It’s not exactly the black swan of business which no one saw coming. It’s more the elephant in the room that eventually tramples. It’s there, it’s huge, and it’s not disappearing anytime soon. The numbers are staggering. Mental health and substance abuse cost US businesses between $80 and $100 billion annually with costs incurred in absenteeism, and lost productivity. The National Institute of Mental Health reports 1 in 5 adults live with a diagnosable mental illness. To put that into your workplace perspective, If you have a business of 20 people that’s 4 individuals and if you have a workplace of 1000 that’s 200 people. Research tells us that people with a diagnosable mental illness who self monitoring and pursue treatment when needed manage quite effectively in the workplace. The bigger issue for workplaces is that 8 out of 10 employees who are struggling with their mental health don’t seek treatment out of fear, shame and lack of knowledge. The stigma of mental health stops people from getting help. Without acknowledging that help is needed things will get worse. It is known that the earlier there’s help the more manageable things will be.

**The elephant in the room will eventually trample.**

Both employees and managers report that the mental health conversation at work is a hard one. John is a ten year employee in the tech industry who states he has been struggling with his mental health at work for the past five months.” I find it harder to concentrate and I’m more irritable with my family and coworkers. I’m drinking more in the evenings and weekends just to take the edge off the stress of work. On some level I know the right thing to do is to fess up to my boss and tell her what’s been going on and see if she has any suggestions. But then there’s the part of me that keeps wondering if it’s going to make me look weak and this will be a black mark on my career advancement. I just feel I can’t risk it even though I know things aren’t getting better.”

Andrea is a seasoned HR manager in the retail industry who gives her take on dealing with mental health in the workplace. I’ve seen just about everything coming through my office and mental health issues are always a challenge. There’s some sort of fine line between figuring out what can be helpful and respecting the person’s privacy. The question we really need answered is, “ how we can help you be successful at your job? The answer gets complicated because of stigma, fears, and mental health being very individual. Sometimes the person themselves doesn’t know what would be helpful. Sometimes the answer is a break away from work but many times the answer is providing short term support or reallocating duties. As a rule, people don’t like talking about mental health especially their own.” A Deloitte UK study showed 95 percent of those who had missed work because of stress cited a different reason for being off. Much easier to call off work with “coming down with a cold” then “exhausted and can’t concentrate.”

**Talking about mental health openly helps.**

But talking we must do. Not only is reducing mental health stigma the right thing to do, there is a payoff all around. The World Health Organization has estimated that for every dollar invested in treatment and support of mental health disorders sees a return of $4 in improved health and productivity. In another business research study it is suggested that for every dollar spent on workplace mental health training programs we can expect to see a return of $10. These programs improve the culture in the workplace by helping to reduce stigma, making it more likely for someone who needs help to seek help. It also gives managers the tools to support employees that are struggling in silence. That’s sounds like a win-win to me.