

Member's Quarterly

Spring 2024 Edition

Feature

Focus on Mental Health:

Psychologically Safe Workplaces

A change in thinking

Occupational health and safety have long been a priority for both employers and their employees. However, until recently, little attention was paid to how well employees are doing in regard to their mental health and mental well-being. This has dramatically changed. Now most employers are shifting their focus to look after not just their employees' physical safety, but their psychological well-being too.

Employees are trying to deal with the increased risk of developing chronic diseases, strokes and heart attacks. Employers are struggling with the added cost of sick leave, disability payments and skyrocketing prescription drug costs on their employee benefit plans. Some have estimated the cost of all these additional expenses to employers at over \$50 billion per year in health and absence related costs. It naturally makes good sense for everyone to focus on mental wellness at work.

Working from home

Despite the relatively successful transition to remote work that many organizations have achieved over the course of the last few years, the COVID-19 crisis is leaving lasting scars in the form of burnout, anxiety and mental toll. Operational agility aside, the transition to working at home has not been smooth sailing for everyone. On top of the logistical concerns, there is also the stress driven by fear of job losses, the unavoidable distortion of work life balance, isolation, workplace suitability and lack of adequate or reliable technology. In order to come out on the other side of this intact, all organizations are going to have to invest in resources and programs to ensure their workforce has the support needed to continue feeling that work is a psychosocially safe space.

Change for the better

Some workplaces have cultures of bullying and harassment that create psychologically unsafe working conditions where people are afraid and insecure. Some develop anxiety conditions and others have more serious mental health issues like clinical depression and mood disorders. In workplaces where there is potentially a high level of workplace violence, there can be deep emotional scars and trauma. This is a possibility in a range of job occupations ranging from front line social service workers to bank tellers to nurses or first responders.

Many employers are moving to make their workplaces a psychologically safe place to work. Some are encouraging and supporting positive mental health initiatives to adopting anti-bullying programs throughout the organization. Others are focusing on mental well-being by looking at the work done by the Mental Health Commission of Canada and adopting the National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace.

Mental health and #MeToo

The #MeToo Movement that began in October 2017 has spearheaded a much-needed dialogue surrounding the consequences of workplace sexual harassment and violence. The psychological impact of this kind of behaviour is still being unpacked and is raising important issues regarding the gender differences that are seen in mental health disorders. It is now well established that women experience mental health disorders at a much higher rate than men and are twice as likely to have a major depressive disorder.



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A reason for this discrepancy is undoubtedly problems of equality in the workplace. In Canadian workplaces, a gender pay gap that is double the global average still exists. This means that women earn \$8,000 less, annually, than men in Canada, compared to \$4,000 less worldwide. It is critical that every psychologically safe workplace has a clear game plan, including policies and procedures that define harassment, sexual harassment and other behaviours that are unacceptable in the workplace.

Setting a new standard

While there is certainly still plenty of work to be done, one key piece is the National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace that came out of the work by the Mental Health Commission of Canada. The Standard provides a framework to help guide employers of all sizes as they work toward psychologically safe and healthy workplaces.

The Mental Health Commission of Canada continues to be at the forefront of workplace mental health. In addition to the Standard, the Commission has also been sponsoring and supporting a number of other activities that help foster psychologically healthy workplaces. This includes several evidence-based mental health training programs that are founded on best practices, research and methodologies.

Almost everything helps when it comes to improving the psychological health of workers and the workplace. Open communications about mental health issues at work and encourage people to talk to one another. Practice positive role-modelling from the front by having managers take their weekends off and discourage excessive overtime. Get outside help and resources. An excellent resource is the Mental Health Commission of Canada <https://mentalhealthcommission.ca/>. There you will find access to training and support as well having the ability to connect and communicate with other employers in your field. ■