

Mental health in the workplace: What employers can do ?

By Ty Arslan

Special to NCHCA members

Mental Health? What is it? Can I talk about it? Who do I talk to? Should I feel embarrassed asking for help? Questions that 15-20 years were very difficult in receiving responses to or being educated on. Nowadays mental health is in the forefront in schools, organizations, athletics and general public information. Champions of mental health such as Clara Hughes and Bell Canada have allowed the topic to be openly discussed in the public now. The NCHCA Health and Safety Committee would like to continue this open dialogue on this matter.

With Mental Health in the workplace affecting everyone involved, the NCHCA Health and Safety Committee decided to support your needs with mental health programs, assistance and evaluations. Below are key messaging and takeaways in assisting your organization with mental health. The key messaging focuses on the cost, the impact, roles, responsibilities, tips, strategies, signs, diagnosis' and resources.

Cost of Mental Health in the Workplace

- On any given week, more than 500,000 Canadians will not go to work because of mental illness
- More than 30% of disability claims and 70% of disability costs are attributed to mental illness
- It is estimated that between compensation to sick workers and lost productivity, mental health issues cost the Canadian economy \$51 billion a year, of which \$20 billion alone would be **lost productivity**. The total loss represents 4% of GDP. (*Towers Watson, 2012*)

Within the workplace mental health may result in:

- Higher turnover
- Greater levels of job dissatisfaction
- Absenteeism
- Presenteeism
- Employee Health impacts
- Loss of productivity

It can also hit your bottom line with:

- Salary related costs and lost production costs
- Short term disability
- Long term disability
- Health claims

What is the profile of a person with mental health issues: Is there a stigma?

- Mental illness affects people of all ages, educational and income levels, and cultures

- Some groups more likely to report mental health issues:
 - Women
 - Non-managers
 - Not-for-profit sector
 - Unionized employees
- Some groups less likely to report mental health issues:
 - Residents of Québec
 - People 65 years and older
 - Construction sector

Reference: Conference Board of Canada

The financial impact of mental health on STD and LTD Claims (Short Term and Long Term Disability claims)

- For short term and long term disability claims, mental disorders are the leading cause of disability among professional and management occupations and almost equal to MSK claims in other job categories
- Mental Disorder STD claims have the longest durations and last between 10 weeks to 14 weeks (longer for professional and management categories). Many of these claims would likely reach the maximum benefit period and may transition into a Long-Term Disability claim.
- Mental Disorder LTD claims have the longest duration (over 3.1 years) with the greatest in the professional and management categories
- Females have a higher incidence than men for Mental Disorders

How the STD costs add up:

Example: In a 100 employee workplace, up to 10 employees may be away from work for 10 days or more during a year. At least one of these employees will suffer from a mental health issue. At an average salary of \$50,000, that employee will cost \$12,500 in lost salary at 100%

Whether the STD benefit is self-funded or insured, there is a direct cost to the employer

How the LTD costs have a major financial impact on companies

- Need to hold enough funds to pay for current and future claims
- Costs increase by age and the Canadian population is aging.

Example: For every 1000 employees, 9.5 will enter LTD this year. Of these, at least 2 employees will have a mental disorder as a primary diagnosis. Based on a \$50,000 salary and a 66% benefit, total benefit payout could exceed \$200,000.

To this is added the disability reserve which, on average, would exceed \$175,000 per employee. (This does not include the Life reserve.)

- Total potential cost of the claims (while on claim): \$550,000

Early Warning Signs of mental health.

Which may show that an employee is struggling with a Mental Health issue: Do you know of any employees with the listed symptom and signs?

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lateness or frequent breaks away from office • Change in attendance • Patterned or excessive sick leave • Presenteeism (on the job absenteeism) • Reduced quality of work • High rate of accidents • Withdrawal/avoidance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employee errors • Missed deadlines/productivity change • Changes in physical appearance • Confusion or forgetfulness • Employee conflict • Inappropriate behaviour, mood swings, negative attitude
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What are the most common conditions?

- Depression and acute depressive episodes

Anxiety

1. General Anxiety Disorder
2. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
3. Acute Stress Disorder
4. Panic Disorders
5. Phobias
6. OCD

Stress is not a diagnosis – Medical Assessment is required to yield diagnosis – then resultant treatment and prognosis

7. Other Psychiatric Disorders – Bipolar, Schizophrenia
8. Addictions – substance abuse / dependence
9. Post Concussion (Workplace, Sport)
10. Post Chemo “Fog”
11. Acquired Brain Injury

What are your responsibilities as an employer?

Providing a safe and healthy workplace extends beyond the physical environment to that which may impact the Mental Health of our employees

1) Prevention & Promotion

- Understand your organizational needs & identify potential and existing issues
- Organizational Review Tools (ex. Guarding Minds @ Work)
- Develop prevention and management strategies for psychological health or safety issues in your workplace
- CSA Standard Z1003 Psychological Health & Safety in the Workplace – Mental Health Commission – 3 year pilot study with over 30 employers

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2) Education to staff on mental illness

- Remove stigma by education on the realities of mental illness
- Learn mental health coping strategies are strained by stress, burnout, conflict or life events
- Awareness of mental health resources i.e.: HR, OH&S, EAP, community resources etc.
- Posters, articles, newsletters ,lunch & learns, health fairs etc.

Strategies for Management & HR have responsibility in improving and addressing workplace mental health issues

4) Early intervention and employee support

- Prevention & crisis response
- Temporary accommodation
- Mental health resources for their employees i.e.: EAP, health & disability management programs

5) Accommodation

- Return to work process
- Accommodation ideas for mental health related situations
- Assessment Tools and Medical Management Tools to support accommodation

Additional training front-line managers want to assist them in the early recognition of mental health cases?

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognizing signs and symptoms • Community supports available • Medical factors influencing mental health issues • Strategies for keeping employees functional and successful in the workplace 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responses to negative reactions • Insight into legal requirements • Handling difficult conversations • Softer skills • Creating an inclusive work environment
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What are your rights as an employer?

- Appropriate information about the diagnosis
- Medical Management is appropriate and underway, updates
- Prognosis for recovery – specific, targeted and related to the diagnosis
- Functional status upon recovery/closure of claim
- Compliance by employee with treatment plan
- Compliance by staff within the organization to have behaviours which reduce the risk of Mental Health issues, support RTW and recovery plans
- Union support of plans which are structured for the employee to succeed
- Claim guidance – WSIB vs. STD/LTD
- Outsourced providers to support internal resources

Tips in creating positive change in your organization

1. Focus on education and communication to reduce fear, stigma and discrimination
2. Create a culture conducive to good mental health
3. Demonstrate leadership at the top
4. Provide the tools and training to support managers in their role
5. Inform employees

Reference: Conference Board of Canada

Effective Organizational Resources in dealing with mental health

Assistance with targeted initiatives addressing mental health, life stages, stress, change, addictions, return to work:

- Printed material
- Online resources, articles
- Electronic newsletters

Workplace health and life learning sessions that address important topics including stress, work-life balance, communication, conflict, change :

- Lunch & learns
- Virtual classrooms
- E-learning

Concluding Remarks

- Absence management starts with measurement especially in the Mental Health area
- An integrated process of planned communication, providing early identification and measurement
- Getting the right information to the right people at the right time

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