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Depression a hidden cost to U.S. business

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In a typical office of 20 people, chances are that four will suffer from a mental illness this year. Depression, one of the most common, primarily hits workers in their most productive years: the 20s through 40s.

Its annual toll on United States businesses amounts to about \$70 billion in medical expenditures, lost productivity and other costs, yet most employers don't have a clue.

Even though Prozac has become a household word, few individual companies know the true costs of depression to their business...That's because many of the indirect costs – such as reduced productivity and related illnesses such as alcoholism – aren't readily apparent. And unlike those with allergies or appendicitis, people with mental or emotional problems tend to hide their conditions for fear of stigmatizing their careers.

...depression is a tough disease to manage because its symptoms are largely invisible and subjective – even as it affects a person's moods, thoughts and energy levels. While its symptoms and severity can vary widely, the disease is particularly debilitating for working people: It often causes them to lose interest in their jobs and other aspects of their lives, to withdraw from social contact and to be overcome by feelings of worthlessness, guilt and hopelessness.

Sometimes, depression is triggered by an event, such as a death or divorce, but it can also occur without warning. For many, the disease is mild and transient. But for others, it worsens over time and, left untreated, can lead to very serious symptoms, such as suicidal thoughts that require hospitalization – or actual suicides that may seem to co-workers to come out of the blue.

A study in the early 1990's showed that treating depressive disorders cost an insurance health plan nearly as much as the cost to treat heart disease.