

‘Tackling Mood Disorders in the Workplace’

Imagine if Workplace Diversity existed; I mean truly existed in our society. Imagine if it was an invaluable tool used to increase productivity, improve morale and achieve the greatest outcomes. Imagine if employers recognised that effective deployment of diversity was a means by which empires could grow and thrive. Imagine if difference was no longer measured in terms of deviation from perfection. How much more we could create, how high our aspirations and how successful our communities ...

Are people with mood disorders recognised as individuals with diverse gifts and skills? Do employers make the most of the manic energy of the bipolar employee, use the sensitivity of the depressive to read people and situations, take advantage of the meticulous attention to detail of the obsessive compulsive? Do employers respect the need for individuals with mood disorders to have some down time once in a while to re-group and re-centre? Do they maximise the opportunity presented by such diversity in their industry or sector?

And on the other side of the coin, as individuals who suffer from mood disorders, do we attend therapy and medicate ourselves to gain tools to achieve happiness and success? Or do we try to discard a part of ourselves that we are ashamed of. Do we berate ourselves for our difference? Do we push ourselves to the end of our physical, emotional and spiritual tethers, refusing to ask for help until we have crashed through the safety rail and begun to slide down, down into the gaping chasm of fear, anxiety, and self-loathing that is always there, always waiting...

Somewhere in a city, in a building, in an office a woman sits hunched at her desk, surrounded by the detritus of emotional collapse , paralysed with guilt, anxiety and fear.

Piles and piles of paperwork lie scattered on the desk, the floor. She is sure there are answers there somewhere – that she could make sense of it, organise it, give it meaning; at least that's what she thought, or maybe that was yesterday, or last week, last month; maybe never...

Coffee cups with remnants of liquid promises – contents gone cold and souring - peak out from the clutter as yet more proof. Hard evidence of her worthlessness, her inadequacy, her incompetence.

The constant and harassing sound of city traffic below seems to amplify in her head, multiplying the chaos in her mind, in her work, in her life. The computer triumphantly launches into screen saver mode, throwing random and erratic patterns across the screen.

She hunches further into her seat, and prays that no one comes in, that no one will see her as she is; naked, vulnerable – a failure. A trail of ants marches in orderly procession to indulge in the sweet, sticky remains of her morning apple, oblivious to the presence of the woman falling apart beside them.

Throughout history mood disorders have featured as part of the human condition – nervous disorders, melancholia, behavioural problems, 'the little girl with the curl'. Today these conditions have medical names – bipolar, depression, OCD, ADD, ADHD... and we are bombarded with medical 'solutions', descriptions, prescriptions and potions. Our mood disorders are recognised as genuine conditions by the medical profession – like asthma or diabetes. Yet still it seems mental illness is a dirty secret, a weakness that is acceptable only if it is the affliction of someone else. So we struggle along our confused path asking for help or not, looking for answers, or continuing to lose ourselves in endless questions, seeking support, or struggling on in our loneliness and isolation...

Perhaps it is time we took a stand and began to educate our communities and our workplaces about the truth about living with mood disorders. Maybe it is our collective responsibility to unashamedly tell our stories. Why should mental illness make us victims? Why do we perpetuate our victim status by continuing to allow ourselves to be weighed and measured and found wanting by employers, colleagues and perhaps most of all, ourselves?

We do not understand our condition, so how can we expect others to accommodate our needs intuitively? Happiness, contentment, success, self acceptance; these are not grand and unattainable goals. Collectively we have the capacity to move mountains. Despite our condition, we have unique gifts and strengths that should be recognised and nurtured.

When we come across someone who is blind or deaf, we find that their other senses are far more acute than those who have not lost a sense. How strong are the compensating limbs of the amputee? The person with a mood disorder may at times be paralysed with anxiety and fear, may be overly emotional, moody, angry or aggressive. But all have corresponding gifts and skills; strengths we should encourage and protect. With the right support from our colleagues and managers they could bring out the best in us. With some self-acceptance – cutting ourselves some slack once in a while – we could bring out the best in ourselves.

Employers are responsible for implementing fair and equal employment opportunities, for introducing workplace diversity policies, for supporting their staff to maximise productivity. But standing up for ourselves, respecting ourselves and asking the world to take us as we are, to give us the space to use our creative talents and find ways to manage our problems – asking for acceptance and respect – for that we are responsible.

In another city, in a building, in an office somewhere a woman gets up from her seat. This feeling of inertia that could rapidly deteriorate into a debilitating sense of inadequacy and impending doom is painfully familiar.

Last week, if her mind will allow an accurate recollection, she achieved above and beyond the call of duty. The way she feels today is the way she is. The way she has always been. The trough after the peak, the exhaustion after the exertion. She must not give in to it or it will take her spiralling down into the depths of depression and despair, lasting a day, a week, a month...

She sends an email to her supervisor requesting 2 days work from home. She outlines what she will achieve and how she can be contacted. She doesn't go into detail about the reason why, but their working relationship is honest and healthy and she is confident (thank God!) the request will be understood and approved. It is a great comfort to her that the culture of her workplace will spare her the humiliation of exposing her fragile emotional state, and she senses the unspoken support of her colleagues, knows her fear of judgement is unfounded.

As she collects a pile of dishes scattered around her desk, leaving a trail of ants now confused and disoriented, she feels herself move a step back from the edge and is grateful.

Hot tears stream down her face on the way home but they are tears of relief more than fear and she feels the knots in her stomach release their grip. Pulling into her driveway she tells herself 'it's going to be ok.' And out of the corner of her eye she is almost certain she glimpses the spectre of a black dog, slinking away into the shadows.