

Thought Leadership:

Response to common brain condition “is a no-brainer”

Introduction

Imagine that for every 10 of your friends, family and workmates, at least one had a medical condition that affected their mood and made them and those around them less safe and less productive. Imagine that condition was easily treatable, usually for free, and that employers who invested in preventing it received a 200% return on investment.

Imagine no more. The condition is depression and, according to an expert on depression in the transport industry, the longer we continue to attach stigma to the condition, the longer our friends, family and workmates will suffer in silence and the more dangerous our roads and workplaces will be.

Perception and reality

Depression has become more widely accepted and discussed in Australian society. Unfortunately, that has not translated to some male-dominated industries, including trucking and wider transport industry.

The overall incidence of depression in the Australian population sits at around 11 per cent, but the few studies that have been conducted all suggest higher rates of depression in the truck driving industry, with estimates varying from 12 to 70 per cent.

Truck drivers are more likely to be among the 350 million people worldwide with depression because of the specific workplace factors they face, including

working long hours, long periods alone, fatigue, and inconsistent work and rest times. The bad news is that depression reduces driving performance and reaction time, with heavy vehicle drivers suffering from depression seven times more likely to be involved in a crash. That not only increases their risk of death or injury but that of other road users.

The good news is that depression can be effectively managed.



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Let's bust some myths

The starting point according to Taryn Chalmers, who has spent the past five years looking at depression in the transport industry, is busting some of the myths surrounding depression.

Myth #1 is depression is a lifelong battle that you can't do anything about. Depression can be managed and there are many treatments available – and not just medication.

Taryn, whose father was a truck driver and brother also works in the transport industry, believes myth #2 that needs dispelling is depression is something to be embarrassed about. Depression is 'not a choice, often it's a biochemical neurological disorder. Depression is no more a choice than any other neurochemical disorder, like Parkinson's Disease.' Talking openly is just as important as identifying incidence of depression, she adds, and busting these common myths will help bring depression out into the open.

Over thousands of interviews and discussions with truck drivers, the researcher has also found that drivers are concerned employers will find out if they have depression and they will 'be taken off shifts'. In reality, there is no reason, she says, that an employer need know.

What to look for

Another misconception is people with depression are sad all the time. Depression manifests in many different ways, with signs including changes in mood, periods of feeling sad, a lack of motivation, loss of pleasure in usually enjoyable activities, an

inability to cope with daily stressors in life, and thoughts of suicide. Increases in drinking, smoking and gambling can also lead to or be a sign of depressive disorder, as can an increase in risk-taking behaviour.

What to do

If you – or those around you – recognise these signals, the first port of call is a health professional, such as your local GP. Doctors are well trained in helping people with depression, and will discuss suitable treatment options. There are generally three treatment options, including lifestyle changes, psychological therapies, such as 'seeing someone' – which is usually free or subsidised – and medical therapies. For those uncomfortable speaking to stranger, discussing it with your partner, a mate or a family member is a good idea. 'Being able to be open and not feel like you're hiding something is a great first step', Taryn says.



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An employer's role

Employers can play a key role in helping truck drivers address depression, particularly in creating an environment where employees feel more comfortable seeking help. Helping employees also helps the business, with PricewaterhouseCoopers estimating that Australian businesses lose \$10.9 billion a year for failing to appropriately manage mental health issues in the workplace. However, transport industry companies that invest in initiatives that promote improved mental health in the workplace will, on average, see a return of \$2.80 for every \$1 invested.

Employers can provide what Taryn Chalmers calls 'cushioned support', providing support and information without overstepping the boundary by 'saying we're going to mental health test you every week'. Creating awareness through simple measures like displaying mental health posters, on the back of toilet cubicle doors for example, or fostering discussion at 'toolbox' meetings dispels any culture of fear among employees with depression that they will be treated differently. It is vital employers create an environment of confidentiality and privacy, so employees feel comfortable discussing any issues should they feel the need.

A common response

With depression being a common condition that can be effectively managed, the silence and stigma that still surrounds it in the transport industry makes little sense, and adds unnecessarily to ill health, poor workplace safety and reduced productivity.

As Taryn Chalmers neatly puts it, addressing depression 'can improve every single aspect of a workplace, from work safety to work health to employee health to economics. Everything will improve.'

For more information, visit www.beyondblue.org.au

