

VOICE

A Newsletter for Donors and Friends

Supporting My Husband with Clinical Depression

By Marcia Heinegg, FRIEND OF NAMI

My husband's depression has been my teacher. We've been married 48 years. I knew nothing about depression when we met.

The first years of living together, we spent many weekends going to a bookstore where I would go to the psychology section and read about depression. I had so much to learn, and through my experiences with my husband, I have learned so much.

Chris has depressive episodes. Sometimes he has endless energy and curiosity for seeing, exploring and learning. Sometimes he is exhilarated and happy. There is also a middle ground I call "functionally depressed." In this state, he gets up, gets dressed, eats breakfast and plows through the day doing useful things, but he has no sense of humor.

During his depressive episodes, he is gloomy, sad, tired and tearful. He experiences suicidal thoughts, although he's never made an attempt. This was very frightening for me, until I realized that when he's



Marcia Heinegg

depressed, he's unable to focus enough to follow through with a plan. As you might imagine, this realization was a great relief.

Chris had his first severe episode when he was 22 while taking his final exams for his civil engineering degree. The breakdown put him in a mental institution for six months where he had electric shock treatments and medication that sedated him. His second severe episode happened years later when he was between jobs. Rather than seek

help through the medical system, his mother connected us with a retired psychologist who lived on a farm. I took a leave from work, and we both went to live on the farm. The arrangement was that we would work in exchange for room, board and therapy, which included individual therapy, couples counseling and group therapy. We learned a lot, and after a few months, Chris came out of his depression.

"NAMI was what helped me most in learning how to best support Chris."

The third severe episode came about five years later. At that point, he agreed to see a counselor regularly, and he started taking an antidepressant. The medication didn't work long term, but it at least helped him get out of the episode.

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Leading by Example

By Daniel H. Gillison, Jr., CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER



Daniel H. Gillison, Jr.

This year has been challenging for everyone, and those challenges have translated to rising cases of mental health conditions and substance use disorders. According to the CDC, 2 in 5 U.S. adults experienced a mental health condition in June 2020, compared to 1 in 5 before the COVID-19 pandemic. Mental health conditions affect every part of life, including the workplace, and the time to start acknowledging this is long overdue.

American workers are known to work long hours, take less vacation and experience high rates of burnout. The chronic stress we've all been experiencing since 2020 has further negatively impacted both workplace productivity and employee mental health. Employers can no longer ignore the toll pandemic-related stressors like isolation, loss, Zoom fatigue and uncertainty about the future have had on their employees. Accommodating for mental health needs through employee assistance programs, adequate insurance coverage and mental health days is critical.

"We must invest in the health and wellbeing of our whole selves if we want to make any mission a reality."

At NAMI, we recognize how important it is to lead by example. In August 2021, after what had been a tumultuous year and a half, we gave our national staff a paid week off to care for their mental health. Our people are our greatest asset, and giving our employees a chance to rest is just as important as asking them to come to work, ready to create meaningful change. We must invest in the health and wellbeing of our whole selves if we want to make any mission a reality.

Employers have a responsibility to look after the mental health of their employees and foster a supportive environment in the workplace — not only because it is good for business, but because it is the right thing to do. We hope other companies are inspired to promote a culture of mental wellness and support in their own workplaces, too. 🌐

You can help others by sharing your stories of hope, recovery and how NAMI has helped you. Please send your stories to donornewsletter@nami.org. Please note that while we appreciate every story, we are unable to publish all submissions. NAMI may edit your story for length and clarity as needed.

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What Can We Do to Improve Workplace Culture?

By Kelly Pavelich, DONOR COMMUNICATIONS MANAGER

With Lisa Lewis, CHIEF HUMAN RESOURCES OFFICER

As people increasingly start returning in-person to the office, it's important to recognize that the workplace may not feel the same as it did prior to the pandemic, and employees' mental health needs may have changed as well.

According to Mental Health America's "Mind the Workplace 2021 Report," 9 in 10 employees report that their workplace stress affects their mental health and 4 in 5 feel emotionally drained from their work. Only 5% of employees strongly agreed that their employers provide a safe environment for employees who have mental illness. Making matters worse, 1 in 3 employees are unable to afford their health care costs and more than 60% of employees aren't paid enough to save for an emergency.

Untreated mental health conditions can impact the day-to-day workings of a company, both financially and in terms of morale. Symptoms may include sleep problems, lack of concentration, aches and pains, irritability, low motivation or self-medication, which can all have a negative impact on the workplace. The National Institute of Mental Health reports that mental illness

costs the economy about \$200 billion in lost earnings each year.

So, what can companies do differently? How can they better support their employees' mental health and prevent burnout? And what can employees do to improve their own workplace culture?

What Companies Can Do

Workplaces should make it their top priority to provide:

- Adequate insurance coverage
- Employee assistance programs (EAP)
- Accommodations and/or disability planning for people with mental illness

Lisa Lewis, NAMI's Chief Human Resources Officer, says that it's part of Human Resources' (HR) responsibility to protect employees' physical and mental health and ensure that insurance carriers provide for mental health.

Companies should also consider the unique stressors of family caregivers and implement policies to better support them. NAMI recommends management training, so managers know how to have effective conversations about mental health and wellness, particularly in

relation to performance and discipline. We also recommend using non-stigmatizing language and providing resources about mental health to employees to decrease stigma in the workplace.

Through these actions, companies can improve access to quality care and create a healthy setting where employees feel more secure and have the support they need to be successful in the workplace. To assess whether benefits and policies meet employee needs, companies can check-in with their employees through surveys and host employee resource groups (ERG) to encourage open discussion. "Feedback from employees is important," Lisa says. "It motivates, it builds morale, it says, 'this company really cares; they hear me.'"

During the COVID-19 pandemic, companies may also need to adjust their policies to provide their employees with additional support. NAMI hosted an ERG for working parents to discuss the challenges that come with balancing work and home life; we accommodated our benefits, allowing for a flexible schedule and the option to roll-over additional vacation days into the new year; we hosted fun

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ASK YOUR EMPLOYER

Managing a mental health condition at work can be challenging. Practice healthy habits to improve your well-being.

- What are our policies on mental health?
- What kind of mental health insurance do we have? Do we have access to Employee Assistance Programs (EAP)?
- If I need a leave of absence, what disability and return to work options are available?
- What other workplace resources are available to me?
- What supports are available to me if I have a family member with a mental health condition who needs my care?

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virtual events for Halloween and Thanksgiving; and we provided our employees with a paid mental health week in August.

What Employees Can Do

Employees can encourage change by starting a conversation with HR. "HR is there to support the employee," Lisa says. "HR professionals often don't know [what's helpful] unless you ask or tell us. We are open to hearing new ideas and feedback." Employees can also form their own

ERGs, which can be informal, to confer with their colleagues.

One of Lisa's top recommendations for employees looking to care for their mental health is to take advantage of EAP, which is typically available through a company's health insurance plan. EAP is confidential — employers won't know who uses it — and covers two to three therapy sessions for free. When employees call, they're directed to the appropriate professional

depending on their unique circumstance, for example, a mental health concern, bereavement, divorce or family support.

Workplace mental health and culture have increasingly become topics of conversation during the pandemic. Statistics prove that it's in a company's best interest to support their employees' mental health and create a supportive, healthy environment that's #StigmaFree. The time is now to protect mental health. 🌐

Supporting My Husband with Clinical Depression

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For the next 20 years, Chris joined personal growth workshops, attended a men's group, saw counselors on and off and took about 15 different anti-depressants while searching for the right one. He found several things that helped keep his depression at bay, and I found ways to be more understanding and to continue my quest for knowledge about depression.

NAMI Programs

NAMI was what helped me most in learning how to best support Chris. I took the NAMI Family-to-Family class and attended every session. I got so much out of this course. I gained knowledge and techniques that helped me cope with Chris's depressive episodes. I learned how important my reaction was to the situation. I really understood his pain, and my compassion rose. I understood that he felt physically sick, and he needed a lot of sleep to heal. Less than halfway through my course, Chris joined NAMI Peer-to-Peer, a program for adults with

mental health conditions. He got a lot out of that group, too.

Hobbies

These past 20 years, Chris has gotten a lot of joy out of house renovation, artistic garden projects and his social life. He enjoys yoga, bicycling and playing guitar. He has developed friends with men in his men's groups, and I, too, have a women's group.



Marcia and Chris Heinegg

Depression Log

Another very useful tool I developed is a depression log. For one year, I recorded when he was depressed, what he did while depressed and observed how he moved through the episode. I realized that he was only depressed about three days per month. This realization helped me very much. Chris said that he found the log result helpful in that it showed him a more optimistic perspective. He also said that depression is on a spectrum of severity, and he agreed that he's moderately to severely depressed three days a month, but half the month experiences low grade depression.

Medication

Chris finally found an anxiety medication that helps with his symptoms. He still experiences depression, but the medication provides some relief.

Now, we are getting old. We put one foot in front of the other and enjoy the sunshine and our grandchildren. 🌐

Living and Thriving with OCD

By James Madich, FRIEND OF NAMI

One of the most important milestones during my road to recovery was returning to work after nearly six months of leave to seek treatment for obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). Not only was it another step toward living a full life with OCD “in tow,” but it was also a chance for me to openly share my story, give people a better understanding of the condition, reduce stigma and correct common misperceptions.

Prior to taking leave, I was known to be professional, ambitious and hardworking — all qualities that are praised in the workplace. However, on the inside, I struggled. I was at a loss for what I was experiencing, frightened and felt like I had no place to go. I needed help. It took longer than I would have liked, but I eventually established a support team and plan to help identify and treat my condition.

When I returned to work, it was natural for my colleagues to wonder where I had been for the past six months. Unfortunately, it can still be “risky” to share one’s mental health journey. I felt vulnerable; I didn’t know how I would be perceived if I shared my story and wanted to hold onto my professional reputation.



James Madich

I had the option to keep my story confidential, but being open about my treatment allowed me to clear the air, start fresh and give in to this vulnerability. By sharing that I took time away to focus on treatment, I reinforced how excited I was to be back and that I was grateful for their support. This allowed me to further acknowledge and accept my condition and vulnerability, which gave me more confidence in myself and greater resilience.

Today, I still have all the praised qualities mentioned before — professional, ambitious and hardworking — but with a broader sense of self-awareness. I know my OCD

“Being open about my treatment allowed me to clear the air, start fresh and give in to this vulnerability.”

isn’t “going away,” and I’ve chosen to live and thrive despite of it. By acknowledging my condition and being open to questions, I’ve recognized my full self at work rather than just the parts people see on the outside.

Everyone’s story is unique and personal, and so should be your decision to share (or not share) your mental health journey. You may want to take into account your workplace environment and culture and ensure it is a safe and respectful space before disclosing your mental health status at work. Places of employment can do their part by fostering and facilitating this supportive environment, and then we can all work together to find a path to accept the vulnerability and imperfection of the human experience. 🌐

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stigmafree

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COMING SOON

NAMI is excited to bring you "Meet Little Monster,"

a coloring and activity book created by our partners at NAMI Washington that includes prompts to discuss emotions and other mental health conversation-starters for elementary-aged youth. This is one of NAMI's first resources targeted to this age group.

More info on how to download the book from nami.org will be announced soon!

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