

DEPRESSION CAN KILL

We need an uncompromising message to business leaders that depression is as real as the numbers they base their business on.

By Bill Wilkerson

(Wilkerson is the award-winning Co-Founder and CEO of the Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health headquartered in Toronto, Canada. He contributes periodically to Mental Health Works)

Depression killed two members of my family. One with a blood clot, the other, a gun.

In 2004, my older brother died alone at home. Official cause of death: heart failure. More to the point, he was killed by his “depressed mood.” Having recently lost his wife to cancer, he abandoned his blood thinners and anti-depressant medication.

In 1979, my ex-wife used a small revolver her brother gave her for protection against the night to put a bullet in her brain – while she was stirring a pot of spaghetti sauce – her speciality. Separated, not divorced, we were still close.

By far, most people who complete suicide have depression. The Roundtable believes deaths like this are a business issue. Both these people were productive and professional.

The Roundtable’s Business and Economic Plan on Mental Health and Productivity proposes a role for business in research, education and early detection to prevent suicide and improve the dual diagnosis of depression and heart disease.

Dr. Tom Insel, Director of the National Institute for Mental Health in Washington, told the World Economic Forum earlier this year that suicide is the leading cause of violent death in the United States. Most of the time, depression is in play.

In a presentation to the Chamber of Commerce in Canada, I reported that clinical studies in the United States and Canada tell us that about 20 percent of the people who suffer heart attacks show signs of a major depression at the time.

Researchers at the famed Montreal Heart Institute say that symptoms of depression among heart patients may predate eventual heart attacks by many years. One year after a heart attack, the death rate of heart victims with depression is three times higher.

Studies in the Netherlands point to a condition called “vital exhaustion” – a combination of fatigue, irritability and poor morale predating the heart attack by several months.

Depression, studies show, may predict cardiovascular disease – separate and apart from cardiac function itself – and depression following hospital for unstable angina quadrupled the risk of cardiac-related death or non-fatal heart attack.

Depression and heart disease are a “lethal mix” and belie the perception that depression is an invisible disability. If what makes depression tick was taught in high school it would more likely be taught in chemistry, biology, physics or social science classes.

Because it involves all four. Nothing invisible about any of this.

Business people see brain skills everywhere in the economy and the workplace in the form of quality services, product innovation, teamwork. New ideas and mental acuity can change the world. Cerebral skills and functions all.

If brain skills are visible, then so are brain illnesses not to mention what the trained naked eye can see through brain imaging technology.

Science and society have miles and years yet to travel to unravel the mysteries of depression and other complex forms of mental illnesses. But I tell business people we already know this much for sure.

Depression and other forms of mental illness are not invisible, impossible to diagnose or – as some popular mythology would have it – imaginary.

Imagination didn't kill my brother or my wife. With a blood clot and a gun, depression did that.

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