

Coaching Up: Help your supervisor support you through your mental illness

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If you are an employee experiencing depression or anxiety in the workplace, having a supportive supervisor can make a huge difference in your ability to remain productive and stay at work. Unfortunately, even well-intentioned supervisors may not know how to respond to the changes in your behaviour or performance. Fear and misunderstanding can lead to hostile reactions or disciplinary approaches.

Supervisors commonly react with avoidance or denial of the issue, even if they are generally sympathetic and capable. What may be simply a rough spot for you as an employee can expand into full-blown conflict and turmoil. Too bad all supervisors were not provided with adequate training and support! The reality is that many simply do not have a clue about how to address the symptoms of your illness in a more effective manner. This may not be their fault: training about mental health issues at work is not usually part of their education or experience. So what can you do? Turns out there is plenty and the approach is called “coaching up”.

Coaching up occurs when we provide skills training through discussion and suggestions to those we report to rather than those who report to us. What is most important about this approach is that it is done with respect for the role of the supervisor. Their job does not include becoming a counselor or working with you on personal issues. Your supervisor’s job is to help you to remain productive, so remember to focus your efforts on workplace issues. Offer your supervisor suggestions and assistance on the best ways to help you at work. After all, no one knows better than you what will help you to remain productive and get your job done.

Even if you are experiencing depression, anxiety or another mental illness, if you can still work, you are probably capable of coaching up. It will take some work on your part. You will need to be able to identify and describe your challenges and needs, and possibly you may have to be able to accept compromise.

First, take some time to think about the challenges you face during the workday. You may want to keep a brief diary of when you struggle during the day, paying attention to the following:

- Concentration – when is your concentration at its best? When is it most difficult?
- Fatigue – when are you most tired? What part of your job energizes you? What part of your job drains your energy?
- Irritability – if so, what exactly triggers it?
- Conflict – where does interpersonal conflict exist in your workplace for you?
- Deadlines – are you having trouble meeting deadlines? If so, which ones and why?
- Memory – are you forgetting things? Do you have trouble recalling facts or figures? How often and when?

- Emotions – do your emotions overwhelm you? If so, what triggers them?
- Change – are you able to adapt to and accept change? If not, what makes it difficult for you?

Once you have identified your challenges, think about what would be helpful for you to minimize or eliminate these obstacles to your productivity. Make sure your solutions take into account the effect they will have on others. For example, if your co-workers are ticked off because they have to do your work for you, it will not help you to feel better and recover.. Consider what your supervisor can control, and what is outside their control. Also, think of solutions that are cost-effective and allow you to continue contribute to the overall success of the organization.

Here are some ideas from people who have a mental illness and have successfully returned to or stayed at work:

Concentration

- Try to rearrange your day so that you take advantage of the time when your concentration is at its best to do your more complex tasks. Save the routine work for when you are less able to focus on details.

Fatigue

- Use the parts of the job you enjoy and that energize you to increase your ability to fight fatigue.
- In some cases, the work you enjoy is not what your co-workers enjoy. If so, trade them for work that they enjoy, but that drains you. For example, if you find filing relaxing and your co-workers dislike it, you might offer to do their filing and in exchange they take minutes at meetings for you. Be creative and be aware of what will appear as fair to everyone.
- Consider shorter, more frequent breaks to fight fatigue.
- Speak to your medical professional about how to use nutrition, exercise, sleep and the timing of medication to reduce fatigue.

Irritability

- Learn to identify your triggers and non-blaming ways of discussing them with your supervisor. Be specific, yet non-personal. For example, don't say, "You irritate me," (even if this is what you are thinking!) Here are some suggestions for what you might say:
 - "When instructions are given to me verbally I find it confusing," is more effective than: "When you bark orders at me you really tick me off." You may want to ask that instructions be given to you in an email or in writing until you feel better.
 - "I am sensitive to raised voices at the moment and will tend to react negatively," is more effective than: "If you yell at me, why shouldn't I yell at you?"
 - "Criticism triggers my anxiety and makes it difficult for me to focus on improvement. Making positive suggestions for change and setting a time to follow up to see if it has been done can result in the outcomes you want," is more effective than "I need to defend myself because all you ever do is criticize me."

Conflict

Conflict is always hard on all concerned. When you have a mental illness, two important factors add to the challenge in resolving the conflict.

- When people do not understand that your behaviours are related to your health, they may react by taking your irritability or withdrawal as a personal insult.
- You may be experiencing the feeling that everyone is out to get you. This is a common symptom of many mental illnesses and makes it difficult to trust those around you.

Being aware of these two factors, you can try to suggest ways to resolve or reduce the conflict. Some ideas can be:

- Offer positive suggestions for change rather than focusing on the problem, especially if that “problem” is a person. For instance, if someone is critical of you, ask your supervisor to instruct all employees to refrain from criticizing each other. If you feel that someone dominates meetings, ask your supervisor to find a way to engage everyone equally at meetings. Try to stay away from accusing individuals and instead focus on solutions that will work for everyone.
- Offer to refrain from engaging in conflict by walking away and asking your supervisor to address the issues with co-workers.
- Suggest that your supervisor explain that you currently have a health condition that is affecting your emotions. Disclosure of diagnosis is not necessary, but explaining that your reactions are not intended to be personal may help reduce tension.
- You may wish to ask to be excused from social events for a time.

Deadlines

- Schedule more frequent meetings prior to the deadline.
- At the start of a project ask your supervisor for a thorough review of all of the resources and tasks required.
- Buddying-up with someone or delegating project overview to someone else until you are well.

Memory

You may wish to consider:

- Request information in writing.
- Use your email software for reminders.
- Carry a date book or a small pad of paper with you at all times so you can record information from “hallway” conversations that may affect your work.
- Use sticky notes on your computer and do not take them down until the task is completed.
- Record information from every call on a pad of paper. Review to ensure all calls were responded to.

Emotions

Ultimately, you are responsible for your emotions at work. If you are having a hard time staying professional during the work day, seek help from your doctor or therapist.

Cognitive-behavioural therapy has been shown to be particularly effective in this regard.

You can also strategize at work:

- Get permission to go for a 5-minute walk when overwhelmed.
- Identify and minimize those things that trigger your emotions.
- Ask for understanding from your supervisor while committing to doing what you can to stay well and emotionally balanced.

Change

Explaining how you would like change introduced can help your supervisor to do this in the best way possible.

- Some people prefer to know about change as soon as possible so that they can prepare.
- Others do not like the anticipation and wish to be told at the last minute.

Once you have identified all of the suggestions that you believe will support you in being a productive employee, ask your supervisor for a _-hour meeting. Be sure to suggest the meeting be held in a place where you are comfortable. Explain to your supervisor that you have a medical condition that is currently affecting your well-being and you know it may be more difficult for them to manage you in the way that has always worked before. Tell them you would like to offer a few suggestions that could help you to stay productive without costing them anything. Ask if they would mind if you shared these ideas with them. Be prepared to compromise. If some of the suggestions get adopted and others are not considered practical, you are still further ahead than if you had not coached up.

If you are unsure how reasonable your suggestions are, try them out on a trusted friend outside of the workplace before speaking with your supervisor. This can allow you to “rehearse” and be more confident when the discussion takes place, as well eliminating those ideas that may be impractical or expensive.

I am not suggesting this will be easy, but it is also not easy to continue to work while having mental health problems in a workplace where no one understands. If you can coach up, you may be able to teach someone how to be a better supervisor, not just for you, but for others who are distressed in the workplace.