

Mental Wellness in the Workplace

A Playbook for Employers

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Glossary

BEHAVIOURAL HEALTH PROBLEMS: Includes anxiety, stress, and depression. Stress and depression cause physiological changes such as metabolic, endocrinal, and inflammatory shifts, which are predictors of disease.

BURNOUT: A state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion. Burnout is the cumulative result of stress.

COGNITIVE BEHAVIOUR THERAPY (CBT): Helps people identify their thoughts, emotions, and behaviours, challenge them, and develop skills to improve mood, functioning, and wellbeing.

DISCRIMINATION: Refers to unfair treatment due to a person's identity. This includes race, religion, citizenship, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, marital status, and disability, including mental disorder, to name a few. Discriminatory acts can be overt or covert. Openly expressing prejudice is an overt example, while covert or systemic discrimination is often evasive or passive.

ECHO PANDEMIC: Observed surge in mental illness and mental health issues because of COVID-19.

EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (EAP) OR EMPLOYEE AND FAMILY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (EFAP): Confidential, short-term counselling that helps employees manage stressful circumstances that can affect their work performance, such as depression, anxiety, dependency issues, traumatic events, finances, relationships, or retirement.

EMPLOYEE WELLBEING: Mental, physical, financial, and social health of an organization's workforce.

MENTAL HEALTH: State of wellbeing in which an individual realizes their own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively, and contribute to their community.

MENTAL HEALTH ACTION GAP: Refers to the gap between the number of businesses who believe investing in mental health is important and the number of firms who are taking concrete action, according to survey data collected by the Ontario Chamber of Commerce.

PRESENTEEISM: When an employee continues working when they are unwell – either physically or mentally – and therefore unable to be fully productive.

PSYCHOLOGICALLY HEALTHY AND SAFE WORKPLACE: A workplace that promotes workers' psychological well-being and actively works to prevent harm to workers' psychological health, including in negligent, reckless, or intentional ways.

STIGMA: Shame, prejudice, or negative stereotypes associated with mental health or substance use conditions. Self-stigma or the fear of being labelled with a mental illness often prevents people from seeking help and worsens their conditions.

STRESSOR: Anything in the outside world that can cause strain or tension. Adjusting to remote work was a common trigger of stress at the onset of the pandemic. Conversations about returning to the workplace may also cause tension. A stress response is the body's attempt to restore balance. Stress responses are different for everyone and can lead to healthy and unhealthy behaviours.

Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused Ontarians to experience a prolonged period of uncertainty and change. Households, schools, childcare centres, and businesses have had to adjust. Some also experienced the grief associated with the unexpected loss or sudden illness of a loved one. The pandemic also sparked or worsened feelings of fear, anxiety, and social isolation for others.

In late 2020, **70%** of health care workers reported their mental health was “somewhat worse now” or “much worse now” compared to before March 2020.ⁱ

Many employees struggled with the sudden shift to remote work, which blurred the line between professional and personal lives. While some employees appreciated the cost-savings associated with this shift, remote work was challenging for some Ontarians, such as those juggling work and child and elder care responsibilities, and not feasible for others, including those in certain sectors (e.g., retail, food service, accommodations, etc.) where face-to-face interaction is critical. Since physical distancing is not feasible for health care and essential workers, many experienced heightened anxiety over contracting COVID-19 in addition to heavier workloads.

In 2019, **53%** of Canadians rated their mental health as excellent or very good.ⁱⁱ

This figure dropped to **38%** by December 2020.ⁱⁱⁱ

Those able to work remotely witnessed an increase in the digital intensity of their workday. Research indicates the average number of meetings, emails, and chats has gradually increased since 2020.^{iv} Employees can feel pressure to keep up with heightened – and often unplanned – communication. The speed and urgency that comes with virtual work has disrupted work-life balance and led to burnout and exhaustion for some.

ⁱ A survey conducted by Statistics Canada between November 24 to December 13, 2020, with 18,000 health care workers across Canada, specifically those who provide health care services directly to individuals, technical support to medical staff, and support services within a health care setting.

ⁱⁱ The Race Relations in Canada 2019 Survey was conducted between April 17 and May 6, 2019, with 3,111 Canadian adults.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Survey on Employment Skills conducted by the Environics Institute for Survey Research, in partnership with the Future Skills Centre, and the Diversity Institute at Ryerson University between November 24 and December 22, 2020, with 5,351 Canadian adults.

^{iv} The 2021 Work Trend Index surveyed 31,092 full-time and self-employed workers in 31 countries, including Canada, between January 12, 2021 and January 25, 2021. For more information, see: Microsoft. 2021. *The Next Great Disruption Is Hybrid Work – Are We Ready?* <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/worklab/work-trend-index/hybrid-work>.

47% of Canadians reported feeling exhausted, while the global average was **39%** in January 2021, according to a survey by Microsoft.^v

Employers have also had to grapple with new challenges. This includes dealing with fatigue as employees juggle professional and family responsibilities, promoting social connections while maintaining physical distancing, managing performance and productivity remotely, virtually supporting employee mental health, and much more.

In 2017, the OCC [found that](#), although most businesses believed investing in mental health was important, few firms were taking action. This paradox was termed the “mental health action gap.” While this gap has slightly improved, it persists.

In 2016, **81%** of Ontario businesses agreed investing in employee health and wellbeing was a good investment. Yet, only **40%** of respondents reported having a formal strategy in place.^{vi}

In 2020, **89%** of employers believed spending on employee health and wellbeing was a good investment. Despite COVID-19, only **53%** said they had a formal strategy in place.^{vii}

v For more, see: Microsoft. 2021. *The Next Great Disruption Is Hybrid Work – Are We Ready?* <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/worklab/work-trend-index/hybrid-work>.

vi In 2016, the OCC's Business Confidence Survey (BCS) was conducted between October 25 and November 30, 2016, with 733 respondents across the province.

vii The 2021 BCS was conducted between October 8 and November 3, 2020, with 873 respondents across the province.

What is causing this gap? At times, mental health can be an intimidating and challenging topic for employers to address. The reasons include limited human and financial resources, perceived scope of responsibility, privacy concerns, or simply not knowing what to do. Yet, undiagnosed, and unrecognized mental health issues raise human capital, business, and financial consequences for employers. A healthy population, both mentally and physically, will also be critical to Ontario's recovery.

Prior to COVID-19, poor mental health in the workplace in Canada accounted for:

- **\$50 billion** in direct costs per year, including health care costs, social services costs, and income support like short- and long-term disability claims;
- **\$6.3 billion** in indirect costs from lost productivity, including absenteeism, presenteeism, and employee turnover; and
- **500,000 Canadians** missing work each week due to mental health issues or illnesses.

By 2041, the cumulative cost of poor mental health to the Canadian economy will exceed **\$2.5 trillion**.^{viii}

Considering the many challenges that emerged with COVID-19, the OCC partnered with Sun Life to develop a new *Playbook for Employers*. This resource provides employers with practical information, guidance, and resources to address the persistent mental health action gap. It offers the following tools:

- A summary of the feedback businesses and mental health experts shared during two virtual consultations;
- Five actions to improve employee mental health and morale; and
- Resources that can be leveraged to develop psychologically healthy and safe workplaces.

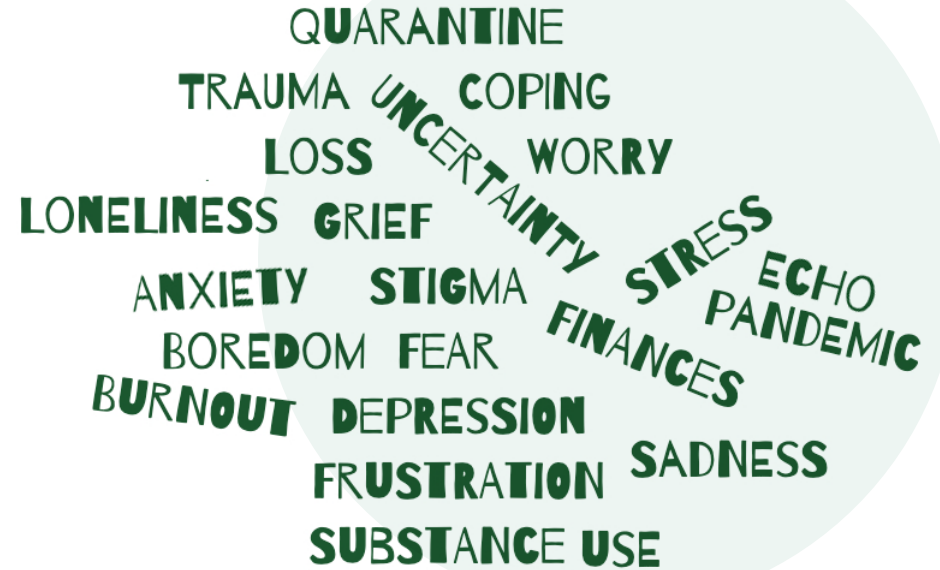
viii Deloitte. 2020. *The ROI in workplace mental health programs: Good for people, good for business. A blueprint for workplace mental health programs*. <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/ca/Documents/about-deloitte/ca-en-about-blueprint-for-workplace-mental-health-final-aoda.pdf>.

PART I:

Background

While COVID-19 presents a threat to Ontarians' physical health, it also poses a less visible threat to our psychological health. Ontarians continue to be worried about the pandemic and the health and safety of their families, as well as their jobs and financial security. Others are wrestling with uncertainties about what the future will hold. The confluence of these factors poses a serious threat to our workforce, economy, and collective success.

73% of Ontarians are experiencing some level of stress, and **63%** are concerned about their personal finances.^{ix}



QUARANTINE
TRAUMA COPING
LOSS WORRY
LONELINESS GRIEF
ANXIETY STIGMA
BOREDOM FEAR
BURNOUT DEPRESSION
FRUSTRATION SADNESS
SUBSTANCE USE
UNCERTAINTY
STRESS
FINANCES
ECHO PANDEMIC

The pandemic triggered a range of emotions, and the feelings identified above can be fluid. Numerous studies also confirm Ontarians have experienced higher levels of mental distress since COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic. History also reinforces this point. After the financial crisis of 2008, many countries saw higher rates of depression, anxiety, and substance use. We know from the 2003 SARS outbreak that the psychological impacts of a crisis can last three years after the crisis itself.^x

Almost **80%** of Ontarians believe the province will face a serious mental health crisis – or an echo pandemic – as it emerges from COVID-19.^{xi}

ix Angus Reid COVID-19 Tracker, Wave 32 Survey, conducted between February 17 and 18, 2021, with 378 Ontario respondents.

x Canadian Association of Mental Health. *Mental Health in Canada: COVID-19 and Beyond*. July 2020. <https://www.camh.ca/-/media/files/pdfs--public-policy-submissions/covid-and-mh-policy-paper-pdf.pdf>.

xi Canadian Mental Health Association survey conducted by Pollara Strategic Insights between February 19 and 22, 2021, with 1,004 Ontario respondents.

At the same time, the pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on certain demographics, including those who were experiencing poor mental health prior to the pandemic and racialized and low-income populations who were more likely to be affected by the virus.

Women reported lower levels of mental health in comparison to men (**52%** versus **58%**).

LGBTQ2S+ individuals were more likely to report fair or poor mental health.^{xii}

Visible minority groups were more likely to report fair or poor mental health.^{xiii}

Youth aged 15 to 24 were the least likely to report excellent or very good mental health.^{xiv}

Some Canadians reported using more substances to cope at the start of the pandemic. This was particularly true for Canadians who rated their mental health as fair or poor.

14% of Canadians aged 15 and older increased their alcohol consumption. Almost **7%** increased their cannabis use. **3%** increased their tobacco use.^{xv}

Taken together, these statistics have several economic implications, in addition to social ones. First, the growing number of Ontarians experiencing behavioural health problems has the potential to further strain the province's health care system. Second, poor mental health costs employers. Some employees are continuing to plough through their work despite psychological challenges. These employees are not working at their peak, which hinders their productivity. Third, this situation will have broad economic consequences; without a healthy and productive workforce, business competitiveness will be undermined, with many organizations unable to fully contribute to their communities and the economy.

xii Statistics Canada found this can be explained, in part, by the greater likelihood of job loss and inadequate financial resources for gender diverse individuals.

xiii Statistics Canada explains visible minority groups include South Asian, Chinese, Black, Filipino, and Arab. Statistics Canada found visible minority groups were more likely to report fair or poor mental health due, in part, to the fact that this group was more likely to report the pandemic has had a "moderate" or "major" impact on their ability to meet their financial obligations than white respondents.

xiv For more information on these data points, see: Statistics Canada. "Impacts on Mental Health." October 20, 2020. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-631-x/2020004/s3-eng.htm>.

xv The Canadian Perspectives Survey Series (Wave 1) conducted between March 29 to April 3, 2020, with over 4,600 people, aged 15 or older, in the 10 provinces.

Prior to COVID-19, it was estimated that:

- **6.7 million** people in Canada were living with a mental illness;
- Of these, **1 million** were children and adolescents (between 9 and 19 years);
- By age 40, **50%** of the population will have – or have had – a mental illness; and
- Around **20%** of Canadian youth are affected by a mental illness or disorder.^{xvi}

Since working adults spend most of their waking hours on the job, workplaces play an important role in the health and wellbeing of employees – and their families. Workplaces can be a source of positivity and a place where employees showcase their talents, but also a source of stress that impacts mental health. By taking action, businesses can support employees, improve mental health in the workplace, and narrow the mental health action gap.

Employers, however, cannot wait until the pandemic is over to invest in workplace mental health supports. COVID-19 will have a permanent effect on Ontarians as well as the workplace. Depression, anxiety, problematic substance use, and other mental health issues will last long after Ontarians receive their second dose. This *Playbook for Employers* provides businesses with supports needed to build appropriate strategies and ensure employees can take control of their mental wellness during this unprecedented time.

xvi Mental Health Commission of Canada. 2013. *Making the Case for Investing in Mental Health in Canada*. https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/sites/default/files/2016-06/Investing_in_Mental_Health_FINAL_Version_ENG.pdf.

PART II:

Re-Cap of What We Heard From Businesses and Experts

In May 2021, the OCC and Sun Life hosted two virtual roundtable consultations with businesses and mental health experts. We asked participants a range of questions, including how their organization supported employee mental health and wellness before and during COVID-19, the benefits associated with investing in mental health in the workplace, how comfortable employees are when it comes to discussing mental health, and whether they integrated their mental health and equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) strategies. This section summarizes some of the key learnings that emerged from these consultations (see [Appendix A](#) for additional insights).



COVID-19 brought the issue of mental health and wellness to the forefront.

Mental health has been one of the most consistent narratives when it comes to the pandemic's impact on Canadians. The sudden change and uncertainty brought on by COVID-19 increased stress, fear, and anxiety. This stress can affect how well people function in various aspects of their lives, including their work. With Ontarians practicing physical distancing and many working remotely, the pandemic also resulted in feelings of social isolation. Some are using pro-social coping strategies (e.g., connecting with friends and family virtually), while others are engaging in risky behaviours (e.g., increased substance use).^{xvii} Physical health has also diminished during the pandemic,^{xviii} which impacts mental health.

“Organizations are struggling with how they manage this. They know they need to, they’re valuing their employees more and more, and [employees’] health and mental health. But the challenge business owners have right now is – how do we deal with this and what tools are there?”

Leaders play an important role in supporting employees’ mental health.

Some leaders have been regularly communicating with staff through videos, weekly messages, and/or town halls – sharing personal stories and how they overcame mental health challenges. These leaders recognize the importance of shifting the culture from “don’t ask, don’t tell” to “do ask, do tell, and let’s talk about mental health.” Most working Canadians are reluctant to admit or would not admit to a leader or colleague they were experiencing a mental illness. This owes to fears of being judged or losing their job. When leaders are open and honest about their experiences in an authentic way, it opens the door to conversations, helps reduce the stigma, and inspires employees to seek support.

xvii A survey conducted by the Conference Board of Canada and the Mental Health Commission of Canada between April 27 and May 15, 2020, with 1,804 respondents.

xviii A survey conducted by Angus Reid between April 15 to 17, 2020, with 1,912 Canadian adults found that 42 percent of respondents said their physical health had diminished due to inactivity.

Prior to COVID-19, **39%** of Ontario workers said they would not tell their managers if they were experiencing a mental health problem.

Around **49%** of those who suffered from depression or anxiety said they never went to see a doctor.

Stigma or discrimination attached to mental illness present a barrier to seeking care, diagnosis, and treatment.^{xix}

Workplace culture and the use of inclusive, non-stigmatizing language are critical.

Culture encompasses a company's values and beliefs and sets the tone for an organization. It lets employees know what is considered acceptable behaviour and how to appropriately address issues. A negative workplace culture can cause negative health outcomes, hinder engagement, and result in poor productivity. It can also undermine the effectiveness of the best mental health programs. A health-focused culture improves employee wellbeing and leads to higher job satisfaction and retention. The use of safe, respectful, and inclusive language is key to a psychologically healthy and safe workplace.

“We need to ensure that the workplace – from the top down and all levels – is creating psychological safety by talking about mental health, creating spaces for people to come forward – openly or anonymously... Having leaders share stories of the tools they’ve engaged with can create a more accepting culture that makes it easier for employees to take advantage of supports...”

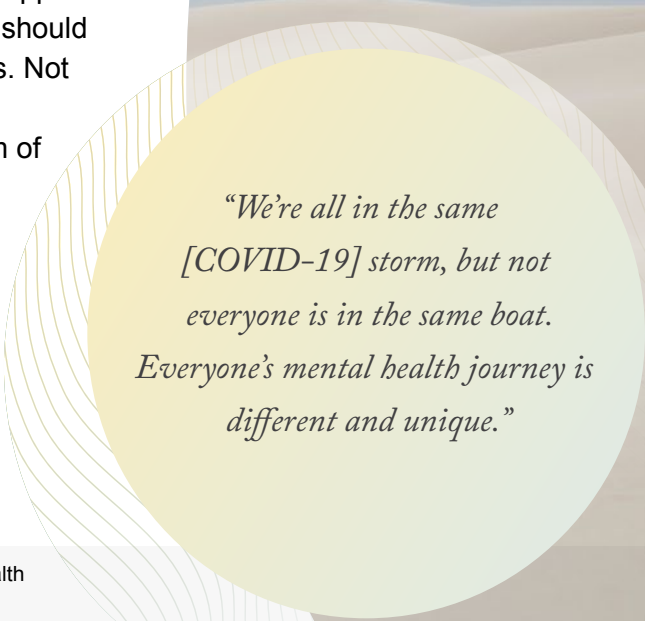
xix Canadian Association of Mental Health. “Mental Illness and Addiction: Fast Facts and Statistics.” <https://www.camh.ca/en/driving-change/the-crisis-is-real/mental-health-statistics>.

Mental health and EDI strategies should be interconnected.

Some organizations view their mental health and diversity, equity, and inclusion strategies separately. However, for groups facing discrimination in their daily life, like BIPOC employees and those in the LGBTQ2S+ community, the workplace can be a source of stress and poor mental health. The intersectionality of mental health and other dimensions of diversity should be top of mind as employers strive to create safe, inclusive workplaces. Employers must embed EDI in every part of their workplace mental health strategy and ensure mental health supports reflect the diverse needs of their employees.

There is no one-size-fits all solution for mental health and a collaborative approach is needed.

Prior to implementing new mental health supports, a needs assessment should be conducted to understand employees' needs and support gaps. Employers should also develop their mental health strategy or new supports in consultation with employees – to ensure they are relevant and accessible. Where possible, businesses should offer a variety of supports so employees can choose which option(s) works best for them and their families. Not all interventions are expensive (see checklist in Part IV and free resources in Part V). Supports should be accessible^{xx} in a channel of choice – whether in-person *and* virtually. They should also span the continuum of mental health – from prevention to early intervention, recovery, and return to work.



“We’re all in the same [COVID-19] storm, but not everyone is in the same boat. Everyone’s mental health journey is different and unique.”

xx Pollara and CMHA’s survey found that 35 percent of Ontarians who participated in their survey were finding it difficult to access mental health supports.

Good mental health and wellness benefits pay off, and there are risks associated with inaction.

Employers have a responsibility to create and foster an environment that is healthy and safe – both physically and psychologically. Despite the costs associated with additional mental health and wellness benefits, businesses recognize the return on investment (ROI) that comes from having healthy employees. This includes more engaged, motivated, and supported employees; reduced absenteeism, presenteeism, and drug and disability claims; improved productivity and performance; and better health outcomes. Since poor mental health is a top cost driver for employers, these investments can provide businesses with savings in the long run, as well as help attract and retain talent. Employees are increasingly looking for employers that take mental health issues seriously and provide appropriate supports.

Mental health conditions account for **30%** of short- and long-term disability claims and are rated one of the top three drivers of such claims by over **80%** of Canadian employers.^{xxi}

"You need to have a variety of tools and supports... The more types of tools that are available, the more employees will use them because they're more personalized and they can chart their own course."

"It may be hard to justify financially in the short-run, but proactive health measures are a good thing to do in the long-run...."

xxi Mental Health Commission of Canada. 2013. *Making the Case for Investing in Mental Health in Canada*. https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/sites/default/files/2016-06/Investing_in_Mental_Health_FINAL_Version_ENG.pdf.

Mental health resources exist, but greater awareness is needed to increase uptake.

Few Canadians are making use of the mental health services offered by their employers, or federal and provincial resources.^{xxii} Stigma coupled with a lack of awareness^{xxiii} and challenges navigating resources are key barriers. A communications strategy is needed to ensure employees are aware of the tools available to them. Likewise, resources need to be easily accessible with fewer steps. Without this knowledge and convenience, some Canadians are relying on healthy *and* unhealthy coping strategies – the latter of which can have long-term health implications.

Only **4%** of Canadians said they used the EAP/EFAP available through their employer.^{xxiv}

Only **2%** of Canadians reported accessing online mental health resources.^{xxv}

“People don’t reach out for help the first time they hear about a service being available... It really does start with making people aware...”

xxii According to a study conducted by Maru/Matchbox on behalf of the CMHA between September 14 and 21, 2020 with 3,027 Canadian respondents over the age of 18, only 11 percent of respondents are accessing virtual mental health services/supports.

xxiii A survey conducted by researchers from the University of British Columbia and the CMHA between September 14 and 21, 2020, with 3,027 respondents found that, among those who reported experiencing a mental health concern during the pandemic, 22 percent said they did not know that virtual mental health services/resources exist, 21 percent did not believe they would be helpful, 17 percent preferred in-person health care supports, and 11 percent cited privacy concerns.

xxiv According to a survey conducted by the Conference Board of Canada and the Mental Health Commission of Canada between April 27 and May 15, 2020, with 1,804 respondents.

xxv A survey conducted by Maru/Matchbox in May 2020 on behalf of the CMHA, with 3,000 Canadians.

PART III:

Practical Steps to Help Employers Address the Mental Health Action Gap

What can employers do to address the mental health action gap and support employees? Supporting employees' mental health centres on five elements: developing a mental health strategy; building a psychologically healthy and safe workplace culture; providing robust communications; ensuring adequate resources; and preparing for hybrid work. Rather than a one-size-fits all approach, the following list provides suggestions any organization can adapt to their unique workplace.

“Just like we’re all familiar with COVID-19 [personal protective equipment] (PPE), we should be thinking of providing mental health PPE – at home, at work, and at school. So, when people are ready to reach out, there’s something available for them.”

1. Develop a comprehensive mental health strategy

- ❑ **Develop a mental health strategy** that is linked to your EDI strategy.
- ❑ **Review benefits reports or disability claims** (if applicable) to determine whether supports are meeting employees' needs and which departments have higher rates of distress.
- ❑ **Measure baseline workforce mental health** through qualitative measures (e.g., feedback gathered from employees through regular pulse checks and surveys^{xxvi}) and quantitative measures (e.g., absenteeism, presenteeism, short- and long-term disability, etc.).
- ❑ **Set specific performance targets based on baseline data** and the unique needs of your organization and employees.^{xxvii}
- ❑ **Keep leaders accountable** by including achievements related to the mental health strategy in performance evaluations.
- ❑ **Monitor progress** to assess whether intended outcomes were achieved and what corrective action is needed to improve psychological health and safety.

xxvi Consider making surveys anonymous to protect employees' privacy.

xxvii For more on the critical role performance measurement plays for any mental health strategy or program, see [Appendix B](#).

2. Build a psychologically healthy and safe workplace culture

- ❑ **Invest in mental health and cultural sensitivity training for leaders** to ensure they have the skills needed to recognize signs of distress and support employees who raise mental health challenges. ^{xxviii}
- ❑ **Consider building a mental health committee** that includes employees who reflect your employee demographics, are invested in workplace culture, and can champion change – to ensure your mental health strategy is relevant and engaging. ^{xxix}
- ❑ **Pay attention to the quality of social connections** in the workplace and consider creative team building opportunities (that adhere to public health guidelines) to foster social cohesion and camaraderie.
- ❑ **Encourage employees to practice self-care** that includes daily relaxation to decrease stress and healthy habits (e.g., healthy eating, adequate sleep, exercise, and regular breaks). ^{xxx}
- ❑ **Consider small gestures of appreciation** (e.g., delivering snacks, providing a gift card, offering an extra day off, or a simple “thank you”), which can have a big impact on an employee’s day.
- ❑ **Launch a formal workplace peer support program** with the required policy framework, selection criteria, privacy and confidentiality principles, roles and responsibilities of peers, training, and supervision, and encourage employees to support colleagues.

xxviii For more on the importance of mental health training for leaders, see [Appendix C](#).

xxix For more on why resource allocation is needed, see [Appendix D](#).

xxx For more on how mental health is a collective responsibility, see [Appendix E](#).

3. Communicate widely, regularly, and effectively

- ❑ **Encourage leaders to model open and authentic communication about their own mental health challenges** – to destigmatize mental health and encourage employees to access supports – both within and outside the organization.
- ❑ **Create spaces for conversation led by leaders** – whether short, virtual coffee chats between staff or town halls where employees can share how they feel, check in with one another, and build a sense of community.
- ❑ **For non-remote workers, discussions could be held during team huddles, safety moments, at the start of a shift or during a shift change.**
- ❑ **Repeat key messages throughout the year** – not only during health and wellbeing events – to create lasting cultural change and using a variety of formats (e.g., intranet, team meetings, newsletters, posters, etc.).
- ❑ **Collect employees' views** (e.g., surveys, suggestion boxes, town halls, committees, etc.) to understand what coping strategies are being used and encourage help-seeking behaviours (e.g., seeking the help of a therapist or telemedicine), while being prepared to take action.

4. Ensure adequate resources and supports for employees and their families

- ❑ **Ensure supports are varied, visible, and accessible** – both in-person and virtually.
- ❑ **Invest in leaders' wellbeing** so they can provide support to employees within the organization.
- ❑ **Support employees along the full continuum of mental health** – from prevention to early intervention to recovery – and not just responding when employees are unwell.
- ❑ **Review your company's health plan with your benefits administrator** to examine what supports you currently provide for employees and what could be added (e.g., virtual care or increasing mental health coverage^{xxxi}).
- ❑ **Develop a plan to support employees returning to work after a mental health-related absence** (e.g., communicate expectations, provide continued mental health supports, etc.).^{xxxii}
- ❑ **Promote Employee (and Family) Assistance Programs** and take steps to improve awareness of these voluntary and confidential services to enhance uptake.
- ❑ **Promote free resources available through the federal and provincial governments** (e.g., Wellness Together Canada and MindBeacon in Ontario).

xxxi The American Psychology Association and Canadian Psychology Association found that, on average, 15-20 therapy sessions are required for 50% of patients to recover. For more information, see: <https://www.apa.org/ptsd-guideline/patients-and-families/length-treatment>.

xxxii For more on why developing a plan for employees returning to work after a mental health related-absence, see [Appendix F](#).

5. Prepare for hybrid work (if applicable)

- ❑ **Offer modified or flexible work arrangements (where possible)** to address the challenges employees may encounter in balancing their work and personal lives, and to alleviate some of the anxiety associated with returning to the office.^{xxxiii}
- ❑ **Consider what steps need to be taken for a hybrid work environment** (e.g., regular check-ins, providing employees with necessary tools or workspace items, creating an equitable experience for in-person and remote employees, etc.).
- ❑ **Plan for early and regular check-ins** to provide employees with clarity on expectations and plans related to returning to the office, thereby putting employees at ease, alleviating anxiety, and ensuring they feel informed.



xxxiii For more on the shift to remote work, see [Appendix G](#).



PART IV:

Resources to Help Businesses Get Started

As businesses begin to plan their return to the workplace, employers need to understand the importance of mental health prevention and be prepared to support employees. The following section provides businesses with an expanded list of resources and commemorative dates to promote mental wellness throughout the year.

Addressing Stress and Substance Use

Breaking Free

[Wellbeing and recovery program](#)

Centre for Addiction and
Mental Health

- [Information](#) for individuals on alcohol and COVID-19, with tips to moderate drinking
- [Information](#) on stress and quizzes to determine [perceived stress](#) and how you are [coping](#) with stress

Assembling a Mental Health Committee

Sun Life

[Guide](#) to building a mental health committee

Developing a Mental Health Strategy and Performance Measurement

Sun Life

- [Template](#) for building your mental health strategy
- [Tips](#) to prepare an effective mental health strategy
- [Tips](#) for setting performance measures and measuring success

Discussing Mental Health with Employees

Canadian Mental Health
Association

[Toolkit](#) to help employers navigate returning to physical workplaces, plus tips on signs of mental distress and how to speak with employees

MindBeacon

[Information and resources](#)

Sun Life

- [Best practices](#) for communicating organizational health commitments
- [Document](#) that outlines stigmatizing versus inclusive language
- [Glossary](#) of key terms to discuss mental health
- [Tips for speaking with employees](#) about performance and mental health

Think Mental Health and
Ottawa Public Health

[Videos](#) on how to talk about mental health, reducing the stigma, and more

Establishing a Peer Support Program

Centre for Addiction and
Mental Health

Peer-to-peer [discussion forum](#) to share experiences
related to managing stress during COVID-19

Peer Support Canada

[Information and resources](#) for peer supporters

Free Government Resources

[211 Ontario](#)

Helpline that connects people to community and social
services in their area in 150+ languages

[BounceBack](#)

Guided self-help program for people experiencing
mild-to-moderate anxiety or depression, or feeling low,
stressed, worried, irritable, or angry

[ConnexOntario](#)

Phone, live chat, and email support for mental health,
addiction, and problem gambling

[Hope for Wellness Help
Line](#)

Counselling and crisis intervention for Indigenous peo-
ples by phone or chat

[Indian Residential School
Survivors and Family](#)

24-hour support for anyone experiencing pain or dis-
tress because of their residential school experience –
1-866-925-4419

[MindBeacon](#)

Digital therapy to help with mild-to-moderate mental
health concerns

[Talk Healing](#)

Live chat and helpline for Indigenous women in 14
languages

[WellCan](#)

Internet-based cognitive behavioral therapy program for
Ontarians aged 16+

[Wellness Together Canada](#)

One-to-one counselling, self-guided courses, self-as-
sessment, and more

Other Free Resources for Employees

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health	24-hour crisis line for suicide-related concerns – 1-833-456-4566
Crisis Services Canada	Phone and text support – 1-833-456-4566 or 45645
Huddol	Six free one-hour virtual sessions with a therapist
Lumino Health, an innovation from Sun Life	Health and wellness guides on topics, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stress and anxiety • Emotional wellness • Healthy lifestyle • Building resilience
Mental Health Commission of Canada	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guide to support remote employees' mental health by reducing the negative effects of poor ergonomics • Resources, including webinars, fact sheets, and toolkits, on suicide prevention and intervention
The Ontario Caregiver Organization	Provides support for caregivers, including a helpline, online support groups, and peer support

Recognizing the Signs and Symptoms

Mental Health Commission of Canada	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guide to help employers provide staff with tools and resources to manage seasonal affective disorder • Suicide Prevention in the Workplace
Workplace Safety and Prevention Services	Poster outlining the signs and symptoms indicating mental distress

Training for Leaders

Canadian Mental Health Association	Mental Health Works , Mental Health First Aid , and CMHA Certified Psychological Health and Safety Advisor Training
Mental Health Commission of Canada	Mental Health First Aid training, Working Mind courses to reduce the stigma related to mental illness, and 13 videos on the factors that impact employees' mental health and ways to promote psychologically safe workplaces
MindBeacon for Leaders	Insights on mental health innovations for HR leaders
Ontario Shores Centre for Mental Health Sciences	Mental Health First Aid training to assist someone in a mental health crisis
Sun Life	Training videos for leaders

Understanding the Duty to Accommodate

Canadian Human Rights Commission	A Human Rights Guide for Employees and Employers
Canadian Mental Health Association	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guide to help employers understand how to assist staff with a mental health concern and a guide to help leaders accommodate employees
Sun Life	Accommodations employers can make to support employees experiencing challenges, return-to-work tips for leaders and policies and practices for supporting return to work and accommodation

Commemorative Dates

Bell Let's Talk Day	January 28
Psychology Month	February
Pink Shirt Day	Last Wednesday in February
Mental Health Awareness Week	First full week of May
Self-Care Day	July 24
World Suicide Prevention Day	September 10
Healthy Workplace Month	October
Mental Health Awareness Month	October
National Disability Employment Awareness Month	October
Mental Illness Awareness Week	October 2 to 8
World Mental Health Day	October 10

Conclusion

The pandemic changed our everyday lives and has taken a heavy toll on individuals. Business leaders and employees quickly adjusted to an unprecedented set of circumstances – in their personal and professional lives. Not surprisingly, workplace mental health is one of the most important issues facing organizations today. Every leader must ask, “What are we doing to help our employees stay physically and emotionally healthy?”

“We’re all grieving loss – we’ve all lost through the pandemic. And hopefully it’s not a loved one, but for many of us, the life we knew had a lot in it that we don’t currently have, including spending time with family and friends... Employers have an added responsibility right now because people are bringing a lot more to the workplace in terms of what they’re struggling with than they probably ever had.”

The pandemic has brought mental wellness issues to the forefront and provided employers with the opportunity to reimagine how they will support employees and improve company culture going forward. For some organizations, supporting mental wellness in the workplace will require updating existing strategies and resources. Other organizations may require large structural and cultural changes considering the mental health action gap that remains. While the challenges ahead may seem great, inaction comes with a potentially greater cost for employers and the economy alike.

This *Playbook for Employers* aims to empower businesses and provide employers with the information and ideas needed to stimulate positive change. By making mental health a clear organizational priority and taking advantage of the resources contained in this document, employers can help employees reach their full potential, reap the benefits associated with a psychologically healthy and safe workplace, and help bridge the mental health action gap.



Appendices

Appendix A: Additional insights from consultations (continued)

Communication and two-way dialogue are key during times of uncertainty. Uncertainty about the new normal and how long the pandemic will last can be a source of anxiety. By clearly communicating organizational plans to staff, employers can quell questions and concerns. Transparency also promotes feelings of safety and security as employees have greater confidence in how their workplace is handling the situation. Businesses should listen with empathy, acknowledge the situation may be causing unease, and reassure employees the organization understands this is a challenging period. Organizations should also ensure leaders are equipped with all the information they need to effectively answer questions.

“People are getting tired of being on a screen. Sometimes you’ll see peoples’ faces, sometimes you won’t see them for an entire meeting. It’s really hard to tell if there’s an issue... You have to listen really closely or have an individual conversation with them.”

COVID-19 has had a disproportionate impact on certain demographics. COVID-19 transmission has been concentrated in communities experiencing poverty, low-income housing, and has had a disproportionate impact on equity seeking groups. The pandemic also made things worse for Canadians who were already struggling with their mental health. The economic impact has been concentrated in the retail, service, and hospitality and tourism sectors, which predominantly employ women, newcomers, and youth. As a result of the “she-cession,”^{xxxiv} mental health concerns are on the rise among working women, especially mothers juggling work, child, and/or elder care responsibilities.^{xxxv}

“COVID-19 put people into survival mode, but not everyone has the same set of circumstances or access to resources. Poverty and privilege have never played a bigger role in determining whether families and workers can cope or get help.”

COVID-19 has led to a greater acceptance of digital and virtual health services. Due to the challenges associated with accessing in-person care at the start of the pandemic, patients, clinicians, and insurance carriers became more receptive to virtual health services. Federal and provincial governments also invested in bolstering access to various supports, including cognitive behaviour therapy.^{xxxvi} Clinically validated virtual supports are available for all ages, genders, and symptom severities (see free government resources in Part IV).

xxxiv For more information on the “she-cession,” see: Claudia Dessanti. 2020. *The She-Covery Project: Confronting the Gendered Economic Impacts of COVID-19 in Ontario*. Ontario Chamber of Commerce. <https://occ.ca/wp-content/uploads/OCC-shecovery-final.pdf>.

xxxv A survey conducted by Pollara Strategic Insights on behalf of The Prosperity Project, with 1,000 adults found women are much more likely than men to feel anxious, stressed, and depressed during the second wave. These feelings were even higher among working mothers than working women without children and working fathers. The survey found some women are considering leaving the workforce, asking for reduced hours, or looking for new roles with different working conditions.

xxxvi For more information, see: Catrina Kronfli. 2020. *Realizing the Full Potential of Virtual Care in Ontario*. Ontario Chamber of Commerce. <https://occ.ca/wp-content/uploads/COVID19-Policy-Brief-Virtual-Care-final.pdf>.

Appendix B: Performance measurement is critical to any mental health strategy or program.

Organizations should decide how they will benchmark success, track progress, and ensure accountability. Reviewing performance measures (e.g., absenteeism, disability claims, perceptions of well-being, etc.) can help employers understand what is driving mental health issues in their workplace and reveal adoption rates, trends, and whether investments are having the desired impact. Programs should be adjusted based on these data to improve effectiveness. Generally, workplace mental health programs deliver greater returns as they mature, rather than generating immediate benefits.^{xxxvii} This should not discourage employers, as organizations with comprehensive mental health strategies tend to outperform their peers in the long run.

Appendix C: Investing in mental health training, mental health first aid, and cultural sensitivity training for leaders generates an ROI.

While managers are often ‘first responders,’ they may lack the knowledge needed to recognize signs of distress, spot issues early, and connect employees to appropriate supports. Training should provide leaders with basic information (e.g., on resiliency and stigma) to generate awareness and understanding. Training empowers leaders, positions them as champions for mental health and diversity, shifts an organization’s culture, and fosters an inclusive workplace. Further, organizations can consider including achievements related to their workplace mental health strategy in leaders’ evaluations or setting performance measures for leaders around the mental health and wellbeing of their teams.

Appendix D: Resource allocation – both human and financial – is needed to demonstrate commitment to mental health.

Employers can consider appointing a Sponsor(s) at the leadership level with decision-making authority, as well as Champion(s) who are passionate about workplace mental health and can be the ‘face’ of their mental health strategy.^{xxxviii} Businesses can also assemble a mental health committee with representatives across the organization.^{xxxix} The committee can inform, champion, and deploy program(s). Since some employees may be reluctant to speak with their employer about mental health, a peer support program^{xl} may be a good entry point. Ultimately, businesses should assess the resources available to them (e.g., time, money, and staff), as well as the type of industry they are in, employee demographics, and job requirements, to develop mental health supports tailored to their organization.

xxxvii Achieving a positive ROI can take three or more years. For more on this, see: Deloitte. 2020. *The ROI in workplace mental health programs: Good for people, good for business. A blueprint for workplace mental health programs.* <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/ca/Documents/about-deloitte/ca-en-about-blueprint-for-workplace-mental-health-final-aoda.pdf>.

xxxviii In some organizations, the sponsor and champion may be the same person.

xxxix Alternatively, an organization’s current health and safety committee or diversity and inclusion committee could be leveraged.

xl This involves co-workers with a shared experience of mental health issues connecting informally and confidentially.

Appendix E: Mental health is a collective responsibility shared by employers and employees

Mental health is a collective responsibility shared by employers and employees. Employees can take steps to improve their mental health by using group benefits available through their employers, participating in regular physical health checkups, making positive lifestyle choices (e.g., regular exercise, regular meals, healthy snacks, etc.), and adhering to medications to manage chronic conditions. Employees can also practice self-care throughout the day (e.g., regular breaks and time away from the computer screen) and in their personal time based on their individual interests. Employers can encourage these practices, but it is ultimately up to the individual to implement them.

Appendix F: Developing a plan for employees returning to work after a mental health-related absence is important.

Many organizations struggle with the return-to-work process. However, a plan is critical to helping employees successfully transition back to the workplace after being on leave. This can include personalized accommodations and continued access to supports. Training plays an important role by providing leaders with an understanding of their roles and responsibilities. When handled correctly, return to work can help employees recover by building their self-esteem and sense of inclusion.

Appendix G: Flexible work is here to stay, and organizations need to evolve their operations to meet this new reality.

While 2020 ushered in remote work, employers face another disruption – hybrid work. Employers should ensure workers have the physical tools they need to contribute from anywhere (e.g., basic office supplies, support with remote work expenses, etc.), while also considering how they can combat digital exhaustion (e.g., reducing unnecessary meetings to give employees more time to focus on their work). Since remote work can create silos, businesses should find ways to foster cross-team collaboration, which drives innovation and productivity. At the same time, many employees are concerned about health and safety and returning to on-site work could be a stressor. By developing a plan that includes the option of remote work (where possible) and asking employees for input, businesses can increase transparency, offer greater flexibility,^{xli} and reduce stress and anxiety.

xli For more on how flexible work can help level the playing field for women, see: Claudia Dessanti. 2020. *The She-Covery Project: Confronting the Gendered Economic Impacts of COVID-19 in Ontario*. <https://occ.ca/wp-content/uploads/OCC-shecovery-final.pdf>

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