Mental Health — How to Address and Support Fact Sheet

WHY SHOULD EMPLOYERS BE CONCERNED ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH?

The overall health of a workplace includes both the physical and psychological well-being of its workers. By treating mental health and its psychological component equally with the physical environment, a workplace can support their workers' overall well-being. Poor mental health not only hurts the individual, it also reduces corporate profits. It's important that all levels of the workplace — including the Board of Directors, management, finance, and human resources departments — get involved to incorporate mental health at your workplace. It is also necessary to engage your health and safety committee and workers — we all have a shared responsibility for health and safety, including mental health.

There is no one "right way" to create a mentally healthy workplace because every workplace is different — from the people doing the work, to the work that needs to be done, to the leaders running the organization, the size of the organization, the external environment that influences the community, and the external resources the company draws. All of these factors play a role in employee mental health.

There is also a legislative requirement for employers to protect the mental and physical health of their employees. Many provincial occupational health and safety acts have been expanded to include harm to psychological well-being in the definition of harassment. In jurisdictions that do not have explicit legislation dealing with psychological health in the workplace, the general duty clause would apply.

Are there any specific issues in the workplace that affect employee mental health?

Research has identified 13 workplace factors — known as psychosocial risk factors (PSR) — that can have an impact on organizational health, the health of individual employees, and the financial bottom line. The way work is carried out and the context in which work occurs can have a significant impact on an employee's mental health — positively or negatively. When employees have a negative exposure to these factors, there is potential for the development of stress, demoralization, depressed mood, anxiety, or burnout.

Organizations need to consider all of these in their efforts to create a mentally healthy workplace. The factors are:

1. Psychological Support
2. Organizational Culture
3. Clear Leadership & Expectations
4. Civility & Respect

5. Psychological Competencies & Requirements
6. Growth & Development
7. Recognition & Reward
8. Involvement & Influence
9. Workload Management
10. Engagement
11. Balance
12. Psychological Protection
13. Protection of Physical Safety

Workplace issues that affect mental health include:

- stigma and discrimination
- demand/control and effort/reward relationships
- presenteeism
- job burnout
- harassment, violence, bullying and mobbing
- substance use, misuse and abuse at work

WHAT CAN WORKPLACES DO TO SUPPORT MENTAL HEALTH?

A psychologically safe and healthy workplace is one that promotes workers' mental well-being and does not harm employee mental health through negligent, reckless or intentional ways. For example, a psychologically safe workplace would be free of excessive fear or chronic anxiety. An organization's commitment has to start at the top.

One way to achieve a psychologically safe workplace is to create and implement a Regulations. This program is a series of strategies and related activities, initiatives and policies developed by the employer, in consultation with employees, to continually improve or maintain the quality of working life, health, and the well-being of the workforce. These activities are developed as part of a continual improvement process to improve the work environment (physical, psychosocial, organizational, economic), and to increase personal empowerment and personal growth.

HOW DO I CONDUCT A HAZARD ANALYSIS FOR MENTAL HEALTH?

A process to identify, assess and control psychosocial hazards proactively and on an ongoing basis must be established in the workplace. Employees must also be trained to report unhealthy psychosocial situations to their supervisor/manager, who will investigate and take corrective action, if required. The results of the assessments will help to set objectives and targets when developing programs or policies.

Sources of information for hazard and risk evaluation for the psychosocial work environment include:

- health and safety committee reports, minutes and/or recommendations
- workplace health/well-being committee reports, minutes and/or recommendations
- worker concerns and complaints during workplace inspections or other times
- worker exit interviews
- previous workplace risk assessments
- incident investigations (if investigation probes deeply enough into root causes)
- absenteeism, short- and long-term disability claim data
- employee surveys such as perception surveys, employee engagement surveys
- data regarding the nature of health benefit claims and EAP usage if available

Note: Because psychosocial hazards are non-physical, they generally cannot be seen during inspections or audits. It is necessary to ask employees about the stressors they experience at work. The process must be confidential and anonymous whenever possible.

WHAT ELSE CAN EMPLOYERS DO?

Below are eight strategies that employers can use to encourage positive mental health:

1. Encourage active employee participation and decision making
2. Clearly define employees' duties and responsibilities
3. Promote work-life balance
4. Encourage respectful and non-derogatory behaviours
5. Manage workloads
6. Allow continuous learning
7. Have conflict resolution practices in place
8. Recognize employees' contributions effectively

(Adapted from Workplace Mental Health Promotion, A How-To Guide.)

Additionally, employers can:

- When implementing a new process or procedure, always consider the psychological impact of the change.
- Assess psychological safety in your workplace and develop a plan to address it.
- Develop a policy statement reflecting your organization's commitment to making workplace mental health a priority. A policy demonstrates leadership and commitment. Alternatively, your health and safety policy should address commitment to addressing psychosocial risk factors as well as physical hazards
- Explicitly include mental health and psychological safety in your health and safety committee mandate.
- Develop policies and practices for workplace harassment, violence and bullying. Review your current policies and procedures and consider how they might be positively or negatively contributing to issues of violence and harassment.
- Provide education and training that ensures managers and employees know how to recognize hazards such as harassment, bullying, and psychologically unhealthy work conditions. This training provides concrete ways for co-workers to recognize and talk about mental health issues in general. Managers can additionally contribute to a positive work environment if they have the skills and knowledge to identify and respond to issues before they escalate.
- Educate all health and safety committee members about the importance of mental health in the workplace.
- Ask the worker representative(s) on the committee to bring forward general workplace mental health issues that affect their workforce rather than any individual's particular situation. Require that individual privacy and confidentiality be respected at all times.
- Develop substance abuse policies (i.e., use of illicit drugs at work, alcohol consumption at work, inappropriate Internet use, etc.) and make sure that all employees are aware of them.

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