

Star Social Firms
www.blogs.guardian.co.uk
14 November 2007



Tackling the mental health taboo

A new charity is calling time on outdated attitudes towards people with mental illness, explains Mary O'Hara
November 14, 2007 9:00 AM

Ask people if it is acceptable for employers to discriminate against someone on the grounds of race, religion, sexual orientation or disability and the answer is likely to be an outraged "absolutely not". Ask the same question about someone with a mental illness however and the moral certainty tends to disappear.

The fact is that despite years of anti-stigma campaigns and, more recently, high profile celebrities such as Stephen Fry speaking candidly about living with conditions such as bi-polar disorder, millions of people with mental illness remain targets for prejudice and discrimination both at work and in wider society.

Research by government, academics and mental health charities is fairly consistent - stigma is widely entrenched and, when it comes to work, people with a serious mental illness can expect to either not find work at all or face an uphill struggle to convince employers that they are up to the job they are already doing. For many people, the only way they feel they can survive in the workplace without being discriminated against is to keep their illnesses hidden from bosses and colleagues.

Jonathan Naess, founder of the new anti-stigma charity, Stand to Reason, wants to change all that. He and others involved with the charity are "coming out" as mentally ill to say "enough is enough". They are calling time on people with mental illness being seen as somehow incapable of leading a productive working life. Using their own successful careers to illustrate their point, they have decided to take on the ignorance surrounding mental health - particularly among employers - by educating bosses about changing recruitment practices and on how to create a better work environment to get the best from all staff.

Naess and others are asking that mental illness is discussed in the same terms as physical illness - not as something to be feared and dismissed as too difficult for

employers to deal with. They believe that by lobbying for support and investment from employers and government it will become as unacceptable to discriminate against people with mental illness as for any other group protected by equality legislation.

Stand to Reason appears to be tapping into a fresh commitment on the part of mental health campaigners to get stigma on the agenda. New initiatives such as the government's anti-stigma campaign, Shift, and the launch of Moving People, which has £18m and a four-year remit to reduce stigma in England, are a promising start and a welcome backdrop for any effort to convince employers to play their part. Some, such as BT, are leading the way on making better mental health an integral part of their broader health and safety initiatives - with considerable success - especially when it comes to reducing absenteeism due to anxiety and stress. Serious mental health conditions may require particularly imaginative approaches by employers but is not an insurmountable problem, according to Naess.

Perhaps it is by breaking down barriers to employment among this group that Naess and his fellow campaigners can do most good. But in the meantime, for those employers yet to get to grips with the issue, a look at some of the figures should be a wake up call. Why is it that only 20% of people with severe mental ill-health are employed when 65% of people with physical health problems are in work? And why is it that a third of people with a mental illness say they have been dismissed or forced to resign from their jobs because of their illness?

Naess believes we may have reached a "tipping point" as a society when it comes to our apparent tolerance of discrimination against people with mental illness. With figures like these, let's hope so.

Sally Reynolds, CEO, Social Firms UK

I'd like to pick up on the piece about Jonathan Naess and Stand To Reason, and today's subsequent items from the Blog. It is in fact as a direct result of discrimination in the open labour market that service providers working to try and place their clients with mental health issues have resorted to developing Social Firms. Social Firms are one type of social enterprise where the overall objective is to create paid employment for a minimum of one quarter of the workforce who are disabled or severely disadvantaged in some way and we are the national support agency for Social Firms in the UK. The number of businesses (all market-led who have to generate at least 50% of their overall turnover through sale of products or services) has grown from 5 in 1997 to 137 in 2007 and have successfully created sustainable jobs for people who would otherwise have struggled to get them in the open market. It is no coincidence that 60% of our Social Firm members are focusing on employment creation within the businesses for people with mental health issues and this type of job creation is suitable for all levels of ability. We welcome Jonathan's initiative and believe that, alongside good employer case studies and Social Firms that have focused on good quality employment for people with mental health issues, stigma in our society can be tackled over time.