with these illnesses maintain a normal lifestyle. Treatments include cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), interpersonal therapy (IPT), psychodynamic therapy, light therapy, support groups; and brain stimulation therapies including electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), repetitive transcranial magnetic stimulation (rTMS), and vagus nerve stimulation (VNS). A wide assortment of medications are also available for treatment. These medications often have physical side effects, can take up to 12 weeks to reach their full effect, and typically impact brain chemicals including serotonin, norepinephrine and dopamine.

Now that we have a better understanding of what depression is (and some of the common types), its common symptoms and how it is treated, I want to challenge you to ask the following questions: Are any of your employees exhibiting signs of untreated depression? Are you willing to provide a culture where it’s ok to seek help? Will you provide support on a long-term basis? Stigma and shame often prevent people living with depression from getting the help they need. As an industry, we need to continue shifting our culture until every company answers “yes” to these questions.

Resources for this blog included the following: Mayo Clinic (www.mayoclinichealthsystem.org), National Alliance on Mental Illness (www.nami.org), National Institute of Mental Health (www.nimh.edu).

About the Author - Bob Swanson

Bob Swanson is the past president of Swanson & Youngdale and the first Chairman of FCA International. He tragically lost his son Michael to suicide on March 13, 2009 at the age of 33. Bob now focuses his efforts on creating awareness of the impact of mental health and suicide in the construction industry.

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