

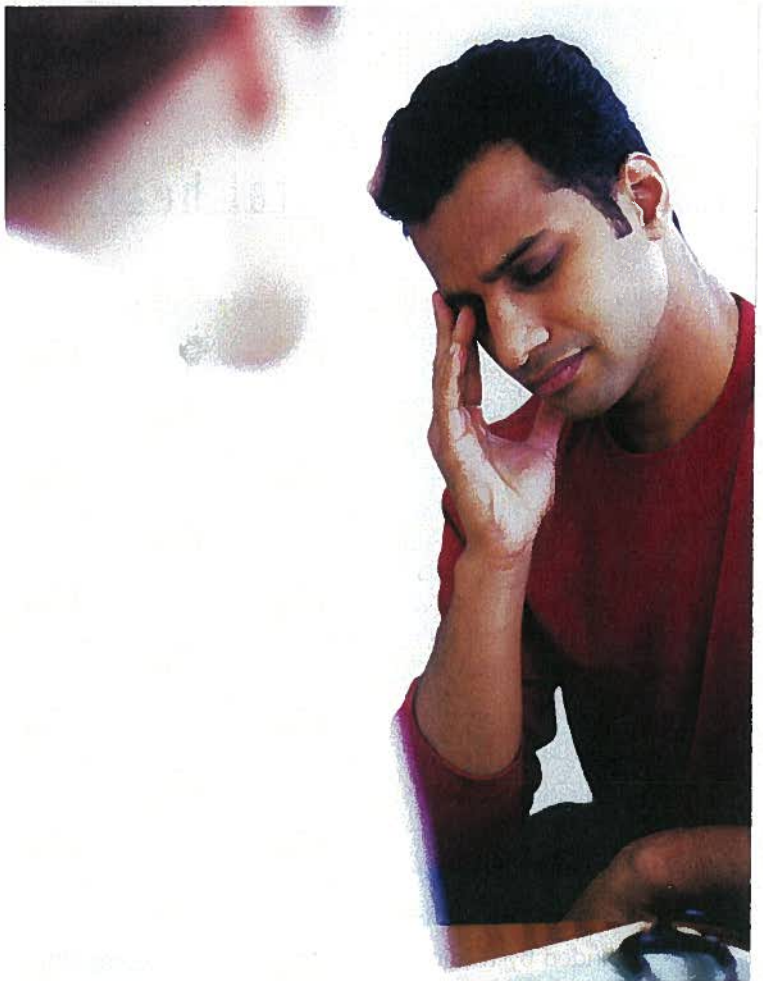
# Am I too depressed to work, doctor?

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Cathy, a manager in an office supply company, has been struggling with stress and depression for many months. A couple of weeks ago she saw her family doctor, was diagnosed with clinical depression, and started treatment with medications and counselling. Cathy goes back for a follow up appointment and tells her doctor that she is still struggling at work, and asks, "Should I take time off work because I'm feeling so depressed?"

People with clinical depression, also called major depressive disorder, often have difficulties at work. Common symptoms of depression include low mood, interest and motivation, low energy and fatigue, and poor concentration and memory, all of which can interfere with the ability to work. People with depression may also withdraw from others or experience social anxiety or irritability that leads to conflict with co-workers. Workplace stresses can also set off a depressive episode or make the depression worse. It is not surprising, then, that many people who suffer from clinical depression believe that they need to be off work until they feel better. Is that true?

The good news about clinical depression is that there are many effective treatments, including talk therapy, especially cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and antidepressant medications. The not-so-good news is that these treatments often take some weeks before people experience symptom relief. It used to be thought that depressive symptoms had to improve before functioning could be restored. More



recent studies, however, have shown that symptoms and functioning improve together. This means it may not be necessary to take time off work while being treated for depression.

Having depressive symptoms alone does not mean that a person cannot work. Severity of symptoms is one consideration, but symptoms often fluctuate through the day. Deciding whether to take time off work depends very much on the situation and the individual. Some potential benefits of time off include avoiding work stresses that can worsen depression, allowing time to focus on treatments such as counseling, and avoiding accidents in safety-sensitive jobs.

However, there are also many potential risks in taking time off that can interfere with recovery and eventual return to work. Losing the structure and routine of going to work can worsen the inertia experienced by a depressed person, making it easier to spend more time in bed, for example. Without the distraction of work activities, there is more time to

### What if you do take time off work?

- Plan to return to work as soon as possible
- Start immediately on a return to work strategy
- Maintain some contact with work and co-workers
- Use available company resources—case manager
- Use self-management tools
- Keep up a regular schedule
- Maintain social interactions with family and friends

engage in negativity and self-doubt. This is compounded by the loss of satisfaction from completing work tasks, even if productivity is an issue. Because the workplace is a major source of social interactions for many people, someone with depression may become more isolative and withdrawn. There is also the loss of income, which varies depending on company absence policies.

Does staying away from a stressful work environment help in recovery from depression? Not necessarily. Avoiding stress, by itself, is not helpful. Instead, learning ways to cope with stressful situations is often more important. Being away from work means that the depressed person cannot deal with workplace issues, so problems and conflicts will likely still be there when they go back to work. Anxiety about returning to unresolved workplace problems is a major factor that delays recovery and return to work.

Another important consideration is that the longer someone is off work, the less likely they will ever return. Some studies show that 50 per cent of people with injury or illness who are away from work for eight weeks will not return; over 80 per cent of people who are off work for six months will not

return to long-term employment.

How can people with depression weigh the benefits and risks of taking time off work? Cathy's doctor asks her three important questions.

### ***What kind of problems are you having at work?***

The depressive symptoms that most interfere with work functioning include loss of interest and motivation, problems with concentration and memory, and low energy and fatigue. These symptoms can lead to problems with making mistakes, doing less or poorer quality work, and difficulty multi-tasking. Other common symptoms include anxiety and irritability, which can affect workplace relationships and lead to conflict with others. It is helpful to track the type of work problems and how often they occur. Remember that the negative thinking patterns that accompany depression can sometimes make "mountains out of molehills," so that positive aspects of work functioning, such as what tasks you are able to perform, should also be assessed.

### ***What are the consequences of your work problems?***

Safety issues are paramount, so leave from work is definitely required if you are seriously depressed and working as an air traffic controller or operating a construction crane 25 stories above ground. If a depressed person is unable to perform essential components of their work, then time off to recover those critical functions is indicated. Conflict with supervisors or managers is often a concern, especially because many of the symptoms and consequences of depression look like problem workplace behaviours.

### ***What are your supports for staying at work?***

Many companies offer access to an Employee and Family Assistance Program (EAP), which can be a very helpful resource. EAPs provide confidential counselling services to help employees identify and problem solve personal and workplace issues, such as whether to disclose a diagnosis to the employer.

Larger companies have human resources departments that offer services for health problems, including case managers and occupational health professionals. Some job accommodation may be possible. There are also very effective self-management tools that can be used alone or with counselling. One example is the *Antidepressant Skills at Work* booklet, which uses proven techniques from cognitive behavioural therapy for depression and focuses on workplace-related issues.

A newly developed clinical tool for doctors can provide important information to help in the off-work decision. The Lam Employment Absence and Productivity Scale (LEAPS) is a brief and simple questionnaire designed to quickly assess work functioning and impairment in people with depression. The information from the LEAPS can be used by doctors and patients to decide whether time off work is necessary. The LEAPS can also be used to monitor progress in treatment.

Cathy and her doctor review her LEAPS and symptom questionnaires and discuss her work situation. She decides that she is still able to function adequately at work and acknowledges that she gets a lot of support from her co-workers. She will discuss with her EAP counselor how to approach her supervisor for some accommodation in her work hours.

Effective treatments can allow many people to stay at work while being treated for clinical depression. Understanding the risks and benefits of being off work will help guide the difficult decision for whether to stay at work or take sick leave. Early recognition and treatment of depression are keys to prevent progression to long-term disability leave. ■

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### Resources—Workplace Mental Health

- *Antidepressant Skills at Work* was written by experts on workplace depression. It is a user-friendly self-management tool that is available for free download on the internet (or a paper copy can be purchased).

[www.comh.ca/antidepressant-skills/work](http://www.comh.ca/antidepressant-skills/work)

- Lam Employment Absence and Productivity Scale (LEAPS) was designed for physicians and patients as a simple monitoring tool for work functioning.

[www.workingwithdepression.ca](http://www.workingwithdepression.ca)

- Mental Health Central is a one-stop resource offering a detailed mental health self-test, informative articles about mental health disorders, workplace mental health, nutrition, healthy recipes, listings of books, support groups, events, research and more.

[www.mentalhealthcentral.ca](http://www.mentalhealthcentral.ca)

- Mental Health Works, sponsored by the Canadian Mental Health Association, is a resource for employers and employees about workplace depression and other mental health concerns.

[www.mentalhealthworks.ca](http://www.mentalhealthworks.ca)

- Working Through It, an initiative of the Great-West Life Centre for Mental Health in the Workplace, is a freely available public resource providing strategies, tools and support for research and initiatives aimed at improving workplace mental health.

[www.gwlcentreformentalhealth.com](http://www.gwlcentreformentalhealth.com)