

Opinion: Washington's Best Workplaces promote resilience, recovery for employees



Business of Pride honoree David Johnson of Navos.

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To be among the best workplaces of today, employers must care deeply about the wellness of their staff.

This includes mental health and substance use disorders some employees may experience and championing their journeys back to wellness. The best workplaces promote the resilience of these colleagues and celebrate their recovery.

Major breakthroughs in brain science and the emergence of highly successful evidence-based practices means that almost all people are able to eventually recover from mental and emotional illness and addictions. We now have treatment pathways that, when carefully followed, ensure people can and do

get better. Recovery may mean not having a recurrence of symptoms, or it may mean that people become so masterful at managing their symptoms that manifestations of the illnesses cease to impede daily functioning.

Many of us will have mental health issues at some time in our lives. Over the course of a lifetime we can be overwrought with grief or traumatized and left with tremendous anxiety. Or we can be afflicted with these symptoms or psychosis because of the emergence of genetically predisposed illnesses and addictions, such as major depression, bipolar disorder or schizophrenia, which are disease processes that can take on the momentum of their own.

As co-workers and employers we have a responsibility to be compassionate for those one in five of us each year who experience some form of mental or emotional illness or substance use disorder. What is more important is for us to pay attention to the resilience people display as they strive to get better, to encourage and support them and eventually to honor them after they do recover.

Treatment works, but stigma can be a powerful deterrent to seeking help. Our opportunity is to create a culture that makes it safe to share with others when we're having problems and for all of us to expect that there will be support from our workplace. This can be as simple as allowing scheduling flexibility so people can be sure to get to their therapy session, symptom management class or medication check-in appointment. For others it might mean accommodation to work at home temporarily if that's the best situation in which to get work done while recovering from a stressful episode of increased symptoms. A supportive work culture could also mean there might be periods of a time when an employee is not able to work but we hold their position for them and welcome them back when they're ready.

It is also important for us to be intentional in not stigmatizing our fellow workers when they have a time of mental health needs or addiction challenges. It's important to remember that anyone of us at any given time could suddenly find ourselves having a panic attack, dealing with anxiety that doesn't seem to be contained by logic or feeling deep sadness and even urges for suicide or other self-harm. Our focus should be on the strengths people have that will get them through when partnered with evidence-based treatment.

These days, there is every reason to be hopeful about recovery instead of afraid of mental illnesses and substance use disorders. Best workplace leaders model this attitude.