

The Business Case for Prioritizing Workplace **Mental Health**

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The COVID-19 pandemic amplified the importance of supporting mental health in the workplace. According to the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, 80 per cent of Canadians indicated the pandemic had a negative impact on their mental health. Considering the average employee spends one third of their life at work, businesses can have a major impact in this area.

Mental Health and Mental Illness

Mental health refers to an individual's state of psychological and emotional well-being. It impacts the way people think, feel and behave. Although mental health and mental illness are often used similarly, they are inherently different.

Mental illness, according to the Canadian Mental Health Association, refers to health conditions characterized by changes in thinking, mood or behaviour associated with significant distress and impaired functioning usually resulting from a complex interplay of genetic, biological, personality, and environmental factors.

Prolonged and unattended poor mental health can lead to mental (and physical) illness.

Absenteeism and Presenteeism

Two key measurable indicators to consider when determining the psychological health of your workplace are absenteeism and presenteeism.

- ▀ Absenteeism occurs when an employee has an unplanned absence from work or is unable to complete their designated work shift because of reasons out of their control, such as disability, injury or illness. It may also occur when an employee chooses not to work even though there may not be any valid reasons for them to be absent.
- ▀ Presenteeism occurs when an employee physically shows up to work but is not fully functioning, resulting in a loss of productivity.





Designing a Successful Support Program

If your organization is looking to introduce or improve its mental health initiatives, the following factors should be considered:

- ▶ **Stigma:** Stigma continues to play a leading role in employees' hesitancy to participate in mental health and wellness programs. There are three types:
 - **Self-stigma:** An individual's own negative attitude towards their situation, which leads to internalized shame.
 - **Social or public stigma:** The negative attitude other people may have about mental health and mental illnesses.
 - **Institutionalized stigma:** Systemic discrimination that occurs as a result of organizational policies and practices.
- ▶ **Access:** Access to services can also be a deterrent for employees seeking mental health assistance. A 2021 report from the Canadian Institute for Health Information showed wait times range from one to four months for community counselling services. Once an individual has found a counsellor, further delays may arise due to fit, treatment specialization requirements or lack of financial resources.
- ▶ **Discrimination:** Discrimination can have a causal effect on employees' mental health. For instance, employees who identify as a part of the LGBTQ2S+ community or as a visible minority can experience lack of managerial support, microaggressions, conscious and unconscious bias, and other stressors that could negatively impact their wellbeing.
- ▶ **Education:** Education is shown to reduce stigma and improve awareness about mental health. A report by SunLife found when businesses provide their managers with mental health training, they saw a 20 per cent reduction in mental health disability related costs and a 27 per cent decrease in the duration of mental health related claims. The most effective education programs train both managers and employees on how to recognize signs of mental health concerns and provide them with skills and resources to help.



Mental health refers to an individual's state of psychological and emotional wellbeing.

Here are five recommended steps to implement effective mental health initiatives in your workplace:

1

Discover and assess. Identify mental health needs, gaps in your programs and processes, and associated operational costs.

2

Develop and implement. Partner with experts to create or amend a mental health program that will yield positive results. Use best practices and technology to drive data analytics.

3

Educate and communicate. Promote open discussion and engage managers and employees through targeted communications to keep mental health top of mind.

4

Monitor and measure ROI. Track key performance indicators that are relevant to projected goals.

5

Review and evaluate. Assess data against projected targets and amend the program as needed

Promoting mental health in the workplace can be a daunting task to undertake because of the many complexities to these programs — but don't let that deter you. Effective mental health initiatives will not only help you reduce the loss of productivity but also improve employee engagement and your bottom line. ■

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