

Challenges of depression hit staff, business

STAFF WRITER

"BLUE Monday" has a completely different meaning to the millions of South Africans suffering from depression, who have to work while trying to hide the challenges this illness presents them with every day.

Depression is a topic that is still often swept under the boardroom table, and we need to explore ways of managing the risks this illness presents to business and its staff, says Kay Vittee, chief executive of Quest Staffing Solutions.

Major Depressive Disorder affects about 121 million people worldwide and the World Health Organisation predicts that by 2020 depression will be one of the highest ranking causes of disability in developed countries, second only to ischaemic heart disease.

These alarming global statistics are also reflected in South Africa, with a local medical aid recently reporting a 50 percent increase in members diagnosed with severe depressive episodes without psychotic symptoms this year.

It is believed that one in five South Africans is affected by mental illness, with women being twice as likely as men to be diagnosed

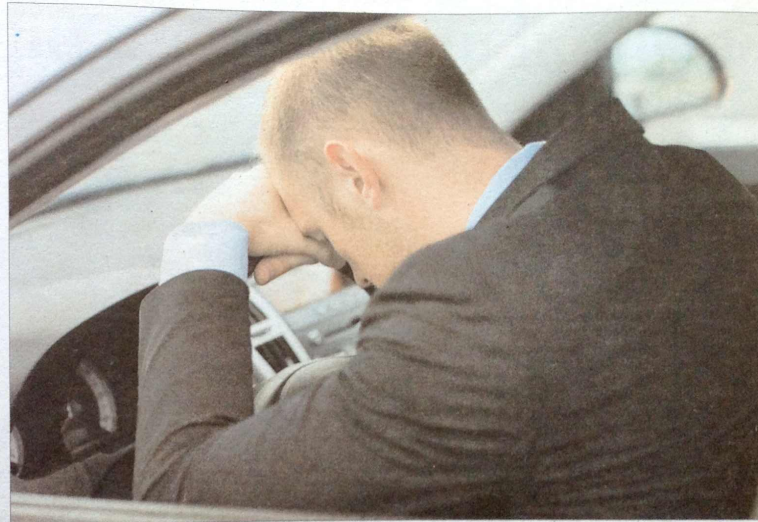
with depression. And there are many people suffering undiagnosed and without help.

"Undiagnosed depression in the workplace is known to have a substantial effect on productivity and absenteeism, as well as 'presenteeism' – the loss of productivity due to working with health or personal issues instead of taking time off work because of the fear of reprimand, discipline or dismissal," says Vittee.

Symptoms of depression in the workplace can include: impaired concentration; increased and unusual mistakes and poor work quality; decreased productivity; withdrawal and declining participation in team or group activities; lack of enthusiasm and increased sick leave.

"The costs of depression in a workforce are tangible and intangible. The negative impact on staff morale, energy levels, teamwork, enthusiasm and compromised contribution to innovation, creativity and motivation has a ripple effect and, if left unchecked, will result in visible business costs," says Vittee.

"Poor productivity, poor customer service, lost work hours and brand damage are only some of the business costs directly linked to



SUFFERING: It is believed that one in five South Africans is affected by mental illness. Picture: SHUTTERSTOCK

this illness in a business."

Employers can help by investing in preventive and curative wellness programmes or initiatives. Positive benefits include:

- Encouraging a healthy lifestyle with regular exercise.
- Breaking down the stigma associated with mental illnesses, such as depression and anxiety, and providing educating on how to identify the symptoms.
- Ensuring that HR and management are informed and equipped to offer advice.
- Providing access to relevant advice and organisations, as well as

a resource of specialised treatment facilities and professionals.

- Communicating that 80 percent of people with depression can be successfully treated.

In a recent Gallup survey in the US, it was found that part-time workers were more likely than full-time workers to be affected by depression – 16.5 percent compared with 12 percent – says Vittee.

"This marked difference should inform companies' decision processes when choosing a staffing partner. Look for experience in handling industries and job types that are high risk for this illness, such

as night shift work or handling of customer dissatisfaction, and the ability to offer effective wellness programmes and initiatives that educate and provide access to information and help.

"A company that invests in a healthy workforce will see productivity and profitability rewards sooner than a company that believes staff's personal and health challenges are not its concern," says Vittee.

"A philosophy of open communication in addressing issues builds healthy relationships with staff and clients."