

Member's Quarterly

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Feature

Connections Between Employee Disabilities and Mental Health

What employers can actually do to help

The connection between mental health and employee disabilities has never been clearer. According to the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC), over 30 percent of both short and long-term disability claims in Canada can be attributed to mental health problems and illnesses. The cost is staggering. The MHCC estimates that the total cost from mental health problems to the Canadian economy is over \$50 billion a year. Every year mental health problems and illnesses among working adults in Canada cost employers over \$6 billion in lost productivity from absenteeism, presenteeism and turnover.

In the US, the problem is even worse. A study by Mercer and Global Disability Inclusion revealed that over half of employee disabilities are related to mental health. Employees identified a range of mental health issues that are a prime factor. This included a mental health condition like severe depression or anxiety. The data gathered from more than 5 million employees is just more research that shows how widespread mental health conditions are in the workplace. It is also another signal to employers that much more needs to be done to support their workers in this area.

One particular mental health condition is surging in the workplace, at least among some segments of the working population. Young workers and women are experiencing depression at higher rates than ever. One new study showed that almost 40 percent of depression cases in the past two years were found in young people. For women, it was even worse with 60 percent of cases of depression found in women across all age groups.

So, what can employers do to combat this scourge of mental health problems that is plaguing so many workers? They can do a lot. Everything seems to help a bit and every bit helps. They can let their employees know that they are not alone in their difficulties. Offering things like awareness programs, mental health days and access to counseling services are all welcome additions to combatting mental illness in the workplace. However, we must all realize that much more needs to be done if we are going to reduce the problems caused by mental distress.

Some employers are looking at innovative approaches to help their employees. Employee Assistance Programs are being revamped to allow for support for employees with mental health issues whether they arise at work, at home or from a predisposed condition. EAP programs are also being designed to provide different levels of support depending on what the employee needs at the time.

In the first line of support, there are self-help tools like online training and webinars that employees can use to educate themselves and monitor their progress. The next level of support provides individual counselling or coaching from a professional who has specialized experience in their condition. Finally, there are supports for people who need a clinical approach. There are virtual or in-person mental health therapists who can provide one-on-one support as required.

At the MHCC, there are a variety of supports available to both employees and employers. Their work has included developing the National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace.



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This standard has a voluntary set of guidelines, tools and resources to help guide organizations in promoting mental health and preventing psychological harm at work. They also have resources to help organizations create more mentally healthy work environments and a library of case studies with specific organizations who have worked to identify and understand best practices for implementing the standard.

In addition, the MHCC also has a free online toolkit to support organizations working to implement the standard and a set of posters that features the 13 psychosocial factors that are described in the standard. Each of these posters has a customizable space that allows organizations to showcase internal programs and initiatives aligned with these factors. Lastly, they have the Minds Matter tool that was developed by CivicAction in collaboration with a group of employers, experts and individuals with first-hand experience of mental health issues. Over 1500 organizations have taken the assessment and are working to provide support and benefits to well over 3 million workers.

For more information and to access the National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace and the related assessment tools, you can visit their website at: <https://mentalhealthcommission.ca/national-standard/>.

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