



The Challenge:

Mental Health in the Canadian

The Impact

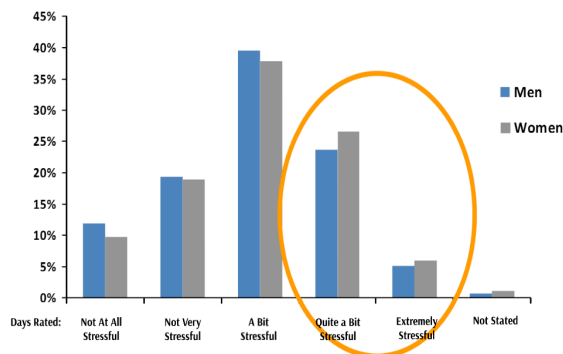
Mental health problems are a widespread and often overlooked issue in today's workforce, costing the Canadian economy up to 51 billion dollars per year. On any given week, more than 500,000 Canadians will not go to work because of mental illness, and more than twice that number will go to work but experience distraction, apathy, increased errors, low energy levels, lack of motivation, decreased task efficiency, and poor decision making as a direct result of their condition.

These numbers are staggering, and serve to emphasize why behavioral health issues have become the single largest cause of short and long-term disability for Canadian employers. Mentally ill employees are more likely to take days off, leave their jobs, and while at work tend to perform well below expected levels.

“ **Mental Health Issues cost the Canadian economy up to 51 Billion Dollars per year.** ”

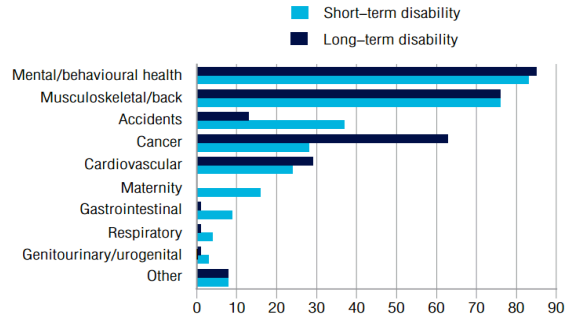
Of all mental ailments, clinical depression and anxiety disorders are responsible for the vast majority of absenteeism and presenteeism in the workplace, resulting in a tremendous amount of economic waste; more than 30% of disability claims and 70% of disability costs are attributed to these conditions. Of all the factors that contribute to anxiety and depression in employees, stress is the single largest contributor towards these ailments. On average, Canadian workers rate roughly a third of their workdays as “stressful.” If allowed to continue for extended periods of time,

Canadians Rate One-Third of their Workdays as “Quite a Bit” or “Extremely” Stressful.



Source: Adapted from Statistics Canada CCIS, 2002

Most Frequent Conditions Leading to Short-Term and Long-Term Disability, in Canada, in 2011 (percentage of respondents; n = 87)



Note: Respondents were asked to select the top three conditions. Source: Adapted from Towers Watson, Pathway to Health and Productivity, 10.

stress can cause serious mental health complications. Constant pressure exerted by workplace stress can put an employee at high risk of encountering a “critical event” that overwhelms their natural coping mechanisms and triggers a depressive episode. If workplace stress is reduced or managed properly, it is possible for these critical events to be eliminated entirely, and with them the vast majority of disability costs.

Building a Better Workplace

Although a number of factors influence an individual's cognitive state, the workplace environment has the single largest impact on employee mental health. A workplace that advocates personal well-being allows for job satisfaction, promotes self-esteem, and strives for individual job fulfilment providing employees with the tools they require to remain psychologically healthy. It has been proven that organizations which implement psychologically healthy workplace strategies perform better, on average, in key areas such as physical health, workplace safety, employee productivity, human resource measures, and shareholder returns.

“ On any given week, more than 500,000 Canadians will not go to work because of **Poor Mental Health.** ”

It is becoming increasingly clear to many forward-thinking companies that the psychological health of their employees directly translates to overall organizational health. Not only does the promotion of psychologically healthy workplaces benefit employees, but the employer as well through company recruitment ability, retention of workers, and organizational sustainability.

Despite its impact on both employees and employers, the issue of mental health in the workplace continues to be an often overlooked and neglected issue. As awareness of mental health issues continues to spread, the quality and prevalence of employee-friendly working environments will likely improve. While this vision of the future is promising, the overall awareness of mental health issues amongst Canadian employers remains relatively low. Clearly, there is much work left to do.

Treatment Gap

Aside from prevention, the largest factor responsible for the cost exacted by mental illness is lack of appropriate care and treatment for employees. In Canada, less than one third of depression and anxiety sufferers are in receipt of proper treatment for their conditions; the remainder endure their condition until they are rendered unable to work or are let go from their jobs due to poor performance. The real question that everyone should be asking is: “why does this happen?”

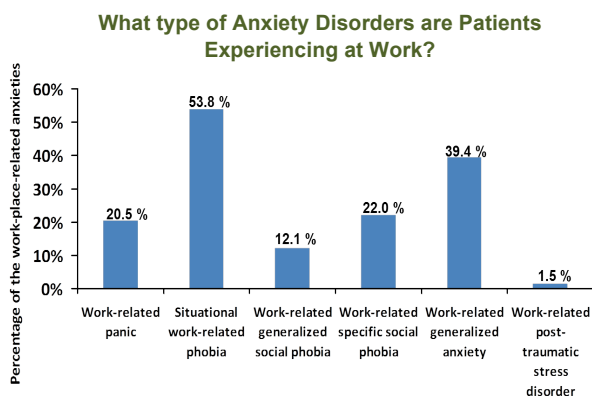
The key to answering this question lies in the differences between how mental illness and physical injuries are regarded and managed by employers. When an employee suffers a physical injury at work, they are commonly given immediate care and treatment to address their condition. This response is commonly accepted and widespread in today’s workforce and is largely recognized as the conventional method of managing physical injuries in the workplace.

This state of care does not yet exist for mental injury.

“ **Less than One Third of sufferers are in receipt of Proper Treatment for their conditions.** ”

Traditionally, companies have treated physical injuries far more seriously than mental issues, and as a result, have far better programs in place to deal with them. This “Treatment Gap” between mental and physical injury makes little sense, since mental illness can be responsible for just as much, if not more, lost productivity than physical illness.

Not only is this outlook neglectful, but it is also unsound economics. Effective treatments for mental issues exist and are available; treatments that are scientifically proven to work and have a low or even zero net cost. It has been repeatedly proven that effective treatment of mental illness can result in immense returns



Source: Adapted from Linden B.J Anx Dis: 2007

due to increased productivity and reduced disability costs. In some cases, proper mental health management can result in as much as a \$2.71 return on investment for every dollar spent on prevention.

It is clearly in the interests of both employee and employer to close this treatment gap wherever possible and treat employee mental health every bit as seriously as physical workplace safety.

“ **Effective Treatment of mental illness can result in as much as a \$2.71 Return on Investment for every dollar spent on Prevention.** ”

Stigma

In addition to dealing with the effects of a mental illness, sufferers often experience shame for having their condition and are frequently discriminated against. Even in our age of awareness, a cultural barrier still seems to surround mental illness, stigmatizing the issue of experiencing mental distress and approaching others for help. This stigma often prevents sufferers from coming forward to admit and address their condition. Despite the high prevalence of mental health issues in the workplace, only a quarter of Canadian employees report feeling comfortable enough to talk to their supervisor about mental health concerns.

In order for the stigma surrounding mental illness to be dispelled, a well-informed approach towards prevention and treatment must be established, and a culture of acceptance must form around it. Fostering this type of environment is within the grasp of companies today. Widespread change will only begin, however, by companies taking an active interest in the mental health of their employees.

Since the release of the National Standard for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace by the Mental Health Commission of Canada, several prominent companies such as Bell Canada have become leaders in the effort to improve employee mental health standards. The efforts of these companies and others like them signal a long-awaited shift in thinking regarding workplace mental health, and one would hope, a welcome one.

References

Mental Health Commission of Canada - National Standard of Canada for Psychological Safety in the Workplace

Harvard Business Review – Return on Employee Wellness Programs