

Depression and work:

The impact of depression on different generations of employees

INTRODUCTION

Workforces are presently facing the inevitable reality of having 5 generations at work for the first time in history (Meister & Willyerd, 2010). Discussions of multigenerational issues in the workplace often quickly take the shape of Traditionalists, Boomers, Gen-X, Millennials and Gen Zs extolling the virtues of their cohort. Over the past few years, there has been a wealth of material published describing best practices for engaging each generation in the workforce, from communication preferences to leadership tips and tactics. What has not been fully explored is whether there are generational differences in how the workforce experiences personal problems.

This is the second of a 4-part series of white papers examining generational differences in the impact of anxiety, depression and risky alcohol use on work performance. This paper will explore the relationship between depression and decline in work performance through a multigenerational lens. Our third paper will address risky alcohol use, and the final paper will address a comparison of all problems by generation.

In our last paper, we concluded that the impact of anxiety might have a different impact on the work performance of each generation. Our findings suggested that workplaces might benefit from considering generation specific prevention and intervention strategies to combat anxiety at work. In this next chapter of our multigenerational journey we explored the relationship between employee depression and declines in work performance.

Beyond the blues

Major depression is a serious psychiatric disorder that affects both work and life functioning. Unlike anxiety, a crucial issue with depression is the reality of suicidal ideation. As such, depression must be recognized as a risk to the workforce. Individuals suffering from depression may experience recurring long-term episodes of depressed mood, decreased energy, and loss of interest or pleasure in nearly all activities (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Other symptoms may include:

- Sleep disturbances
- Changes in psychomotor activity
- Changes in appetite and weight
- Feeling of worthlessness or guilt
- Problems with thinking, concentration, or making decisions
- Recurrent thoughts of death, or plans and attempts of suicide

Almost 10% of Americans struggle with depression every year (NAMI, 2010). The disabling symptoms of depression place an economic burden on society in both lost productivity and health care costs. While recent public health initiatives continue to enhance and expand our understanding of the social and economic costs of depression, the following statistics suggest that more work is needed to combat depression in the workplace:

- It is estimated that those with depression miss 4-5 more days per year in comparison to people without depression, costing an estimated total of more than \$23 billion in lost productivity due to absenteeism (Witters, Liu & Agrawal, 2013)
- 80% of persons with depression report some level of functional impairment due to depression (Pratt & Brody, 2008)
- Depressed employees lose almost four times as many hours of productivity compared to those without depression (Stewart et al., 2003)
- 75% of persons with depression do not receive formal treatment (NAMI, 2010)

METHODOLOGY

When employees seek EAP services, they first speak with one of Morneau Shepell’s masters degreeed clinicians who conduct a telephone-based assessment to provide support and help determine the most appropriate level of service. Over the course of the EAP relationship, Morneau Shepell’s clinicians collect a variety of data sets that are then analyzed and shared with Morneau Shepell’s client customers in the form of anonymous quarterly and annual utilization reports. The data for this paper was taken from a cumulative report of employees seeking EAP services over an 18-month period, from January 2013 - June 2014.

For the purpose of this paper, Morneau Shepell investigated the relationship between reported depression and declines in work performance by generation. Employees accessing Morneau Shepell’s EAP were screened for depression using the PHQ-4 (Kroenke, Spitzer, Williams & Lowe, 2009). Employees that returned a positive screen for depression were further assessed using the PHQ-9 (Kroenke, Spitzer & Williams, 2001). Their responses were then scored and analyzed.

Those employees that were rated positively for depression were also asked questions about the impact that their depression had on work performance. Their responses were then categorized into the following domains:

- **Absenteeism** - Missed days from work due to depression
- **Presenteeism** - Presented to work physically but did not function at his or her full capacity due to depression
- **Work relationships** - Experienced tension or conflict with coworkers as a result of depression
- **Disciplinary action** - Received either verbal or written disciplinary action as a result of depression

Participants were categorized into the following generational categories:

| Generation | Birth year range |
|------------------------|------------------|
| Baby Boomers (Boomers) | 1946 - 1964 |
| Generation X (Gen X) | 1965 - 1977 |
| Millennials (Gen Y) | 1978 - 1999 |

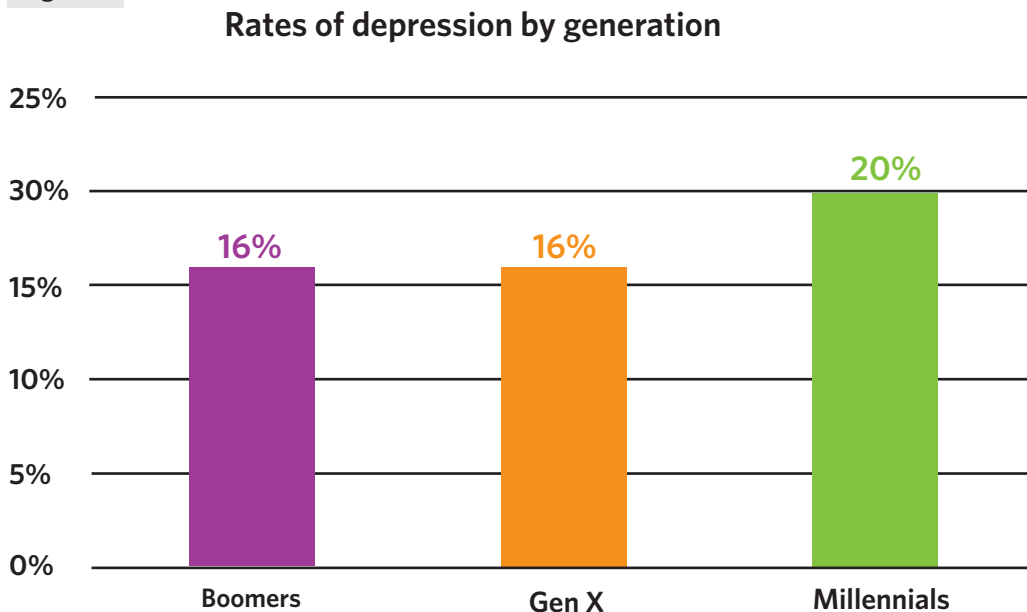
*Traditionalists (1927 - 1945) and Generation Z (>1999) were omitted from this study due to small sample sizes.

Results and discussion

Millennials struggle the most with depression

Millennials reported the highest rates of depression at intake. Approximately 1 in 5 Millennials that used Morneau Shepell's EAP reported experiencing depression. Depression appears to decline with age, as Gen X and Baby Boomers were less likely to report depression. Overall, depression accounted for 17% of EAP users.

Figure 1



"I have been feeling depressed and feeling down. I have 2 young boys and I am having a hard time finding joy in them and life. I have always been pessimistic and negative and I don't want to be that way for my kids."

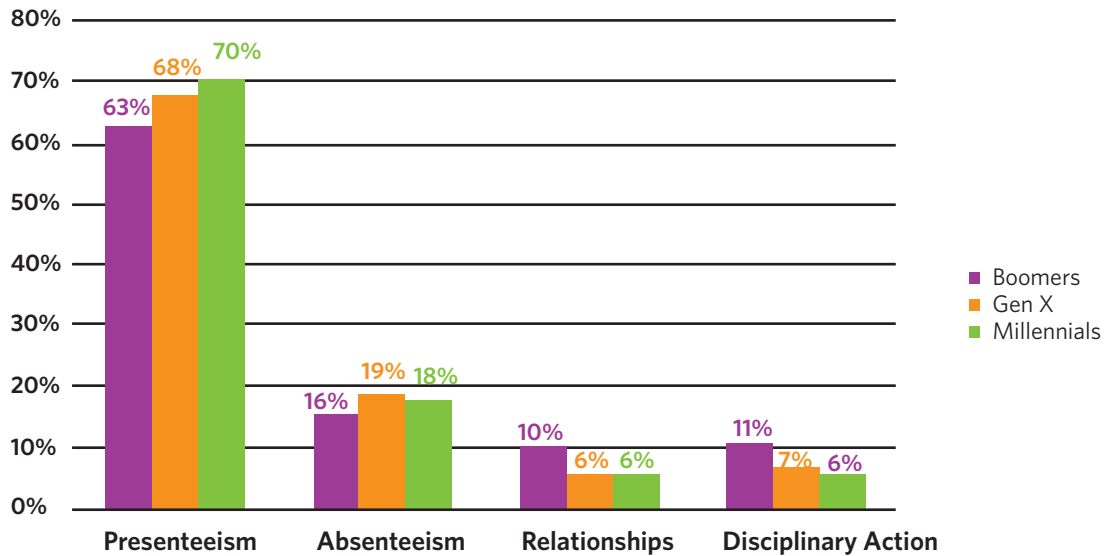
- Millennial male

Depression impacts functioning at work

Figure 2 demonstrates the extent to which depression may contribute to declines in work performance, showing similar patterns in levels of impact. Presenteeism is the most common decline in work performance across each generation, followed by absenteeism, disciplinary action and relationship issues.

Figure 2

Job impact by generation

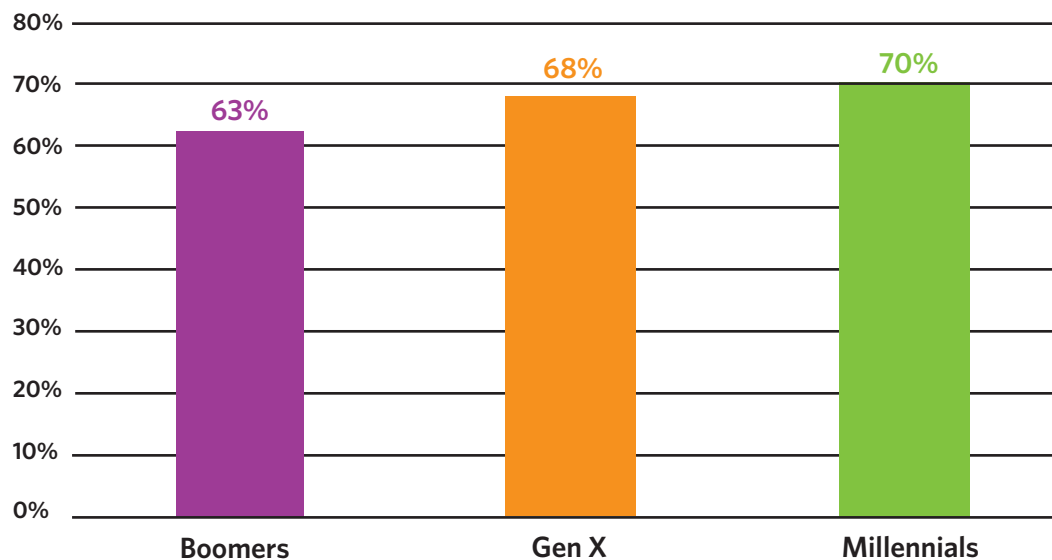


Presenteeism: Working depressed isn't working

Similar to the findings in our anxiety paper, depressed Millennials reported the highest rates of presenteeism among the three generations, while Boomers again reported the lowest amount of presenteeism. These findings show, that regardless of age, presenteeism is the most common impact of depression in the workplace.

Figure 3

Presenteeism





"I can't control myself right now; I can't control my emotions. My co-worker handed the phone to me to call you. I can't control my anger and/or becoming emotional; everything triggers this condition!"

- Millennial male

Absenteeism: Boomers show up

There also appears to be a similarity in absenteeism reports with anxiety and depression. Boomers with depression reported the lowest rates of absenteeism, which appears to reaffirm the Boomers' value of visibility at work. Gen X reported the highest rates of absenteeism, slightly edging out Millennials.



"My boss told me to call the EAP and talk to someone. I have lost the urge to do anything and I have been depressed for a long time. I don't find pleasure or joy in anything, I missed 2 days last week - no call no show. I'm not sure life is worth living."

- Generation X female

Workplace relationships: Moods affect the team

It is well known that our mood can affect our relationships, and as someone experiences depression, they are more likely to have interpersonal issues. The generational differences in declining workplace relationships are especially noteworthy. In contrast to the previous categories, Boomers were the most likely to report conflict in workplace relationships due to depression, at almost twice the rate of Gen X and Millennials. It is hard to decipher if the depression leads to challenges in workplace relationships or vice versa, but there is clear indication that Boomers are at high risk for these challenges, which can significantly impact productivity, especially in team settings.



"I have work issues with my backstabbing, difficult coworkers. I know it's me that has to change and look at this differently."

- Baby Boomer male

Disciplinary action: Boomers in trouble

Similar to declines in workplace relationships, Boomers were the most likely group to report having received disciplinary action due to symptoms of depression. This continues to show that while Boomers may be most likely to be at work, they are encountering other struggles that can have a significant impact on the workplace.



“HR wants me to receive anger management classes. They say I was verbally abusive towards my colleagues. I am suspended from work.”

- Baby Boomer Female

More than just sad

Depression is a significant psychological disorder that can have serious implications in the workplace. The data shows that while each generation does experience all of these impacts on performance, there are important trends to acknowledge in how each is more likely to experience workplace challenges.

| Generation | Highest risk |
|------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Baby Boomers (Boomers) | Relationships and disciplinary action |
| Generation X (Gen X) | Absenteeism |
| Millennials (Gen Y) | Presenteeism |

Based on our findings, Morneau Shepell recommends that workforces pursue additional training and informational campaigns around detecting the signs and symptoms of depression, as well as multigenerational strategies for dealing with employees that experience depression at work. Due to the increased risk of suicidal thoughts for people struggling with depression, it is more important to talk with these employees about seeking help.

Employee Assistance Programs are equipped to help workplaces deal with employees who experience depression in a cost effective manner. Additional multigenerational strategies will be included in the fourth and final paper in this series.



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