



# EAP NEWSLETTER

## *Managing Employee Health and Performance*

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### **Dispelling the Stigma of Mental Health Disorders**

It seems as though life is becoming increasingly hectic. The average person juggles demands at work as well as family responsibilities and personal struggles. For many people, keeping all those balls in the air can be a real challenge and, in some instances, it can take a real toll on mental health, causing stress, anxiety and other problems. When an individual struggles with mental health, the ill effects pervade all aspects of life—work, home and the relationships formed in both those environments. In the workplace, these effects can be costly. Mental health costs the Canadian economy at least \$14.4 billion per year (Stephens and Joubert, 2001), while 30% to 40% of disability claims are for mental illness, creating losses of about \$33 billion a year (CMHA, 2006).

We often have a narrow view of what constitutes a mental health problem. While there exists a general awareness of disorders such as depression, anxiety and schizophrenia, more and more people are beginning to recognize that stress and a lack of work-life balance are also issues that stem from less than optimal mental health. Other common issues include anger management problems, eating disorders and post-traumatic stress disorder. These and other mental illnesses tend to afflict people in their late teens and early twenties (CMHA, 2006)—just when most individuals are beginning to enter the workforce and when they are least likely to seek help or request accommodating measures from employers.

An important aspect of recognizing and dealing with mental health in the workplace is reducing the stigma associated with mental health issues. The negative perceptions surrounding mental illness often cause those suffering its effects to feel further isolated and rejected by society; it can also prevent individuals from seeking help. However, a recent statistic notes that one in five Canadians will personally experience mental illness in his or her lifetime (CMHA, 2005).

The effects of poor employee mental health reverberate throughout an organization. An employee experiencing a mental health issue such as depression may feel fatigued and unmotivated, thus affecting productivity, creativity and causing increased errors and accidents on the job. And, if the illness is left untreated, it may manifest in other, physical ways, resulting in an increased number of sick days and health costs. Finally, employee relationships will no doubt be touched by the illness as well. Misunderstandings, conflict and other relationship problems can arise due to one employee's struggle with an undiagnosed mental illness.

It is important for managers to be educated on the signs of possible mental illness and to be able to address the problem in a professional, discreet and helpful manner, through the provision of resources and referrals. They need to build awareness among employees of the different ways mental illness can manifest itself so that early recognition of a problem can be achieved. Ensuring that employees have easy access to employee assistance program (EAP) resources, such as outpatient therapists, support groups and hotlines, is also an important step. And perhaps most importantly of all, managers must strive to create an open and trusting environment, wherein employees feel comfortable seeking help for all health issues they may struggle with, including mental health problems.

Although it is impossible to prevent the incidence of mental health problems in the workplace, a positive, flexible, empowering work environment can ensure that employees are healthier and happier in their jobs. Specialized education and training programs, such as those offered through EAPs, provide the resources and support employees need to pursue the best possible mental health by encouraging healthy practices and lifestyle choices.

## Improving Mental Health-Related Disability Management

### Case History

Jeannine was a manager in a financial services company with more than seven years of positive performance assessment reviews to her credit. The company's executive committee asked Jeannine to carry out additional tasks that required a substantial amount of overtime.

The end result: exhaustion, rumination, disrupted sleep, self-doubt and finally a major depression that required sick leave.

The medication prescribed was of some use, but not much. Exploratory counselling and analysis that focused on an incident of abuse suffered during her childhood was of no help whatsoever. No rehabilitation services were provided and no special attention in the workplace was given.

Jeannine attempted to return to work after one year on sick leave. The results were not positive.

### How can standard care make matters worse?

Standard care promotes inactivity and isolation. The emphasis is on providing non-optimal treatment that targets reducing the symptoms instead of focusing on the person's ability to function.

The result is a gap between treating an individual's mental health problems and his return to the workplace.

There are seven strategies to improve disability management when the disability is related to an individual's mental health (Bilsker, Gilbert, Myette & Stewart-Patterson, 2004).

1. **Distributing educational material to help the individual take charge of his life (self-determination) and encourage recovery.**
2. **Providing assistance based on best practices.** A company's Occupational Health Department and managers should receive

training on the use of screening tools, supporting individuals within the workplace to prevent a relapse into disability.

Standard Life, together with its EAP provider, FGIworld and other recognized organizations, offers employers a program designed to increase their knowledge of mental health issues and the corresponding impact these issues have on the employee and the workplace.

3. **Adapting healthcare benefits to support treatment based on best practices.** Healthcare benefits should support cognitive behaviour therapy or interpersonal therapy, as well as psychiatric rehabilitation by qualified professionals.
4. **Train mental health professionals to focus on their clients' work-related issues.** In a 2001 study, McCulloch, Ozminkowski, Dunn *et al.* demonstrated that when professionals had specific training in issues involving the workplace, the number of sick days reported by individuals diagnosed with a major depression fell by 20%.
5. **Planning an early return to work.** An extended absence from work weakens a person's morale, can cause an individual to adopt a sick role and can lead to a fear of the workplace. Rehabilitation services can be used to address specific issues in the workplace that could contribute to a relapse. Going back to work is crucial to an individual's recovery process, restoring the person's social and professional skills. Consequently, work must be an integral part of an individual's treatment and rehabilitation. To promote an early return to work and job retention, measures to support the individual must be implemented.



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Standard Life has developed a process to plan and implement an employee's early return to work as well as a guide for employers.

6. **Implementing policies with a view to preventing relapses into disability.** This can be achieved through the health professionals of the company's Occupational Health Department.
7. **Applying an integrated approach to disability management.** Disability management needs to focus on identifying the problem early on, ensuring the active participation and commitment of those in the workplace, improving communications between service providers and the workplace and, lastly, ensuring psychiatric rehabilitation programs in place are based on behavioural and cognitive principles.

### Key messages:

1. Mental health issues are a significant problem in the workplace.
2. The current health system is poorly equipped to manage these problems.
3. EAPs can help employees and employers become more resilient.
4. Access to proven treatment and rehabilitation services needs to be improved.