"Psychology Works" Fact Sheet: Mental Health and the Workplace

Mental health is an increasing public health concern in Canada. One in five Canadians will experience mental illness in any given year. Mental health is a prevalent issue among employed Canadians. At least 500,000 Canadians miss work due to mental illness every week, with an estimated economic cost of $51 billion annually. Organizational psychologists have predicted an epidemic of mental health problems among the workforce in the wake of the global COVID-19 pandemic. According to a national survey, 8.7% of those who were employed during the first four months of 2021 reported a mental health-related disability. This is a significant increase from 6.4% in 2019. Thus, there is urgency among psychologists and organizations to address mental health concerns in the workplace.

What is Mental Health?

It is useful to understand how mental health is commonly conceptualized as it relates to the workplace. Mental health is not simply the presence or absence of illness, but instead operates on a continuum. At any given time, people can experience positive mental health (characterized by general satisfaction, happiness, and the ability to work toward goals and contribute to ones community), mental health problems (the experience of moderate distress and difficulty coping while still maintaining basic daily functioning), or mental illness (a diagnosable psychological disorder characterized by the presence of symptoms that significantly affect one's mood, behaviour, thoughts, ability to cope, and daily functioning).[1]

The most common mental health problems experienced by workers include psychological strain and burnout (see Footnote 1). Psychological strain is a prolonged state of distress and tension caused by chronic exposure to external stressors. Similarly, burnout is a state of mental and emotional exhaustion due to prolonged stress. One in three working-age Canadians are reported to experience burnout. The most common mental illnesses among Canadian working age populations are depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders (see Footnote 1).

How Does the Workplace Contribute?

Working adults spend a majority of their lives on the job. The workplace can be a source of stress for many, leading to mental health challenges. Around 70% of working Canadians report that their work experience impacts their mental health.[2] Some common work-related stressors include:

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[1] Kelloway, E. K., Dimoff, J. K., & Gilbert, S. (2023). Mental health in the workplace. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior, 10*, 363–387.

[2] Howatt, B., Bradley, L., Adams, J., Mahajan, S., & Kennedy, S. (n.d.). *Understanding mental health, mental illness, and their impacts in the workplace*. Mental Health Commission of Canada. https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/wp-content/uploads/drupal/2018-06/Monreau_White_Paper_Report_Eng.pdf

- **Job demands and control:** Evidence shows that highly demanding jobs coupled with little control over work tasks and decision-making can lead to mental health issues.[3] For example, nearly one-third of employed Canadians mentioned that having a heavy workload is a reason for their work-related stress.[4] When employees feel they have little control over how they do their work, it can lead to feeling stressed, burnt out, and less satisfied with their job and life overall.

- **Distributive Injustice:** Organizational justice, or an individual's perception of fairness in the workplace, has implications for employee mental health. Distributive injustice occurs when there is an imbalance between an employee's contribution and the reward they receive, and reward allocation does not meet their expectations of fairness. This type of injustice has been linked to elements of burnout, including emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and a reduced sense of self-accomplishment.[5]

- **Work-life balance:** Approximately 1 in 6 employed Canadians report difficulty balancing work and their personal life as the main source of their work-related stress (see Footnote 4). This happens when the demands, work roles, or the time you spend at work or at home make it difficult to meet the responsibilities in the other parts of your life. The COVID-19 pandemic has made it even more difficult to separate work and family life as many people now work from home.

- **Interpersonal relationships:** Research supports that positive relationships and social support from supervisors and colleagues is critical for buffering the effects of stress at work, which in turn reduces psychological symptoms (see Footnote 1). However, a lack of social support and negative workplace interactions (e.g., aggression, violence, and harassment) can lead to feelings of isolation, distress, and anger (see Footnote 1).

- **Role ambiguity and conflict:** Stress within one's role at work is a determining factor of wellbeing. Role ambiguity and conflict are two types of stressors employees can face in their work roles. Role ambiguity occurs when you do not receive sufficient information for successful task performance, leaving you unclear about what is expected of you. Role conflict occurs when you receive incompatible demands from two or more people.[6] Role stress is related to constructs such as poor overall mental health, psychological work fatigue, and burnout. It is usually the result of receiving insufficient guidance, feedback, intervention, and communication from managers or supervisors (see Footnote 6).

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[3] The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. (2020, January 6). *Workplace mental health – A review and recommendations*. https://www.camh.ca/-/media/files/workplace-mental-health/workplacementalhealth-a-review-and-recommendations-pdf.pdf

[4] Statistics Canada. (2023). *Work-related stress most often caused by heavy workloads and work-life balance*. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/230619/dq230619c-eng.htm

[5] Dishon-Berkovits, M. (2018). The role of organizational justice and stress in predicting job burnout. *Journal of Career Development, 45*(5), 411–424. https://doi.org/10.1177/08948453177054

[6] Barling, J., & Frone, M. R. (2017). If only my leader would just do something! Passive leadership undermines employee well-being through role stressors and psychological resource depletion. *Stress and Health, 33*(3), 211–222. https://doi.org/10.1002/smi.2697

- **Stigma:** A work environment that perpetuates negative attitudes about mental health (e.g., beliefs that people with mental illness are dangerous or incompetent) or employs organizational practices that contribute to stigma (e.g., not providing benefits for psychological care) can contribute to the maintenance of psychological issues (see Footnote 1). Nearly 70% of individuals with mental illness have faced job-related challenges such as interview rejections, job refusals, missed promotions, or other disadvantages due to their condition (see Footnote 3). This stigma, along with the fear of discrimination, can discourage employees from seeking help when they need it. Public stigma can also lead to self-stigma, where individuals internalize shame about their mental health, which contributes to lower self-efficacy and self-esteem (see Footnote 1).

How Do Mental Health Challenges Manifest in the Workplace?

Poor employee mental health is associated with several behaviour changes that result in negative workplace outcomes (see Footnote 1):

- Increased absenteeism and long-term disability
- Increased presenteeism (working despite impaired functioning due to mental or physical illness)
- Increased intentions to quit the job, organization, or the occupation
- Reduced productivity and job performance
- Reduced job satisfaction and commitment to the employing organization
- Risk of unsafe work behaviours (e.g., medication errors among healthcare professionals)
- Greater interpersonal conflict with coworkers
- Greater risk of physical illness

Organizational researchers have identified five signs of struggle to look out for if you suspect a colleague or subordinate is experiencing a mental health issue:[7]

- Emotional distress (e.g., yelling at others, crying)
- Withdrawal behaviours (e.g., participating less in social or work activities, eating lunch alone)
- Attendance changes (e.g., lateness or absenteeism)
- Performance changes (i.e., decreased quantity or quality of work)
- Extreme behaviours (e.g., substance abuse, poor hygiene, intentions to harm oneself or others)

How Can Employers Support Employees?

There are multiple ways in which employers can address mental health in the workplace. Employers should prioritize the development of an organization-wide mental health strategy that prioritizes harm prevention, managing illnesses, and promoting positive outcomes (see Footnote 3):

- **Implement Mental Health Leadership Training:** Employers can implement mental health leadership training to help leaders better understand employee health and their role in

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[7] Dimoff, J. K., & Kelloway, E. K. (2019). Signs of Struggle (SOS): The development and validation of a behavioural mental health checklist for the workplace. *Work & Stress, 33*(3), 295–313. https://doi.org/10.1080/02678373.2018.1503359

prevention. Training can help leaders identify the signs of struggle, recognize common illnesses, and how to offer support (e.g., mental health awareness training and Mental Health First Aid; see Footnote 3).

- **Reduce Mental Health Stigma:** Employers can implement strategies to reduce mental health stigma in the workplace. First, this can be done by providing mental health literacy training to employees and training leaders to recognize signs of distress. Additionally, they can implement policies against discriminatory behavior and commit to treating mental health disorders with dignity and respect (e.g., using nonstigmatizing language and incorporating neurodiversity into diversity and inclusion agendas). Moreover, employers should strive to ensure equal benefits are offered for mental and physical health, promoting a more inclusive and supportive workplace environment.[8]

- **Alleviate Job Stressors:** Employers can assist in alleviating job stress and issues with work-life balance by offering employees more control over their work, providing more flexible work arrangements, lessening the demands placed on employees, and increasing access to support (see Footnote 3).

- **Improve Return-to-Work Processes:** Employees returning from sick leave for common mental disorders often struggle with timing their return, face challenges in implementing return-to-work plans, and risk rushing back into tasks too soon.[9] Employers can prioritize the return-to-work process by investing in employee access to mental health professionals during sick leave and return-to-work phases, creating a coordinated return-to-work plan, offering personalized accommodations, and conducting capability assessments for returning employees (see Footnote 3).

How Can Psychology Help with Employee Mental Health?

Psychologists can **conduct assessments** to identify potential stressors and risk factors in the workplace that may be contributing to employee distress, including workplace culture. Needs assessments can also be conducted to determine if employees are experiencing mental health issues, what kind of issues they are facing, and the best plan of action to address it.

Psychologists can assist in **training and educating** organizational leaders and employees to adopt practices that bolster mental health, such as workshops that focus on communication, conflict resolution, stress management, and differentiating between mental health issues and performance issues. Targeted leadership mental health training can enhance leaders' understanding, intentions, and role in prevention (see Footnote 3).

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[8] Coe, E., Cordina, J., Enomoto, K., & Seshan, N. (2021). Overcoming stigma: Three strategies toward better mental health in the workplace. *The McKinsey Quarterly.*
https://www2.mvcc.edu/shn/renew/pdf/Overcoming%20stigma.pdf

[9] Andersen, M. F., Nielsen, K. M., & Brinkmann, S. (2012). Meta-synthesis of qualitative research on return to work among employees with common mental disorders. *Scandinavian Journal of Work, Environment & Health*, 93–104.
https://doi.org/10.5271/sjweh.3257

Psychologists can **conduct research** to increase employers and employees understanding of how their mental health is related to the workplace and test the effectiveness of workplace interventions.

Finally, psychologists can collaborate with organizations to assist with the **development of policies** that promote mental health, such as inclusivity and anti-stigma campaigns, flexible work arrangements, and crisis management strategies. Successful strategies prevent harm and promote positive outcomes (see Footnote 3). Leveraging their expertise, psychologists can help create policies that promote a supportive work environment, fostering understanding, resource utilization, and overall well-being.

You can consult with a registered psychologist to find out if psychological interventions might be of help to you. Provincial, territorial and some municipal associations of psychology often maintain referral services. For the names and coordinates of provincial and territorial associations of psychology, go to https://cpa.ca/public/whatisapsychologist/PTassociations/.

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Revised: March 2024

Your opinion matters! Please contact us with any questions or comments about any of the *Psychology Works* Fact Sheets: factsheets@cpa.ca

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