

Vitality!

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Resource and Occupational Health
Professionals, Program Administrators,
Supervisors, and Key Personnel

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More and more
organizations are
implementing peer
support programs to
stem the rising tide of
mental health issues in
the workplace. That's
because they work.

Peer Support Programs in the Workplace

PEER SUPPORT PROGRAMS ARE BECOMING AN IMPORTANT AND COST-EFFECTIVE RISK MANAGEMENT STRATEGY THAT ALSO ENHANCES ORGANIZATIONAL HEALTH.

No matter how hard people try, their personal problems can sometimes spill over into their work lives and affect their productivity and professionalism. Employees struggling with relationship problems, job insecurities, financial worries, substance abuse, physical illness, grief and other matters can feel overwhelmed. When this happens, their emotions and behaviours may affect their performance — and the performance of everyone on the team.

The cost of mental illness

Mental health issues (including depression, anxiety, and addictions) pose big problems for managers and even bigger problems for organizations. With one in four working Canadians suffering from depression or anxiety¹, no other illnesses have such an impact on the Canadian workforce and economy. Mental illness costs the Canadian economy about \$33 billion each year — about 2.1 percent of GDP — in

absenteeism and lost productivity². Disability from mental illness amounts to four to 12 percent of all payroll costs³, and mental health is the number one cause of disability in Canada, accounting for nearly 30 percent of disability claims and 70 percent of the total costs⁴.

According to the World Health Organization, depression will be the single biggest medical burden worldwide by 2020.

Compounding the problem is substance abuse. Many people struggling with mental health issues often self-medicate with alcohol, tobacco, and prescription and non-prescription drugs in an effort to feel better. Of course, relief is temporary resulting in ever increasing self-medication that has further implications for individuals and employers.

Organizations simply can't afford to ignore mental health issues in the workplace.

Addressing the problem

A manager usually gets involved in an employee's personal problems only when that employee's behaviour or performance has significantly deteriorated. At that point, performance management protocols are followed, and disciplinary measures taken, neither of which address the underlying cause — the illness. However, such formal actions would be largely unnecessary if the issue had been addressed earlier. Unfortunately, managers are often the last to know that a member of their team is in crisis. While most employees will discuss some personal issues that may affect their performance, such as an upcoming medical procedure, they usually don't want to disclose a situation that involves their mental health. They're embarrassed and uncomfortable and often fear negative reactions or repercussions resulting from stereotypes such as mental illness is a sign of a weak character, instability, and unreliability.

On the other side of the desk, many managers know what to do and say when an employee has broken an arm or suffered a heart attack, but are at a loss when the situation involves depression, anxiety, panic attacks, addiction, eating disorders, and other mental health issues.

When it comes to mental health in the workplace, a peer support program can be invaluable to managers, employees – and the bottom line.

What is peer support?

Peer support is about people helping people. Trained Peers are highly valued by colleagues in that they understand the work culture, are easily accessible, and can provide confidential support in a variety of circumstances. Peers are often the first to notice subtle changes in a colleague's behaviour or demeanour and can respectfully inquire about the colleague's wellbeing in a low-key manner that is not intrusive.

Formal Peer support does not replace the need for professional mental health services such as Employee and Family Assistance, and does not deal with performance issues. However, peers can be a vital link in the pathway to seeking help in that they are trained volunteers who can be a gateway to further assistance by listening, encouraging, and guiding troubled coworkers to the appropriate people and resources for help.

Formal peer support may include:

- **supporting the colleague** for reaching out;
- **engaging in confidential early intervention related to mental health issues**, work stress, critical incidents and other issues that may be adversely affecting their colleague; and
- **providing clear and accurate information** regarding available resources and engaging in supportive follow up.

Although peers are *not* counsellors or experts in mental health issues, they are trained to provide emotional first aid, and to work collaboratively with mental health and crisis management professionals.

Research has clearly shown that Employee and Family Assistance Programs are invaluable organizational supports. However, EFAP is only effective if employees are willing to use the services. Peers play a vital role in this process as well in that they are trained to fully understand the EFAP services and can encourage those who need help to access services.

Why have a peer support program

Peer support programs require a long-term commitment but benefit the organization in many ways in that they:

- **help to foster** employee engagement;
- **can increase resiliency** in colleagues;
- **broaden the organizations'** ability to maintain employee well-being;
- **reduce the stigma** of seeking help when needed; and
- **encourage** self-care.

Establishing a peer support program

Peer support programs differ from organization to organization depending on a company's structure, culture and budget. However, there are certain factors that are helpful to keep in mind when creating and maintaining a program in any workplace. These are:

1. **Top level management endorsement** as even the best program will not be successful without resources and management support
2. **Establishing a steering committee** comprised of stakeholders from across the organization (employees, union, management, etc.)
3. **Assigning a designated Program Coordinator** who can provide leadership and day to day oversight of the program. In addition the Coordinator can also assist in maintaining schedules of availability and can organize recruitment when needed
4. **Enlisting a designated Mental Health Professional** who can provide consultation and guidance to the Program Coordinator or Peers in their role as helpers
5. **Recruiting peer support team members** who are volunteers drawn from every level and area of operation which ensures that all colleagues will have access to a peer that understands their work

Getting started

Organizations interested in discussing the viability of a Peer support program can contact a Homewood Human Solutions representative, who can provide details on all aspects of program development and ongoing management.

Once a decision has been made to establish a program the Homewood Human Solutions representative can assist the organization in establishing a Steering Committee who will establish the program mandate, policies and procedures, and selection criteria. Subsequently, the Committee produces communications to inform colleagues of the upcoming recruitment. Colleagues are encouraged to submit a letter of interest and engage in a formal interview that will be conducted by members of the Steering Committee, with the assistance of the designated Clinical Consultant.

To be the most effective, peer supporters should be drawn from across the organization, varied in age, cultural background, profession, and level. Typically, organizations will want to attract colleagues that are:

- **empathetic, compassionate,** and a good listener or communicator;
- **non-judgmental, easily approachable,** and respectful of other cultures and views; and
- **respected and trusted by others,** is willing to be discrete, and maintain confidentiality

Because trust is such an important part of the process, many organizations have their employees nominate their peer supporters. In others, management asks for volunteers and the steering committee makes the final selections.

Training

Once a group of Peers have been selected for training then a two or three day intensive interactive workshop is provided by a mental Health peer expert. Peers are provided with instruction related to:

- **program mandate,** their role and importance of maintaining confidentiality;
- **essential peer skills** and various frameworks for interactions;
- **mental health issues** and early warning signs of co-worker distress;
- **dealing with special challenges** including critical incidents; and
- **seeking support** and maintaining self-care.

1. Statistics Canada
2. Mental Health Commission of Canada
3. Canadian Mental Health Association

National Non-Smoking Week

January 20-26, 2013 is the National Non-Smoking Week in Canada, an event that has been observed for over 30 years. This is a great opportunity for your organization to reinforce the support available through the EFAP in order to educate your employees on the dangers of smoking.

Making an effective smoking cessation process available will realize many workplace benefits: lower insurance premiums, lower cleaning costs, improved corporate image, a safer, healthier workplace overall, and financial savings — for every dollar spent on employee health initiatives, four dollars can be saved.



Want to know more about these new developments?
Contact your Homewood Human Solutions™ Customer Relations Manager.

About *Vitality!*

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