WELLNESS TOOLKIT

Mental Health

KRGinsure

Contents

Mental Health

Introduction

Employee mental health in the workplace has become a topic of increased focus and awareness in recent years. An employee's mental health includes how they think, feel and act, and includes their emotional and social well-being. While mental health includes mental illness, the two aren't interchangeable. An employee can go through a period of poor mental health but not necessarily have a diagnosable mental illness. Additionally, an employee's mental health can change over time, depending on factors such as their workload, stress and work-life balance.

While 1 in 5 adults experience mental illness annually, a recent study by Deloitte revealed that less than half receive treatment. A study from the Mental Health in the Workplace Summit also found that mental illness is the leading cause of disability for adults ages 15 to 44 and that more workdays are lost to mental health-related absenteeism than any other injury or illness.

Given its prevalence, you can expect that employees at your organization are experiencing mental health challenges or mental illness. That's why it's so important that your organization creates a culture that supports employees' mental health. While this may sound complicated, creating a workplace that is supportive of mental health and illness is easier than it seems.

This toolkit serves as an introduction to mental health and provides several ways that employers can help promote a stigma-free environment and support employees' mental health. It is not intended as legal or medical advice and should only be used for informational purposes.

Mental Health in the Workplace

An employee's mental health includes how they think, feel and act, as well as their emotional and social well-being. Additionally, an employee's mental health can change over time, depending on factors such as their workload, stress and work-life balance.

Employee Mental Health by the Numbers

According to the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH):

In any given year, **1 in 5** Canadians experience a mental illness or addiction problem.

40% of Canadians have experienced feelings of anxiety or depression but never sought medical help for it.

Mental illness can cut **10 to 20** years from a person's life expectancy.

About **4,000** Canadians per year die by suicide—an average of almost **11 suicides a day**.

Mental health is different for each of your employees and doesn't just refer to mental illness. As a result, major health organizations are referring to mental health as mental well-being. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), there's not a specific definition of mental well-being. However, various studies agree that achieving a state of mental well-being includes being able to:

- Realize one's full potential
- Work productively
- Cope with the normal stresses of life
- Contribute meaningfully to one's community

Despite talking about mental well-being becoming more prevalent socially, many employees are still wary of discussing mental health struggles. According to a study by the health benefits administrator Businessolver, 68 per cent of employees fear that asking for help with a mental health issue could jeopardize their job security. Moreover, while 50 per cent of employees reported struggling with their mental health, only one-third of those employees asked for help.

Employees afflicted with poor mental health could potentially experience the following symptoms:

- Reduced focus
- Low productivity
- Reduced cognitive abilities
- Poor physical well-being

According to CAMH, the economic burden of mental illness in
Canada is estimated at **$51 billion** per year. This includes health care
costs, lost productivity, and reductions in health-related quality of life.

Fortunately, your business can implement programs to help
your employees cope with and manage their mental health.

Common Mental Health Conditions

When it comes to mental health conditions, there are a wide variety of illnesses with which employees could be struggling. The following list isn't all-inclusive or exhaustive but does provide a general overview of the most prevalent mental health conditions. Familiarizing yourself with what employees may be going through is essential for educating yourself and managers on how to recognize the signs that an employee may be struggling and to destigmatize mental health at your organization.

Anxiety Disorders

Anxiety disorders commonly occur in conjunction with other mental or physical illnesses, last at least six months and can get worse without treatment. There are a few different types of conditions that are commonly classified as anxiety disorders: generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, social phobia and specific phobia.

- **Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD)**—People with GAD go through the day filled with exaggerated worry and tension, even when there is little or nothing to worry about. GAD is diagnosed when a person worries excessively about a variety of everyday problems for at least six months. Physical symptoms accompanying this condition include fatigue, headaches, irritability, nausea, frequent urination and hot flashes.

- **Panic disorder**—This condition is characterized by sudden attacks of terror—known as panic attacks—which are usually accompanied by a pounding heart, sweating, dizziness and/or weakness. During these attacks, sufferers may flush or feel chilled, their hands may tingle or feel numb, and nausea or chest pain may occur. Panic attacks usually produce a sense of unreality, a fear of impending doom or a fear of losing control. They can occur at any time—even during sleep. About one-third of people who experience panic attacks become so fearful that they refuse to leave home. When the condition progresses this far, it is called agoraphobia—a fear of open spaces.

- **Social phobia**—Also called social anxiety disorder, social phobia is diagnosed when individuals become overwhelmingly anxious and excessively self-conscious in everyday social situations. People with this phobia have an intense, persistent and chronic fear of being watched and judged by others, and of doing things that will embarrass them. They may worry for days or even weeks before a dreaded situation. Many with social phobia realize that their fear is unwarranted, but are still unable to overcome it.

- **Specific phobias**—A specific phobia is an intense, irrational fear of something that poses little or no threat—such as heights, escalators, dogs, spiders, closed-in places or water. Like social phobia, sufferers understand that these fears are irrational, but feel powerless to stop them. The causes of these phobias are not well-understood, but symptoms usually appear in childhood or adolescence and continue into adulthood.

In general, anxiety disorders are treated with medication, specific types of psychotherapy or both. Before treatment begins, a doctor must conduct a careful diagnostic evaluation to determine whether a person's symptoms are caused by an anxiety disorder or a physical problem. Sometimes alcoholism, depression or other coexisting conditions have such a strong effect on the individual that treating the anxiety disorder must wait until those conditions are brought under control. Those with anxiety disorders usually try several different treatments or combinations of treatment before finding the one that works for them.

Mood Disorders

Everyone experiences feeling sad or being in a bad mood, but employees who suffer from mood disorders live with constant and more severe symptoms. Studies show that 1 in 10 adults suffer from some type of mood disorder. Of the different types of mood disorders, depression and bipolar disorder are the most common.

- **Depression**—When a person has a depressive disorder, it interferes with daily life. Depression is a common but serious illness. There is no single cause of depression, but it likely results from a mix of genetic, biochemical, environmental and psychological factors. Depression commonly coexists with other illnesses, such as anxiety disorders or substance abuse. There are a variety of different types of depression, including major depressive disorder, psychotic depression, postpartum depression and seasonal affective disorder. Depression symptoms are different in every person, as is the frequency, severity and duration of those symptoms. However, common symptoms include:

    - Persistent sad, anxious or "empty" feelings
    - Feelings of guilt, worthlessness and/or hopelessness
    - Irritability, restlessness and/or fatigue
    - Loss of interest in activities once found pleasurable
    - A dramatic change in appetite
    - Insomnia
    - Thoughts of suicide

    Depression is a treatable disorder. The first step is to visit a doctor for a medical examination to rule out other factors that may be causing the condition, such as medications or a thyroid disorder. Once diagnosed, a person will likely be treated with psychotherapy and/or medication. In the meantime, it is important to exercise regularly, participate in activities, spend time with friends and family, and think positively. It is wise to postpone major decisions, such as marriage or a career change, until feeling better.

- **Bipolar disorders**—Bipolar disorder causes dramatic mood swings—from overly "high" (mania) to sad and hopeless, and back again, often with periods of normal mood in between. Symptoms of mania include:

    - Increased energy, restlessness
    - Excessively euphoric mood
    - Extreme irritability

- o   Racing thoughts, talking very fast and being easily distracted

- o   Unrealistic belief in one's abilities and powers

- o   Poor judgment

- o   Increased sexual drive

- o   Substance abuse

Symptoms of depression include:

- o   Feelings of hopelessness and pessimism

- o   Loss of interest in activities once enjoyed, including sex

- o   Sleeping too much or not at all

- o   Change in appetite

- o   Decreased energy

- o   Thoughts of suicide

People with bipolar disorder can lead healthy and productive lives when the illness is effectively treated. Without treatment, however, it tends to worsen. Because bipolar disorder is a recurrent illness, long-term preventive treatment is strongly recommended. A strategy that combines medication and psychological treatment is optimal for managing the disorder over time. If those methods are ineffective, electroconvulsive therapy may be considered.

Other Common Disorders

In addition to the mental health conditions discussed above, there are a few other conditions employers should learn about.

- **Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)**—PTSD develops after a traumatic event or experience that involved physical harm or the threat of it. PTSD is common in war veterans, but it can result from a variety of traumatic incidents, such as kidnapping, abuse or a car accident. People with PTSD may startle easily, become emotionally numb (especially to people with whom they used to be close), lose interest in things they used to enjoy, and become irritable, aggressive or violent. They avoid situations that remind them of the original incident, and anniversaries of the incident are usually very difficult.

- **Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)**—OCD sufferers have persistent, upsetting thoughts or obsessions, and use rituals to control the anxiety these thoughts produce. Most often, the rituals end up controlling the person with OCD. For example, if someone is obsessed with germs and dirt, he or she may develop a compulsion for excessive handwashing.

- **Substance abuse**—Substance abuse is the unhealthy use of alcohol, drugs or other substances that negatively interfere with a person's functioning or well-being. Substance abuse can negatively affect people's physical or emotional well-being, significant relationships, educational achievements, finances and other parts of their lives. Substance abuse problems also affect productivity, workplace safety and health care costs.

Substance abuse is preventable and treatable, with recovery rates comparable to other chronic health problems like diabetes and asthma. If employers promote prevention, provide employee access to treatment and support employee recovery from substance abuse, they can help create healthier and more productive employees, workplaces and communities.

Suicide

Having a mental illness issue does not guarantee you will be suicidal. However, depending on the illness, it can make positive thinking much harder. Suicide is a leading cause of death for Canadians, but much like mental health in general, the topic rarely gets the attention it deserves. There is a stigma against discussing suicide and mental health that hinders meaningful conversation about the topic. Open dialogue is an important part of preventing these tragic deaths and establishing safety outlets for those in need.

According to Health Canada, there are approximately 4,000 deaths by suicide per year in Canada, or about 10 suicides per day. For every suicide, there are five self-inflicted injury hospitalizations, 25-30 attempts and 7-10 people profoundly affected by the suicide loss.

Beyond the human toll, the economic consequences of suicide are staggering. According to the Centre for Suicide Prevention, one estimate put the economic cost at around $51 billion annually. Factors like potential underreporting of suicide, total lifetime costs and per capita calculations were used in the estimates.

How Employers Can Help

Companies cannot expect employees with mental illnesses to "snap out of it" or wipe away thoughts of self-harm. Employers need to acknowledge that mental illness comes in many forms and that it probably affects more of their employees than they know. This is why employer-sponsored assistance programs are so important.

Employers should foster a safe environment that encourages employees to speak up if they're feeling overwhelmed by work, as this is a significant stressor for depression and other mental illnesses. Beyond reassessing company culture, organizations can offer referrals or access to mental health professionals through their employee assistance programs (EAPs). One of the most effective ways to reduce suicide is by being there for someone in need. With this in mind, consider empathy training for managers so they can recognize the warning signs of severe depression and can address them with the individual.

Mental Health

What Employers Can Do to Support Employee Mental Health

Mental well-being includes mental health but goes far beyond treating mental illness. One main roadblock that employees face when it comes to their mental well-being is chronic stress, which can lead to a lack of sleep, which in turn can exacerbate workplace stress. It's up to employers to implement various strategies in their organizations that are designed to support employee mental health. The following strategies are among the most common that employers across the country are focusing on.

Create a Supportive, Stigma-free Environment

One of the best ways that employers can support employee mental health is through company culture. Company culture is the personality of a company and the environment in which its employees work. It is the unifying element that holds everyone in an organization together. Unlike an established mission statement, culture encompasses the written and unwritten behavioural norms and expectations of those within the company.

> Establishing a **stigma-free**, **supportive culture** that prioritizes and values employee mental health will go a long way in **improving mental health** at the workplace

Many employers assume that creating this type of culture is expensive, but there are a variety of cost-effective strategies that employers can use to create a supportive culture. Here are some of the simplest ways to cultivate a supportive and stigma-free culture.

- **Communicate the importance of mental health awareness**—Many employees feel ashamed to ask for help or fear for their job's security if they talk about mental health issues they may be experiencing. While great social steps have been made to break down the negative stigma that's commonly associated with mental health, there's still work to be done in the workplace. Employers need to open lines of communication between senior leadership, managers and employees to start a dialogue about mental health. When employees hear their leaders talking about supporting mental health and even talking about mental health issues they've experienced, the negative stigma starts to fade away and employees begin to feel more comfortable talking about their struggles or asking for help when they need it.

- **Encourage employees to prioritize their mental health**—Companies that spread awareness about prioritizing mental health tend to have happier and healthier employees. Distributing information about recognizing the signs of mental illness, stress and burnout, and general overall wellness will keep mental health a top-of-mind concern. Moreover, to create a culture that is supportive of employee mental health, employers should build in mental health days to

their paid time off programs and encourage employees to take a mental health day responsibly if they need one.

- **Check in with employees**—Employers that regularly check in with their employees to see how they are doing and whether they need any additional resources are better equipped to make changes to their benefits offerings to support employee mental health. For example, if an annual or biannual employee engagement survey reveals that a majority of employees feel extremely stressed out at work, employers will be able to address this properly. On the flip side, if employers only check in after a problem has been brought to their attention, it's more difficult to properly manage and develop a strategy that works for all parties involved.

Investing in cultivating a culture that prioritizes and supports employee mental health will help diminish the negative stigma that's often associated with mental health. Moreover, when employees feel that their employer supports their mental health, they are more willing to get the help they need if they are struggling, which benefits both the employer and the employee.

Tackle Workplace Stress

While it may not be possible to eliminate job stress entirely for your employees, you can help them learn how to manage it effectively. Common job stressors include a heavy workload, intense pressure to perform at high levels, job insecurity, long work hours, excessive travel, office politics and conflicts with co-workers.

58% of Canadians report feeling job-related stress on a daily basis.

In fact, **47%** of Canadians cite work as the most stressful part of their day.

Moreover, work-related stress is more strongly associated with illness and health complications than financial or familial stress. Lowering stress can lower the risk of medical conditions and can help employees feel better on a day-to-day basis. You can implement various activities to help reduce employee stress, which can improve health and morale—and productivity. As an employer, you can take several steps to help employees reduce their work-related stress and achieve mental well-being:

- Make sure that workloads are appropriate.

- Have managers meet regularly with employees to facilitate communication.

- Address negative and illegal actions in the workplace immediately—do not tolerate bullying, discrimination or any other similar behaviours.

- Recognize and celebrate employees' successes. This contributes to morale and decreases stress levels.

Aside from addressing job-related issues, you can implement a variety of activities and initiatives to help reduce stress. Some suggestions include the following:

Provide a designated space where employees can sit quietly and use meditation to alleviate their stress.

Offer exercise classes—exercise is a great way to relieve and even prevent stress. Offer a variety of class times (e.g., before and after work, or during lunch) as well as various types of classes—such as yoga and kickboxing.

Provide employees with the education and tools to manage time and tasks, to cope with daily stressors and to prevent stress from damaging their health. You can present a stress management class or provide educational materials.

Establish and promote an EAP. If an employee is significantly stressed, it's possible that they may seek unhealthy ways to cope with their stress. Offering an EAP can help employees get the help they need.

Implement organizational changes to reduce employee stress, including redefining roles and responsibilities, as well as providing reasonable accommodations, including flexible scheduling and telecommuting.

Include mental health services and encourage employees to take advantage of such benefits.

Another thing that employers can do is offer healthy food options at work. A study from the United Kingdom revealed that eating lots of fruits and vegetables is beneficial to your overall mental health. If you combine these recommended initiatives, you're more likely to see positive results and a higher return on investment than if you only offer one initiative focused on mental well-being.

By giving your employees the tools and resources they need to reduce their workplace stress, you can help them be well on their way toward achieving a state of mental well-being. Openly communicate your organization's commitment to cultivating the mental well-being of your employees. Too often, employees don't seek out mental health services because they feel ashamed. By communicating your commitment to mental well-being, you will incorporate it into your organization's culture and everyday way of life. Doing so will help encourage employees to seek the services they need.

Prevent and Address Employee Burnout

When workplace stress isn't addressed or is severe, employees are at risk of burning out. If employees experience burnout, they are more likely to be unproductive, miss days of work and even leave the company. Employee burnout is a trending HR concern, and for good reason. In 2019, the WHO decided to classify burnout as a workplace syndrome, communicating its serious stance on burnout and the dangers it presents. According to the WHO's International Classification of Diseases, doctors can diagnose an employee with burnout if they exhibit the following symptoms:

- Exhaustion or energy depletion

- Decreased engagement at work, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job

- Reduced productivity or efficacy

For some employees, the negative effects of burnout extend beyond their work life and into their home and social lives. Moreover, burnout can increase an employee's risk of getting sick or developing a chronic condition. Since burnout is the result of prolonged and chronic workplace stress, employers must learn how to recognize the signs of stress and develop mitigation strategies before stress turns into burnout.

Prevent Workplace Bullying

Workplace bullying can take many forms—it can be directed at specific people or related to certain work activities. Specific definitions of bullying vary, but many describe it as negative behaviour targeted at an individual, or individuals, persistently over time. Workplace bullying can include, but is not limited to, the following:

- Ignoring or excluding

- Assigning unachievable tasks

- Spreading malicious rumours or gossip

- Delegating meaningless or unpleasant tasks

- Making belittling remarks

- Undermining co-worker integrity

- Withholding information deliberately

- Undervaluing contributions

- Degrading others in public

Bullying can cause psychological health problems, such as depression, and physical health problems, such as sleep difficulties or stomach pains. In general, targets of bullying feel a sense of isolation. In some cases, workplace bullying can leave the victim so traumatized that they feel powerless, disoriented, confused and helpless. Workplace bullying can also result in:

- **Decreased productivity**—Bullying directly affects a victim's confidence and is likely to decrease his or her productivity at work. Victims may also experience high anxiety, which can be very distracting and debilitating. Reduced productivity is bad for business and can lead you to discipline the employee, take away responsibilities or possibly terminate him or her. You may not realize the employee is being bullied, and therefore do not have the chance to offer any counselling or other assistance.

- **Increased absenteeism**—A bullied employee may go to great lengths to avoid a high-stress situation at work. Calling in sick or using a large amount of paid time off at once are common

tactics used to avoid a bully. Other employees may have to make up the extra work, possibly resulting in overtime, complaints or even more bullying behaviour. An excessive number of lost working days benefits no one.

- **Tarnished reputation**—Victims of bullying are likely to talk to friends or family about what is going on and how they feel about it. This information can spread quickly and sour your company's public image. A poor public image is especially destructive to a company that depends on the public for patronage, such as a restaurant or a landscaping company. A negative image can also deter job seekers from applying to your company, making it more difficult to recruit new employees.

Workplace bullying is a common occurrence, and it's up to your organization to develop strategies and policies to deter it from occurring. You can control the risk of bullying in your workplace by following these tips:

- Develop a workplace bullying policy and follow it. Use clear language to define what behaviour your company considers to be bullying:
    - Include information on how to report bullying.
    - Document, investigate and follow up on every report of bullying.
    - Make it clear that employees will not be retaliated against for reporting bullying.

- Establish expectations of appropriate behaviour and the consequences for employees who fail to comply with those expectations.

- Provide training, education, information and awareness on workplace bullying for all employees.

- Provide clear job descriptions that include an outline of the specific roles and responsibilities for each position within the workplace.

Address Fatigue in the Workplace

Workers who are fatigued in the workplace are less productive, less focused, experience more health problems and are more likely to be involved in a job-related safety incident. In addition, fatigue causes more absences from work, both from the tiredness itself and also from accompanying medical problems.
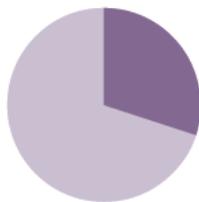
According to The Conference Board of Canada, nearly **30%** of Canadian workers feel fatigued most days or every day during the workweek.

Fatigue in the workplace is a serious problem. Fatigue management can be a relatively easy and inexpensive wellness initiative to help alleviate this problem among your employees. Here are some simple ideas to consider:

- Offer employee educational materials to address the general issue of fatigue, including why getting adequate sleep is so important and tips for getting better sleep.

- Cultivating certain habits can contribute to a better night's sleep. Encourage employees to eat nutritiously, exercise regularly and limit their consumption of alcohol, tobacco and caffeine.

- If sleep disorders are an issue for your workforce, consider offering counselling or referrals for treatment.

These general changes in the workplace can also effectively address fatigue and its accompanying risks:

- Install proper lighting, designate quiet break areas and offer healthy food options in break rooms.

- Consider adjusting policies to allow for more frequent and restful breaks.

- Use machinery and equipment that eliminates or reduces any excessive physical demands of your employees. This can include ergonomic furniture and anti-fatigue matting.

- Ask employees what time(s) of the day they are most tired, and think of ways to address those times (e.g., offering a short extra break, providing a healthy snack option or allowing them to listen to music). This is especially important for employees who work in safety-sensitive jobs, where fatigue is a major hazard.

Take a look at your individual job descriptions and workloads as well to see if there may be a reason why a certain person or department may be struggling with fatigue. If you see that a job description is unbalanced or has had responsibilities added to it over the years, consider the following:

- Redesign the job to include a variety of mental and physical tasks instead of all physical or all mental.

- Eliminate any excessive demands from a job either by deeming them unnecessary or sharing those responsibilities with another employee.

- Introduce job rotation in an effort to limit both mental and physical boredom and fatigue.

Provide Caregiving Support

As the baby boom generation continues to age, it is likely that younger employees will take on caregiver responsibilities. Of 129 benefits managers surveyed in a recent study, 66 per cent agree that caregiving is a growing concern for their workers. Forty-five per cent of these managers say that caregiving benefits are one of their top 10 priorities for health and benefits issues.

According to another survey, a large number of employees may be "closet caregivers" who fear that their boss or organization will think they're not committed to their job if they also provide care for a loved one. This stressor, in addition to the stressors of working while taking care of an ill, elderly or

disabled loved one, can lead to employees experiencing chronic stress. Chronic stress is not only bad for your employees and their well-being, but also for your organization and its bottom line.

Implementing caregiving benefits has been a step taken by many employers across the country to help alleviate some of the stressors caregiving employees face. By offering caregiving benefits at your organization, you will not only establish a culture that is supportive of caregivers, but you will also be giving your employees the tools they need to effectively manage their dual responsibilities.

Evaluate Your Benefits Offerings

In addition to rolling out new initiatives to support mental well-being at your organization, you should look to the benefits you offer to ensure that they support mental well-being, too. Evaluate your programs and policies. Do you have an EAP? Do you have a policy regarding workplace bullying or flexible scheduling? What about a paid time off policy that includes mental health days. Reviewing the offerings that your organization provides is essential to creating a culture that supports employee mental well-being.

In similar fashion, look to see what voluntary benefits you can offer to support mental well-being. Consider offering simple perks like financial planning assistance (as financial stress often contributes to poor mental health), employee discount programs (where employees can receive gym memberships or stress-reducing massages or acupuncture at a lower cost) and EAPs to support your employees.

Don't Underestimate Management Training

One of the most significant problems hindering mental well-being at work is the stigma that surrounds mental health. Despite the recent moves in society toward destigmatizing mental health, issues still persist. To ensure that no stigma surrounding mental health exists at your organization, it's important that you properly train management in recognizing the signs of mental illness, excessive workplace stress, workplace bullying and fatigue. Moreover, managers should be trained to handle potentially difficult conversations with employees surrounding their mental health. Ultimately, they should be prepared to speak openly about mental well-being rather than avoiding the topic.

Conclusion

In today's times, it's essential that employers prioritize their employees' mental health by destigmatizing mental health at the workplace, learning more about mental health and offering programs that are designed to support employee mental health. How a workplace is structured can either help or exacerbate an employee's mental health. By developing helpful programs and communicating with your employees, your business should be able to minimize the impact of poor mental health, which will result in happier, healthier employees.

For more information about promoting employee mental health, please contact KRGinsure today.