**Managing Complex Mental Health Issues in the Workplace**

by Eliza Oakley

§(Music Playing)§

**Eliza Oakley:**

Right now 690,000 Australians are living with severe or complex mental illness, such as Bipolar Disorder, Eating Disorders, Major Depressive Disorder, Schizophrenia and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

So for every one of these people, there are at least five other people who are directly affected, whether it’s family, friends or work colleagues. That equates to approximately four million people who are dealing with the challenges of complex mental illness.

For 30 years SANE Australia has been working with people to reduce stigma and pull down the barriers that prevent people from speaking up and getting the help that they need.

People with complex mental illness are employed within all levels of organisations. We need to increase understanding in our workplaces so that we can create environments that are healthier and better for all.

Best practice leads us to three key things we need to be addressing in our workplaces – reducing stigma, strong leadership, and understanding how to deal with a mental health crisis.

Workplaces need to ensure that they are reducing stigma at every point in the employment cycle.

Pre-employment, we need to be ensuring that we’re not screening out people from work unnecessarily. If someone discloses they’re living with a mental health condition, we need to be asking how might we be able to support you in the workplace.

When we’re at work, it’s really important that we work with someone if they are experiencing a mental illness.

Nicole, one of our speakers tells us that when she was diagnosed with a mental illness she had a great supervisor, and she started talking to somebody outside of the workplace about her mental health condition and was making great progress.

She then had a new team leader, and he suggested to her that she resign and reapply for her position when she was better.

We need to take the responsibility and do better than this.

When we are off work with mental illness, it’s critical that our workplaces stay linked in with us and keep talking to us, reminding us that we are valued employees.

When we’re returning to work, we need to be communicating with the person and make sure that we are helping them readjust in the workplace.

Mick, another of SANE’s speakers, tells us that he gets tired of having to teach managers about mental illness. Absolutely when he’s off work and returning to work, he needs to be helping the workplace understand what his needs are and what his capabilities are at that time. However it’s not his responsibility to teach the workplace about mental illness.

We need to be clear that we’re not creating gated communities at any step in the employment cycle. Reducing stigma at every point along the way is going to make the impact.

Dov, one of SANE Australia’s thriving community speakers, talks compellingly about his experience as a doctor, both as a patient and as a medical practitioner. Dov has a lot to teach us about how we can improve and make the working lives of people with mental illness much better for all of us.

**Dov:**

My name’s Dov. I live with Bipolar Disorder, and I’m a medical doctor. Most people might be surprised to know that people in the medical health profession actually suffer more from mental illnesses than probably mainstream society. Despite that, it’s still not widely talked about and there’s a huge stigma, even amongst my colleagues.

I’m often horrified with how patients with mental health issues are treated. It has allowed me to be a better doctor, however I want people out there to know that even from the position that I’m in as a practicing physician, I too have experienced a loneliness and stigmatisation.

When I was a medical student I had my first major manic event, and I found it quite interesting that amongst my peers of somewhat 200 medical students, barely any identified that there was a problem, or if they did identify that there was a problem, they didn’t raise the alarms or speak to anyone.

So if you think about it, a medical student going through a mental health crisis amongst medical colleagues, lecturers etcetera and still can’t really get the attention and help that they need, imagine what someone in the wider community faces.

**Eliza Oakley:**

Six weeks after Dov’s video aired, he’d had more than 10,000 likes on Facebook, and he reports that there has been overwhelming support from both his workplace and the community.

Reducing stigma is a key barrier, and once we do this we’re working towards all workplaces having better attitudes and therefore better outcomes for all people living with complex mental illness.

We need to start at the top to effect real change around mental illness in our workplaces.

We need to be asking ourselves as leaders where is mental illness in our strategic objectives? Where is it in our executive KPIs?

It’s only then that HR and other managers can develop and implement the policies and procedures necessary to support people living with complex mental illness.

Research tells us that people with complex mental illness don’t speak up, because they don’t want to be a burden and they’re ashamed. This is reflected in the Australian Suicide Statistics. People living with complex mental illness are ten to 45 times more likely than the general population to take their own lives.

Now that we’re aware of the high rate of suicide amongst people living with complex mental illness, our workplaces need policies and procedures in place now, before there’s a crisis.

We need to have our key contact points and the best process clearly outlined for all managers in an organisation so that our response is consistent. Mental illness needs to be included.

Ignorance stands in the way of good management. It can no longer be used as an excuse for poor workplace practice. There are many Australian workplaces that are providing inclusive workplace culture, where people with complex mental illness are able to contribute in their full capacity.

It’s the responsibility of senior managers to provide the environment and the training for managers, to ensure that we have best practice mental health in all Australian workplaces.

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