Vitality

Mental Health

Mental illness causes more lost work days than any other chronic condition. In any given week, approximately 500,000 employed Canadians are unable to work due to mental health problems, and employers bear the weight of this escalating cost. Depression is the fastest growing category of disability costs to Canadian employers, and yet only 31% of employers have plans to manage mental health and mental illness in the workplace[1].

Taking care of your employees makes sense. Organizations that focus on keeping employees healthy and engaged achieve better results. To be truly successful, a workplace health and wellness strategy must be comprehensive, and it must include a mental health component.

In this issue of Vitality, we explore the significance of workplace mental health and provide practical tips for maintaining a mentally healthy workforce.

Work and Mental Health: Mutually Beneficial

An unhealthy workplace can be a significant source of stress and anxiety. Healthy work environments — where employees feel heard, valued, and rewarded in their day-to-day activities — offer numerous benefits for mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional health.

Our careers are an important part of our identities. Work enables us to support our families, build our futures, share our skills and talents, be recognized for our accomplishments, and build important social bonds. That's a lot of opportunity for growth, progress, increasing one's sense of self-worth, and finding meaning in life.

Fostering a psychologically healthy environment for your employees benefits everyone. When an employee experiences a mental health problem and cannot work, the

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consequences can be costly and can compound quickly.

Studies have shown that employees who are unable to work are at increased risk of deterioration in physical and mental well-being, and have increased hospitalization rates — and the longer employees are off work, the less likely they are to return. A lack of mental health support results in a snowball effect of escalating costs.

Healthy workplaces, on the other hand, have been shown to increase self-esteem and overall health[2]. Healthy employees are more confident, more creative, and more productive.

Work provides structure to life and keeps people cognitively engaged and socially connected. Create a mentally healthy workplace, and everyone wins.

Psychologically Safe Workplaces

Psychological safety in the workplace is comprised of two parts:

1. The **promotion** of employee well-being, and

2. The **prevention** of harm to psychological health.

Employees who feel psychologically supported at work experience greater job attachment, job commitment, job satisfaction, job involvement, work mood positivity, desire to remain with the organization, personal commitment to the organization, and job performance[3].

Conversely, when employees perceive a lack of mental health support from their employers, they are more likely to become disengaged. Organizations with poor employee perception or lack of awareness of psychological supports, experience higher turnover rates, increased incidents of workplace conflict, and higher rates of absenteeism.

An effective mental health strategy should include measures that not only support and encourage mental wellness, but also aim to reduce and avoid harm to mental well-being.

If you are looking for guidance and support in developing a wellness strategy for your workplace, consider contacting the EFAP for more information.

Mental Health Risks

Psychological health problems in the workplace can range from mild mental health difficulties to severe psychological disorders. The most common mental health problems in

the workplace are anxiety and depression[3]. As with any incidence of mental illness, a variety of psychosocial risk factors come into play.

Here are some of the most common risk factors associated with mental illness in the workplace:

- **Workplace culture.** Over time, employees develop a set of beliefs and perceptions about the character of the organization. Do your employees see the organization as trustworthy, honest, and fair? Do their daily experiences result in a perception that the company is ruthless, profit-driven, and chaotic? Organizational trust is imperative for a   healthy workforce.

- **Growth and development.** Providing support and opportunity for employees to build their technical, interpersonal, and emotional skills goes a long way. Employees who are not challenged, or encouraged to grow, will become bored and dissatisfied. Over time, their well-being will suffer, and so will their productivity.

- **Work/life balance.** Organizations that recognize the need for balance between the demands of work, family, and personal life yield better success and more engaged employees. Being flexible, where possible, can allow employees to manage conflicting demands (e.g. going to doctor's appointments or attending parent and teacher meetings), which reduces stress, and enables them to maintain concentration at work.

Difficult Conversations

Dealing with upset employees can be one of the most challenging tasks faced by organizations and leaders. When personal or mental health problems interfere with work performance, you have a duty to help employees resolve the problem by pointing them to the appropriate resources, and devising an action plan aimed at correcting the problem. Where do you start?

1. **Identify the facts.** When did you first notice the problem? How has performance changed or declined? Is the employee frequently late? Often absent? Behaving aggressively toward others? Create a set of objective facts about how the problem has impacted the employee's performance or behaviour at work.

2. **Initiate the conversation.** Meet with the employee to address the problem and get their help in resolving it. State clearly the reasons you are meeting. Ask for the employee's thoughts on the situation. If the employee opens up regarding a personal problem, use this opportunity to encourage the employee to seek help through the Employee and Family Assistance Program. If the employee does not believe there is a problem, describe the problematic behaviours you have observed, and why they need to be corrected. Clarify your expectations, and provide examples of behaviours that will indicate to you that the problem has been resolved. Specify the actions you will have to take if the situation is not resolved within a certain period of time. Ask if you can be of any help in resolving the work-related behaviours.

3. **Follow up.** Agree upon a date and time that you will meet with the employee again to assess the progress that has been made. If you have perceived progress, provide examples and encouragement. If no progress has been made, or if the situation has deteriorated, you may need to initiate the corrective process outlined to the employee previously. Encourage the employee to continue with improvement efforts.

4. **End the process.** The problem is resolved when you feel that you do not need to intervene any longer because the situation is back to normal. Meet with the employee one last time in order to acknowledge that you now consider the situation to be resolved, and remind them that you are available if further support is needed.

💬 The greatest wealth is health."

~Virgil

Conclusion

Workplace mental health is dependent on effective leadership and a robust workplace wellness strategy.

Organizations that adopt programs to address psychological health and safety incur 15-33% fewer costs related to psychological health issues[3].

Investing in your employees' mental health makes good business sense – it's good for workplace culture, employee retention, productivity, and your bottom line.

1. Quick Facts on Mental Illness and Addictions in Canada, 3rd Edition
2. Waddell, Gordon and A Kim Burton. (2006) Is work good for your health and well-being? GOV.UK. 2006. Web. 31 July 2015.
3. www.guardingmindsatwork.ca

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