

The Voice

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Mandi Luis Advocates for Mental Health Supports in the Workplace

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Mandi Luis, of Burlington, Ontario, lost her career due to major episodic depression. During her recovery, she learned a lot of information that could have significantly changed the course of her employment — had she known it in time. Rather than regret what could have been, today Mandi is embracing a new career as a return-to-work facilitator and coach.

"There are many things I wish I knew when I was first diagnosed with depression," Mandi reflects. "I lost so much. It took me five years to get back into the workforce. Part of my recovery was finding my confidence and believing that I could once again capably accomplish tasks. Today I have a great work/life balance. I take care of myself first, and I always remember where I have come from. I don't take a moment for granted, and I am never afraid to ask for help."

Mandi is a certified Peer Support Specialist and Career Consultant. Her focus is on facilitating a successful return-to-work process that is in the best interests of both the employee and employer. She is a consumer and an advocate, as well as a public speaker. "I am motivated to tell my story to help others," Luis concludes. "There aren't enough voices out there, and I do all I can to ensure my voice is

heard in the hope that it will strengthen others in their recovery. Sharing what I have learned helps me, and I hope it keeps others from saying 'I wish I knew...'"

What I Wish I Knew:
A snapshot of my experience with mental illness at work...

Eight years ago I was a successful employee at a large financial organization, and if depression hadn't hit me, I would now be retired with benefits and a 32-year unblemished record of outstanding achievement. But depression did hit me, and it hit hard. I underwent an 11-month struggle before I realized that I was experiencing depression.

During that time, a number of personal life challenges erupted which compounded the stressors at work. My confidence ebbed day by day. I was suffering. As a result, the quality of my work also suffered. I lost a career that I loved. I now know that with the proper information and support, my career did not have to be a casualty of depression. I believe I could have remained employed and avoided the financial impact and trauma of losing my job.

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I wish I knew...

I was at risk for depression.

Within four months, I went through the loss of a significant relationship, had a near death experience and ongoing serious family trouble, and started a new senior position with a high degree of responsibility and stress. I wish I had known that grief, personal stress and work stress increased my risk of developing depression.

I was ill, not weak.

I started to lose my memory and was often confused at work. My job included gathering information and writing analytical reports. I could gather the information but could not turn the information into a report. My self confidence decreased day by day with increasing panic. I felt guilty, stupid and ashamed, like there was something wrong with me. I wish I had known that my confusion, feelings of despair and hopelessness were symptoms of depression.

I needed balanced information about treatment.

My doctor prescribed an antidepressant medication and said I had to be on it for the rest of my life. My doctor presented medication as my only option. The medication took away my energy, and made me sleep sometimes for 23 hours a day. Taking medication as the only option did not match my personal philosophy about treating illness. Since I have always believed that optimal health is achieved when people are actively involved in their own health and wellness, I needed balanced information about other forms of treatment, alternative therapies and information resources. I wish I had understood my treatment options and that my road to recovery was unique to me and my illness.

Depression would impact every area of my life.

My experience with depression affected my relationships, my daily routines, my physical well-being, my ability to be productive at work and my sense of purpose and meaning. It took over every area of my life in a torrent of hopelessness. I wish I had had more information to share with my family and friends.

I needed help earlier.

After 11 months of struggling, I finally told my manager that I was having trouble coping, and it was suggested I use the services of the Employee Assistance Program (EAP). I wish that I, my colleagues, my subordinates, or my manager had noticed that I was struggling. I wish someone had suggested assistance.

I was not the only one who had experienced this.

I felt isolated at work. I was not understood and stopped sharing my thoughts. I started to disengage, and my productivity declined. I wish I had someone to talk to at work who had themselves experienced depression.

I needed to be valued at work.

Although I was struggling at work, I had contributed 25 years of my life to the organization and had been extremely successful. Past performance was totally discounted, and current performance was highlighted. I wish that my problems had been looked at in context of my highly successful work history.

It was okay to ask for my manager's help.

I had been taught not to bring my problems to work, so for 11 months I struggled and didn't say anything to my manager about what I was going through in my life outside work. I believed that I was being a good employee by dealing with my life issues on my own. If I had seen my manager as a contributor to my wellbeing and productivity,

Depression looks different for each of us.

Perhaps you are unable to start projects, focus on tasks, or meet deadlines, and people are noticing.

Perhaps you are obsessed with details, or everything seems like a blur.

Perhaps you are worried about your lack of productivity, and feel guilty about letting your team down.

Perhaps you are irritable with colleagues, and feel like they're ganging up on you.

Perhaps you feel overwhelmed, guilty, frightened and pressured, and you see your self-confidence slipping away.

Perhaps you feel powerless to voice your needs because you can't seem to determine what they are.

Perhaps you wish to have time off, but you've used all your sick days and short term disability, and the paperwork to apply for long term disability overwhelms you.

Perhaps you are concerned about losing your income if you go on long term disability.

Perhaps you are worried about losing your job because you are experiencing depression.

I would have engaged her much earlier. I believe things would have turned out much differently. I wish I had known that life stressors outside of work can create a need for accommodation at work, and that my employer could have been a major contributor in my recovery.

I needed the people at my workplace to listen.

As I gained greater acceptance of what was happening to me, I wanted to talk about it at work so that we could seek solutions together. I was told that workplace policies advised against this, since what I wanted to share was seen as confidential and outside of the workplace. I felt frustrated and alienated because I felt that sharing was important to my recovery. **I wish that workplace policies could have been based on the principles of recovery which include: people can and do recover, self-direct my own recovery; be able to provide input to my own treatment options; be given the education to make decisions based on my needs and goals; be able to take responsibility for my own recovery based on my own philosophy and values.**

I needed ongoing support at work.

Being referred to EAP was not enough to improve things at work. Work processes continued as before, and my manager did not inquire as to what I needed to do my job. I wish that my manager had known how to work with employees who are in distress.

I needed my benefits to cover more than six sessions of therapy.

Through my Employee Assistance Program (EAP), I was referred for psychotherapy, but my benefits only covered six sessions. This was not enough time to establish trust with my therapist, identify my issues and begin to address them. I wish that my benefits package had been designed to meet the therapy needs of people with depression.

I needed organizational support during the discussions with my subordinates, colleagues and supervisors about my recovery.

When I returned after six months on short term disability, I felt intimidated, confused and frightened during the negotiation meetings I was required to attend. Driven by fear of losing my income, I made decisions without support, good judgment, and knowledge, or the benefit of the accommodation process. I wish I had moral support and information so I could make better choices.

I needed to return to work gradually using a process of accommodation to help me ramp up to full time.

I was entitled to have my job adjusted as part of the recovery process so that I could gradually resume full time employment. I didn't know how to state my needs, and thought that I had to be agreeable and accepting

of the accommodation being offered, even though it didn't work for me. I wish that I had known more about job accommodation.

I needed information, support and adequate time to consider options.

While making this decision, I was not well and was incapable of understanding my options. I accepted a severance package because I wasn't properly informed about my rights to receive long term disability insurance. I wish that the organization could have supported me or provided an advocate for me.

I needed to know that it can take a long time to recover from depression.

With each doctor and therapy appointment, I kept thinking that things would quickly get better and I would bounce back to being me. I had no idea that it could take a long time to recover effectively from the effects of depression. I wish I had known that recovery can take months or years.

As a peer, I use my story to help others who are experiencing mental health problems in the workplace. What I discovered is that recovery is a process based on continual growth, occasional setbacks, and learning from experience. My recovery encompasses my whole life, including my mind, body, spirit and community. My hope is that you will explore the recovery process fully — while you are still employed. 🌍



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