

Minding the Workplace: Employees and Managers can Collaborate to Improve Mental Health in the Workplace

Introduction

More and more organizations are starting to understand the need to create and sustain mentally healthy workplaces. But few know how to start, be it through policy, practice or initiating activities that support mental health at work. In order to create a mentally healthy work environment, managers and employees must work together.

Mentally healthy work environments are those that promote mental health and well-being for all employees. The mental health of an organization is determined by many factors. Economics, physical factors and psychosocial factors (such as, organizational culture, leadership, respect, job fit, professional development, recognition, involvement, workload management, engagement, work-life balance, psychological support and psychological protection) all contribute to how an organization functions.

Mentally healthy work environments encourage supportive management, and create avenues for employees to attain personal growth and empowerment while enhancing and protecting their own health and well-being.

This resource provides information and tips on promoting mental health at work and is aimed at departments and teams within organizations.

Interesting Facts and Statistics

- 20% of Canadians experience a mood disorder or anxiety in any given year.
- According to the World Health Organization, depression will be second only to heart disease and the leading global cause of disability and mortality by 2020.
- Mental health claims are the fastest growing category of disability in the workplace.
- Depression, anxiety and burnout are the three most common sources of mental distress leading to disability claims.

- Mental health problems account for about half of employee absences due to illness each year in Canada. That is 35 million days lost annually.
- A staggering \$33 billion is lost in productivity each year due to mental illness in Canada.

Characteristics of a Mental Healthy Workplace:

1) Departmental and team culture are characterized by trust, honesty and fairness

Workplace culture is arguably the category that has the biggest impact on the promotion of employee mental health. Factors related to workplace culture are: Communication, social support, beliefs, values and norms, management practices, attitudes and perceptions, job satisfaction, job control and decision making, leadership style, work-life balance and human resource systems.

Tips:

- Create a support system for new employees by pairing them with a mentor and a peer during their orientation.
- Create a department or team mission statement that incorporates values of trust, honesty and fairness - and display it where everyone can see it!
- Create standardized orientation sessions for new employees with information about the department's mission, values and standards for employee behaviour.
- Hold all members of the department or team accountable for their actions and ensure that managers and leaders are held to the same or higher standards.
- Avoid workplace gossip, and maintain principles of confidentiality that build trust.

2) There is effective leadership that helps employees know what they need to do, how their work contributes to the organization and whether there are impending changes

Effective leadership increases employee morale, resiliency and trust, and decreases employee frustration and conflict. A leader who demonstrates a commitment to maintaining their own physical and mental health can influence the health of employees.

Tips:

- Circulate a quarterly letter from the director or manager describing what he or she has been doing in the past month and what is coming up in the future.
- Develop a schedule of one-to-one ‘check-ins’ with employees and managers to address issues of concern.
- Managers and aspiring managers should seek out training that builds skills around assertive and non-violent communication, leadership and ethics.
- Both employees and managers should ensure that job descriptions are current, clear and specific.
- Regular performance reviews for all staff (including management) should be conducted that include collaborative feedback.

3) Employees are respectful and considerate in their interactions with one another, as well as with clients, and the public

A civil and respectful workplace is related to greater job satisfaction, greater perceptions of fairness, a more positive attitude, improved morale, better teamwork, greater interest in personal development, engagement in problem resolution, enhanced supervisor-staff relationships, and reduction in sick leave and turnover.

Tips:

- Create a “Matter of Respect” team policy (see sample in Appendix B) to foster an environment that respects diversity and ensures a safe workplace where employees feel comfortable to be themselves.

- Managers should be approachable and have an open door policy for employee communication.
- Adopt non-discriminatory language in all communications.
- All employees and managers should maintain the confidentiality of other employees' personal information in all communications, and avoid office gossip.

Examples of Activities to Promote Mental Health in the Workplace:

- Check out the “Matter of Respect” policy sample (Appendix B) and use it to create your own for your team.

4) There is a good fit between employee’s interpersonal and emotional competencies, their job skills and the position they hold

Psychological job fit is associated with fewer physical health complaints, lower levels of depression, greater self-esteem and a more positive self-concept. It is also associated with enhanced performance, job satisfaction and employee retention. When people feel competent to do their jobs, they feel better about themselves.

Tips:

- Managers and leaders should be hired for their ability to demonstrate an understanding and commitment to leadership capabilities and supportive management practices rather than just technical skills.
- Employees should seek job counseling from their Employee Assistance Program (EAP) if they are struggling in their positions.
- Managers should provide reinforcement and praise for employees/colleagues demonstration of interpersonal and emotional competencies, and/or job skills. This lets employees know that they are doing a good job, and doesn't leave them worrying or guessing.
- Where appropriate, consider a process allowing employees to explore internal positions that may better match their skills and style (e.g., job-shadowing or career development discussions).

5) **Employees receive encouragement and support in the development of their interpersonal and job skills**

Employee development increases goal commitment, organizational commitment and job satisfaction. Employees appreciate employers who support growth and development, as skill acquisition and career development directly enhance their well-being.

Tips:

- Create a mentor program that links new employees to experienced employees to create social and professional support. Or create a less formal support group to discuss skill development and share knowledge.
- Both employees and managers should be clear on what training is considered mandatory for work and is paid for, and what is not.
- Advertise an internal training and development syllabus that lets employees know about all available opportunities in the organization.
- Provide seminars, workshops, lunch and learns, conferences and educational activities for employees that focus on both individual and department needs.

Examples of Activities to Promote Mental Health in the Workplace:

- Plan an educational session on a topic that your team would like more information about.
- Sign up for a personal development workshop with some of your colleagues in order to enhance emotional and interpersonal competencies.
- Conduct a team check up on how the team communicates and interacts with each other. Team leaders and members could complete checklists, and come up with a team strategy for improvement in communication and collaboration.

6) **There is appropriate acknowledgement and appreciation of employees' efforts in a fair and timely manner**

Fairness is an important principle at work. Employees that exert high effort at work, and receive little reward experience greater stress and problems with conflict.

Tips:

- Employee Recognition
 - Formally recognize individuals based on individual contribution and exemplary effort.
 - Provide a non-monetary prize for all team members that provide exceptional service, support organizational programs or foster teamwork. One example of a prize could be a gift certificate to the cafeteria.
 - Celebrate employee dedication by recognizing their 5, 10, 15 and 20-year employment anniversaries in a newsletter, email or other announcement.
 - Provide employees with constructive informal rewards such as trying a new role and/or taking on additional responsibilities.

- Peer Recognition
 - Encourage employees to publicly acknowledge and thank their peers for exceptional effort, doing an outstanding job, enhancing the work environment, showing tremendous passion for the job or for providing leadership. This can be done by:
 - Starting all major team meetings with at least one person's words of praise.
 - Allowing managers and employees to nominate their coworkers for an outstanding work or contribution award. This can include a certificate of recognition or recognition at a staff meeting.

Examples of Activities to Promote Mental Health in the Workplace:

- Send e-thanks cards to employees or colleagues who have exerted a high effort in their work, or who have helped you with your work.

7) Employees are included in discussions about how their work is done and how important decisions are made

When employees feel they have meaningful input into their work they are more likely to be engaged, have higher morale, and take pride in their organization. This, in turn, increases the willingness to make extra effort when required. Level of job involvement is directly linked to increased psychological well-being, enhanced innovation and organizational commitment.

Tips:

- Employees feel valued and important when they are asked for their input – and it's taken seriously.
- Allow employees to express their thoughts and concerns with senior executives (e.g., email, online, drop box or breakfast/lunch meetings).
- Ensure management is approachable and readily available to employees by implementing an open door policy and by being visible around the office.
- Involve employees in the interviewing and screening for job candidates to ensure that existing team members are comfortable with hiring decisions.
- Encourage employee participation and involvement during times of organizational change, providing support throughout.

8) Tasks and responsibilities can be accomplished successfully within the time available

A major cause of job stress can come from problems with conflicts in demand vs. control. High demand (e.g., constant deadlines over prolonged periods) and low control (e.g., little choice over the day to day organization

of work) at work can lead to high rates of anxiety, depression and low morale.

Tips:

- Give employees more responsibility and accountability where possible. This allows them to gain more control over their work, which makes them more engaged.
- Social support at work may help buffer the negative effects of high demand and low control on stress. Encourage and explore avenues that create social support in the workplace.
- Employees and managers should work together to develop clear, realistic project goals and work plans. Goals should be based on mutually agreeable productivity expectations.
- Managers should be flexible with schedules to accommodate staff needs and to model good practices.
- Cultivate a work culture that values the quality of work done not simply the quantity of work (e.g., hours worked).
- Managers should inform and prepare staff for anticipated periods of increased work (e.g., seasonal demands, peak shift hours) and acknowledge and appreciate employees' efforts during times of high work demand.
- Provide education on resiliency, stress management and burnout (e.g., on signs and effects of stress and strategies for self-care).

9) Employees enjoy and feel connected to their work and where they feel motivated to do their job well

When employees feel engaged in their work, it increases their feelings of control, alignment or buy-in to the organization's mission and increases their sense of pride in their work.

Tips:

- When work plans are being created for the year, involve employees in the decisions.

- Conduct an annual satisfaction survey where employees can evaluate and provide feedback on their manager's performance in the areas of communication, leadership, conflict management and innovation.

10) There is recognition of the need for balance between the demands of work, family and personal life

Work-life balance is defined as a state of well-being that a person can have or can set as a goal in order allow them to effectively manage multiple responsibilities at work, at home and in their community. Poor work-life balance can directly impact an individual's mental health.

Tips:

- Identify ways of reducing workloads. Special attention needs to be given to reducing the workloads of managers and professionals in all sectors. Employees should be asked for suggestions as they are often in the best position to identify ways of streamlining work.
- Try to reduce job-related travel time for employees.
- Give employees the opportunity to say “no” when asked to work overtime. Saying “no” should not be a career-limiting move. Employees shouldn't have to choose between family and/or individual pursuits and career advancement.
- Promote usage of the company's Employee Assistance Program (EAP) for their ability to help with finding childcare or eldercare.

Examples of Activities to Promote Mental Health in the Workplace:

- Establish a rule with your team of no work email use outside of normal business hours.
- Within your organizational guidelines, celebrate employees'/colleagues' personal milestones or accomplishments. For example, use a coffee break to have birthday cake.
- Practice saying “no” at home and at work without excuses or guilty feelings.

11) Co-workers and supervisors are supportive of employee's mental health concerns, and respond appropriately as needed

The more employees feel they have psychological support at work, the greater their job attachment, job commitment, job satisfaction, job involvement, desire to remain with the organization, organizational citizenship behaviours, and job performance.

Tips:

- All employees (including management) should receive the appropriate education or training to enhance mental health awareness.
- Managers should seek out training and mentoring to enhance their interpersonal and people management skills in order to better address employees' mental health concerns.
- Ensure widespread awareness of health benefits and programs that employees can access to address and support their mental health.

Examples of Activities to Promote Mental Health in the Workplace:

- Post a list of resources and programs (see Appendix A) in your workplace so employees know where to access mental health resources.

12) Employee psychological safety is ensured

Enhancing “psychological safety” at work means taking precautions in order to maintain mental health and well-being in the workplace, and to ultimately prevent injury.

Tips:

- Employees and managers should take ‘Mental Health First-Aid’ training to learn to recognize and respond appropriately to employees who may be experiencing a mental health problem (See “Mental Health First-Aid” in Appendix A).
- Host emotional wellness seminars to teach employees new skills and strategies for staying ‘psychologically fit’ in an emotionally demanding job environment.

- Have and a zero tolerance policy for workplace violence and harassment.
- Provide retraining and gradual return to work for employees who have been away for an extended leave.
- Sometimes the physical environment can affect employees' mental wellbeing. Provide employees the option to turn off fluorescent lights in their offices and bring in floor or table lamps. Fluorescent lights can cause anxiety for some people.

Next Steps: Taking Action

Fostering and supporting mental health at work is a team effort. Providing an environment of support, health promoting practices, open communication and inclusiveness is vital to how individuals and managers can work together to support each other's mental health.

Often, teams, units or departments are already doing things that foster mental health at work. Being cognizant of these practices and why they are beneficial is important for continued development and utilization of strategies that are not only good business practices, but are also good mental health practices at work. When employees feel supported, respected, involved, engaged and competent, they are more likely to flourish at work. In turn, they are more likely to be productive, active, proud and passionate members of their organizations.

Appendix A

Programs, Services and Resources

Access Mental Health (Calgary and Area) - Mental health information and access to services: (403) 943-1500

Alberta Health Services: Addiction & Substance Use Health Information
<http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/addiction.asp>

Alberta Health Services: Mental Health & Wellness Health Information
<http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/mentalhealth.asp>

Antidepressant Skills at Work: <http://www.comh.ca/antidepressant-skills/work/>

Canadian Centre for Occupational Health & Safety: <http://www.ccohs.ca/>

Canadian Mental Health Association: www.cmha.ca

Employee Assistance Program: Find out if your organization has an Employee Assistance Program that is free of charge for employees and their families to access assistance in a number of mental health and workplace-related areas.

Great West-Life Centre for Mental Health in the Workplace:
<http://www.gwlcentreformentalhealth.com/index.asp?>

Guarding Minds @ Work: <http://www.guardingmindsatwork.ca/info>

Health Link Alberta: 1-866-408-Link (5465)

Mental Health First-Aid, Mental Health Commission of Canada:
<http://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/Pages/MentalHealthFirstAid.aspx>

Mental Health Help Line (Province of Alberta): 1-877-303-2642

Mental Health Works: <http://www.mentalhealthworks.ca/>

Addiction Services 24 hour Help Line (Alberta): 1-866-332-2322

Appendix B

Sample “Matter of Respect” Policy¹

At [Department/Team Name] it is a priority to create and maintain a work environment where employees are respectful and considerate in their interactions with one another, as well as with customers, clients and the public.

This policy outlines our commitment mutual respect, dignity and safety which are essential to building a workplace that all employees and management thrive in. We will never tolerate harassment of any form, physical, sexual or psychological, or any discrimination. We will not tolerate any act of abuse or violence, sexual or otherwise.

[Department/Team Name] strives to be a civil and respectful workplace in which there is a mutual respect among all employees, management and stakeholders who come in contact with [Department/Team Name]. Everyone is responsible for creating a climate that promotes diversity and respect for the entire organization.

Any breach of this policy should be immediately reported to the supervisor of the individual who has experienced the offence, or a Human Resources Officer.

¹ The Health Communication Unit at the Dalla Lana School of Public Health at the University of Toronto, & Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario. (2011). *Workplace Mental Health Promotion: A How-To Guide*.

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