

When the Boss may have a Mental Health Issue

By: Mary Ann Baynton, MSW, RSW
Director, Mental Health Works, CMHA, Ontario
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We are often asked, “What do I do when it is my boss that has the mental illness?” This question arises because much of what we teach through Mental Health Works training focuses on recognizing, approaching and managing employees with mental health issues. Of course when you have authority over someone, it is much easier to require them to behave and perform in certain ways at work. When the person who may be unwell has authority over you, there is much more personal risk in choosing to approach them. One such risk is losing your job, so what are you to do?

First, we suggest that you respond the way you would if anyone was suspected of being unwell. Say to your boss, “You do not seem to be yourself lately. Are you feeling okay?” Sometimes, even simply stated concerns for well-being are enough to open someone up to seeing that things have changed for them. It is a symptom of some mental illnesses to lack the insight of knowing that this is health concern rather than a product of life circumstances. We all have stressors in our lives and when our mental health begins to create negative thought patterns, it is easy to believe that they are attributable to these stressors rather than to chemical changes within our brains. One person went into a colleague’s office to say she was angry with one of her employees. The colleague said to her, “You seem to be angry with everyone lately.” This statement upset her, but she said that she came to realize it was true. She went to her doctor who said that there was nothing wrong with her, but she persisted in asking for testing. It turns out that rather than a mental health problem, she actually had a problem with her thyroid which also causes chemical changes that may result in negative thought processes. So, we may not know for sure what is causing someone to be unwell and to behave differently, but as caring human beings, asking about someone’s health is a way to help them seek the help they need.

Be prepared with examples of what has changed so that you are stating them in a positive, rather than negative way. For instance, you might want to say, “You are not your usual cheery self.” or “You seem less energetic.” or “You had always been steady as a rock, even with all the stressors you have here at work.” By focusing on the positives that may be currently lacking, you provide perspective and hope that things can return to where they were before. In addition, you avoid the blaming and shaming that can arise when we accuse someone of being negative, critical or volatile.

If this approach is not successful in helping your boss look into his or her health condition, there are a few more things you might try:

Speak to your boss about what specifically you need in order to do your best job.

This can include asking your boss to:

- put instructions to you in writing. This can avoid misunderstandings.
- prioritize your work with you so that you are clear on what is needed first. This can avoid you feeling that expectations are unfair or unclear. When another task is assigned, revisit the priorities to know where the task fits in.
- speak to you in an even tone. You can explain that a raised voice causes you anxiety and although you understand that these are stressful times for your boss, you want to do the best job possible and this will help you do it.
- schedule a short time each week to sit one-on-one with you to review your work, check on how things are going and what changes are needed. This time can be good for your boss and it can also establish a rapport that will allow you to get through this difficult time.

Try to implement stress-reducers into your boss's day without being obvious.

Depending on your relationship, circumstances, knowledge of your boss's likes, and comfort level:

- bring him or her a cup of tea or hot chocolate. (My employee brings me chocolate when I am stressed out because she knows it works every time.)
- try to anticipate some of their needs – tidy their office space, have a report ready in advance of the deadline, remind them of upcoming tasks and ask if you can help for them.
- ask if they would like you to take their calls so that they can have uninterrupted time to do their tasks.
- suggest you go for lunch, a coffee, or even a walk.
- offer to take on tasks you know you can handle that would help them out.
- Speak and react in calm ways, even when they are agitated.

If your boss continues to deteriorate, speak to someone who may be able to help.

It is important that you speak to them about your concern for their well-being and not imply that you are reporting on their performance or attitude. The latter approach can be viewed as subordination on your part and disloyalty to your boss. Rather, you might say that your boss has not seemed to be him or her self lately and you are concerned that they are putting their health at risk.

Ask the person you choose to talk to if he or she has noticed and if they would mind just making sure that your boss is okay. This could be any of the following:

- a friend or family member if you have a personal relationship with one.
- your boss's boss.
- someone on the board of directors if your boss is the CEO and especially if you know a director personally.
- a trusted colleague of your boss's.
- the occupational health professional if your organization has one.
- a human resources professional if your organization has one.

You can even call your Employee Assistance Plan provider if you have one. The counselling professional you contact can help you both manage your own stress while your boss is unwell and speak to you about possible strategies to help your boss get the help he or she needs.

Remember that often mental health problems are temporary and people who get treatment can recover and be well again. The two-pronged approach to take when your boss may be experiencing mental health issues is to 1) find strategies that reduce the stress their illness causes for you; 2) do what you can to encourage your boss to seek wellness.

Finally, if none of these work, my advice to you is to take care of your own mental health. While you may value your job, if you are not enjoying it anymore because of this relationship and if it is negatively affecting your own well-being, you may need to make the decision to find another job. Do not see this as failure or giving up, see it rather as an important strategic decision for your own health. It is highly unlikely that your boss's intention is to cause you daily stress and anxiety, but if that is your reality, you may be experiencing higher levels of potentially damaging biological chemicals such as cortisol. These chemical changes occur in our bodies as a direct result of chronic stress or anxiety and are responsible for all sorts of health problems ranging from heart disease to auto-immune disorders to mental health issues. If you are able to give some of the earlier suggestions a try, you may be able to help your boss work towards his or her own wellness. If this is not possible for you, then remember the Canadian Mental Health Association statement that there is no health without mental health. And that includes your own.