It’s Time to Talk About Mental Health at Work

Nearly one third of women say that things like depression and anxiety are affecting their performance on the job. But is it a career ender to admit it? Sara Gaynes Levy reports.
colleague can cause mounting anxiety. “For example, if a nurse is afraid of the doctor she reports to, and she knows they have an upcoming meeting, that can impact her clear thinking the whole day,” says Robin Stern, Ph.D., the associate director for the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence and author of *The Gaslight Effect*.

That’s not to say that if your workplace is high-octane, it’s by definition a bad one. “Some stress is good: It keeps us sharp and focused,” says Eric Nestler, M.D., Ph.D., director of the Friedman Brain Institute and a member of the Hope for Depression Research Foundation. But identifying when feelings of anxiety, stress, or depression go from manageable to problematic can be hard—for women and their doctors. “If you were worried you had diabetes, you’d get a glucose test,” says Dr. Nestler. “We don’t have anything that black-and-white in psychiatry.” King didn’t realize she had a problem until she felt like she couldn’t get out of bed each day—her depression had gotten that severe. Dr. Nestler says that if you’re having difficulty completing tasks and difficulty eating or sleeping or you’re feeling a loss of interest in your life outside of work, it’s time to seek support.

**What younger women can teach us**

While 28 percent of all women in our survey said their mental health had affected their job, a whopping 41 percent of those 18 to 29 felt that way. But experts don’t think that means women in this age bracket are doing worse. “Young women are more willing to acknowledge these issues, and they have the language to talk about them,” says Dr. Nestler. Adds Dr. Holland, “It’s one of the weird side effects of social media: It’s made people more comfortable disclosing their diagnoses, and millennials seem to have a wider interpretation of what mental health means [beyond the clinical].” Dr. Nestler believes this is a good thing; if women can talk about their struggles with friends (virtually or IRL), they’ll be more primed to talk about them with a boss or a coworker, or a professional if needed.

All the experts stressed that having support is crucial. But perhaps not surprisingly, the workplace is one area where that kind of support is often lacking. Gallup’s 2017 State of the American Workplace poll found that only 40 percent of employees felt that someone at their job cares about them as a person. Feelings of isolation only snowball: “From our research, we know that people who feel isolated at work have the highest levels of workplace stress,” says Nguyen. Julianna DiNicola, 29, was a lucky one who did feel supported at her office. When she took a leave of absence from her job at a nonprofit in 2013 to deal with her depression, she says her team was amazing. “I told them: ‘I am not present fully at work, and hopefully you will let me do my best to take a minute before I come back.’ They were totally understanding,” she says. “I think it’s so important to be able to be candid.