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Neurodiversity in the workplace

Cases of neurodiversity come across my desk daily and sometimes multiple times daily in my role as a senior occupational health adviser. What is neurodiversity and what is the significance to occupational health practice? Neurodiversity means to think differently and the way each person thinks is as unique to that person as other characteristics such as gender, height or eye colour. The term neurodiversity came into existence in the late 1990s providing one exclusive term for the characteristics that represent all types of neurodiversity. Neurodiversity includes dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, autism spectrum disorder and Tourette syndrome.

Neurodiversity falls into the remit of specialist psychology either educational or occupational. It is often the case that those who have a type of neurodiversity may also experience stress, depression and anxiety. The latter is commonly what culminates in the referral to our service and could be secondary to a confirmed diagnosis of a type of neurodiversity or, undiagnosed neurodiversity.

Employees who are at the beginning of their working life and have gone through the education system in the last two decades are more likely to have a diagnosis because of improved awareness and screening in the education sector. Discussion about workplace needs can take place at the pre-employment stage in advance of commencing in post to yield the best outcome for support. Younger employees may be able to provide a formal report following assessment for

neurodiversity with bespoke advice tailored to their individual needs.

It is important to consider the impact of transitioning from the education sector to the workforce which holds particular reference to this younger cohort. Change and adaptation associated with new beginnings such as adjustment when entering the workforce could become an aggravating factor for the challenges the employee with neurodiversity already faces or worse, initiate a deterioration in mental health. Occupational health practitioners need to have a good understanding in relation to the functional difficulties and challenges an employee may face.

Another significant factor is career progression and how the demands of a promotion could impact on the condition and vice versa. Also older workers who are experiencing difficulties at work may be referred to our service. Employees may be referred due to performance issues and may be on the brink of being managed under a capability process. The employer may be seeking advice about whether there is a health issue to explain the difficulties. This is a prime example of where occupational health can identify neurodiversity in mature adults. Redirecting management down the appropriate pathway could lead to improved performance, attendance and productivity. The risk of raising a grievance or legal action for unfair dismissal is reduced. The employee may even thank you for saving their job.

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