



WORKING TOWARD MENTAL WELLNESS

A Toolkit for Employers

About the Ontario Chamber of Commerce

For more than a century, the Ontario Chamber of Commerce (OCC) has been the independent, non-partisan voice of Ontario business. Our mission is to support economic growth in Ontario by defending business priorities at Queen's Park on behalf of our network's diverse 60,000 members.

From innovative SMEs to established multi-national corporations and industry associations, the OCC is committed to working with our members to improve business competitiveness across all sectors. We represent local chambers of commerce and boards of trade in over 135 communities across Ontario, steering public policy conversations provincially and within local communities. Through our focused programs and services, we enable companies to grow at home and in export markets.

The OCC provides exclusive support, networking opportunities, and access to innovative insight and analysis for our members. Through our export programs, we have approved over 1,300 applications, and companies have reported results of over \$250 million in export sales.

The OCC is Ontario's business advocate.



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Glossary

BURNOUT

Burnout is an outcome of work-related stress; it is “a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion that results from long-term involvement in work situations that are emotionally demanding”.¹

MENTAL WELLNESS

Mental wellness, as used in this report, references a state of well-being in which individuals are able to cope with a variety of stressors and challenges (including diagnosed and undiagnosed mental conditions, both permanent and temporary, impacted by a combination of biological and social factors) in a healthy and resilient manner. A mentally healthy workplace is one in which employers and employees feel respected and safe, are productive, and have the opportunity to perform to their the best of their ability.

PRESENTEEISM

Presenteeism occurs when an employee is present, but not working at full capacity for either physical or mental reasons. This can cause productivity loss and lead to further poor health.²

WORK-RELATED STRESS

This term is used to describe the response individuals may have to work demands and pressures that challenge their resiliency and capacity to cope.³

Introduction

Public understanding of mental health issues has increased in both scope and sophistication over the past decade, including a deeper appreciation for the importance of mental wellness in the workplace.⁴ This sea of change has been largely positive, as employees who need treatment can now better access the help they need with less fear of stigma or penalties, thanks to employers recognizing the role they play in supporting the mental health of their staff.

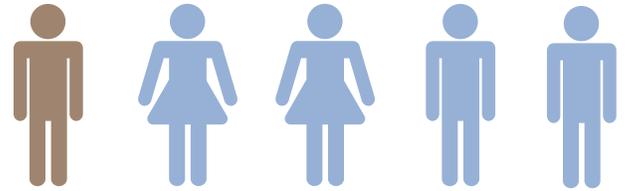
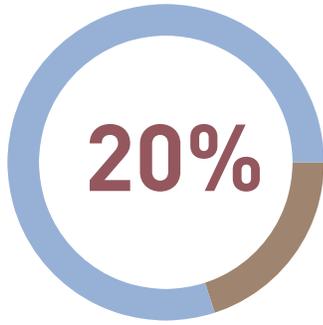
This change in perception is particularly relevant now, as mental health conditions in the workplace are being diagnosed with greater frequency; disability claims for mental illness is the fastest growing claim type in Canada.⁵ The cost of mental illnesses to the Canadian economy is estimated at over \$50 billion annually, with \$20 billion of that stemming directly from workplace losses. On average, mental health issues cost businesses almost \$1,500 per employee per year.⁶

Undiagnosed, unrecognized and untreated mental health problems present an enormous challenge to employers from a financial perspective, a legal perspective and, most importantly, a human capital perspective. Without a healthy and productive workforce, organizations across Canada are unable to accomplish their goals or contribute meaningfully to our economy and our communities. Given the importance of a functioning workforce, ensuring good mental health for employees should be top of mind for employers.

Most employers are familiar with common workplace ailments such as burnout, depression and anxiety. Nevertheless, instead of being recognized and managed, these problems are too often misjudged or disregarded. For most employers, it is easier to cope with an employee's physical injury than a mental one.⁷ In too many workplaces there is both a lack of knowledge as to how to effectively manage the mental health of employees and a dearth of resources to help employers gain that knowledge.⁸

In this toolkit, the Ontario Chamber of Commerce (OCC) seeks to illuminate the distinctive character of mental wellness in the workplace, outline the case for action and provide resources for starting this conversation in your workplace. We have undertaken this project in order to help our members address the gap between wanting to make their workplaces happier and more productive, and the barriers that prevent them from expending time and resources on such a project. Our goal is to provide our members – particularly our smaller members – with the information, guidance, and resources necessary to take the first steps to a mentally healthy workplace.

Workplace Mental Health by the Numbers

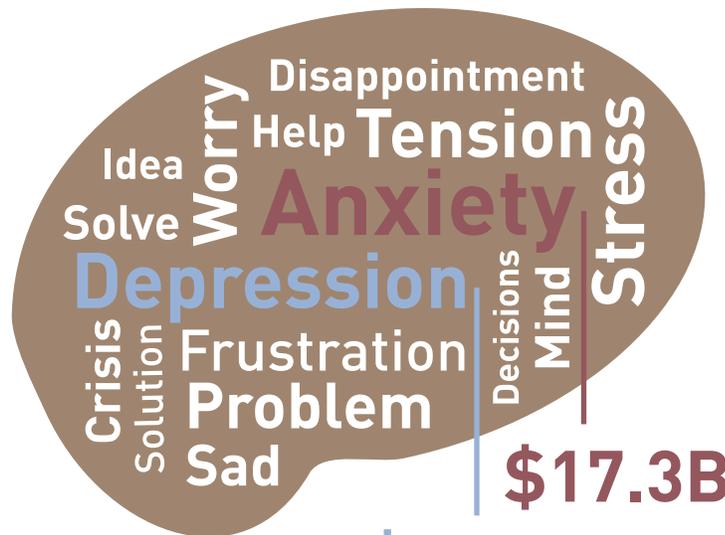
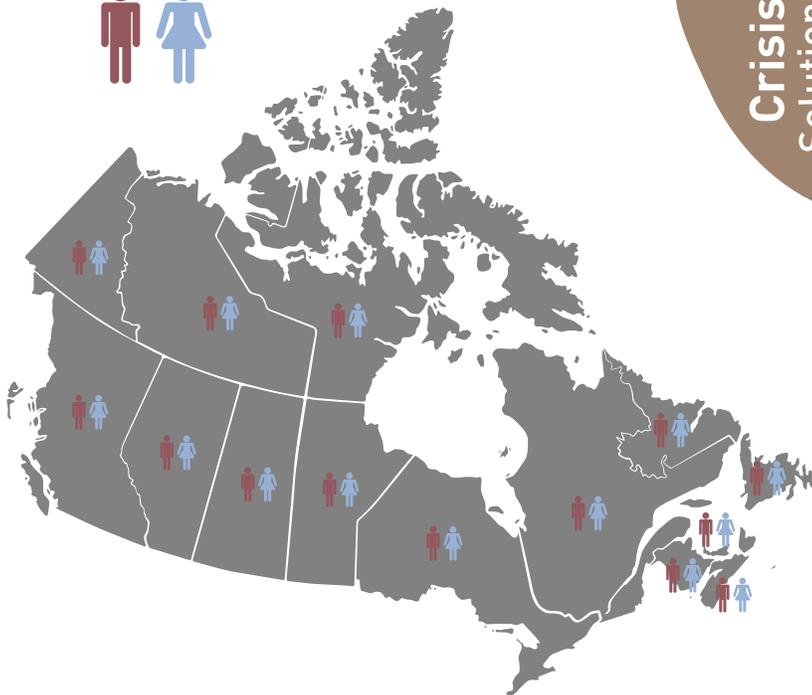


At least 20% of Canadians will have a mental health illness in their life. (Although this identifies only those who have sought medical help).⁹

This is more than those living with heart disease and type 2 diabetes combined.¹⁰

Approximately 1 in 5 members of the working age population in Canada is living with a mental health problem or illness.¹¹

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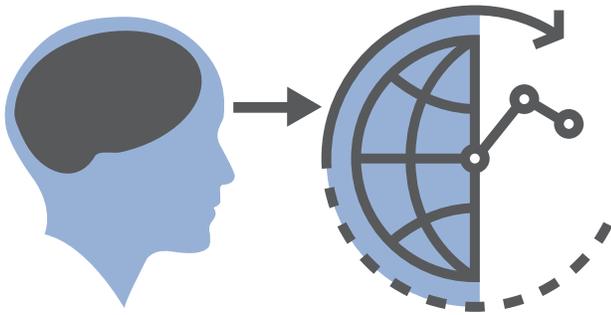


\$32.3B
\$17.3B

Depression and anxiety cost the Canadian economy at least \$32.3 billion and \$17.3 billion a year, respectively, in foregone GDP due to lost productivity.¹³

Each day, half a million Canadians miss work because of mental health issues.¹²

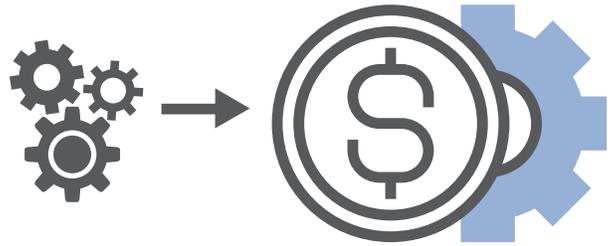
\$51B



The cost of mental illness to the Canadian economy is estimated at approximately **\$51 billion** per year.¹⁴

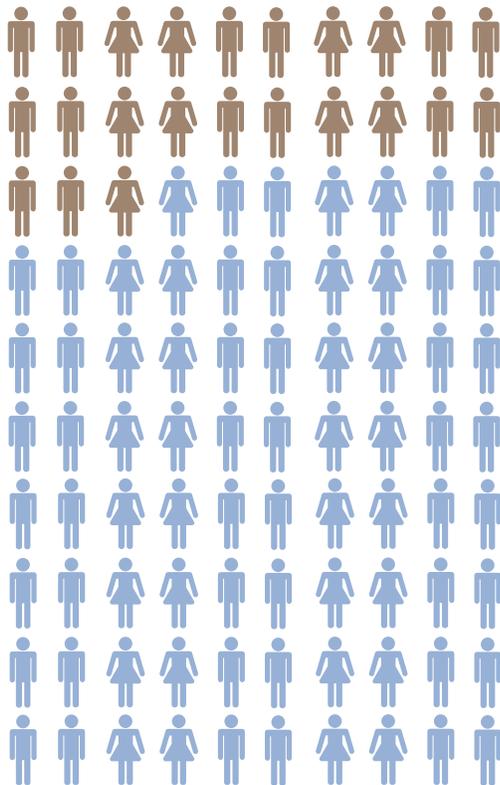
By 2021, this is estimated to be **\$88.8 billion**.¹⁵

\$20B

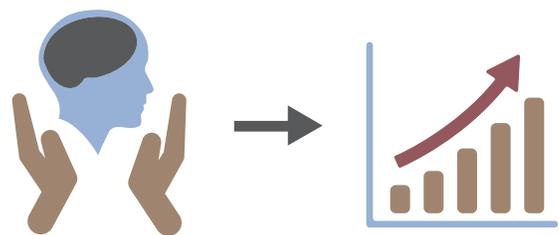
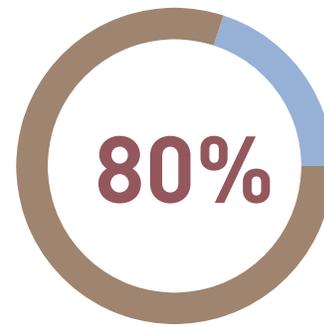


\$20 billion of the cost of mental health problems to the economy is a result of work-related causes.¹⁶

23%



Only **23%** of Canadian workers would feel comfortable talking to their employer about a psychological health issue.¹⁷



80% of Ontario businesses agree it is equally as important to invest in mental health as physical health.¹⁸

80% of Ontario businesses agree that their organization's success is dependent on their employees' health and well-being.¹⁹

Defining the Problem

The Mental Health Commission of Canada has quantified the cost of mental health problems at more than \$50 billion per year, with a cumulative cost to the economy of \$2.5 trillion over the next 30 years.²⁰ While the dialogue surrounding mental health has increased over the past decade, it has largely been in the context of youth or other vulnerable populations. Conversely, research has found that it is individuals in their prime working years that tend to be the hardest hit by mental illness.²¹

Yet acknowledging the issue and taking subsequent action on its solution has presented a challenge to the business community. In a recent survey of OCC members, we discovered a “mental health action gap”: while a majority of businesses believe investing in mental health is important, few firms are taking concrete action.

Ontario businesses understand the importance of mentally healthy workplaces.²² 81 percent believe that spending on employee health and well-being is a good investment. Four out of five agree that it is equally as important to invest in mental health as physical health, and a similar share say that their organization’s success is dependent on their employees’ health and well-being. Hearteningly, only 38 percent of respondents believe that an insurance benefits plan alone is sufficient investment in employee health and wellness.

However, large organizations are more likely to agree with these statements than small organizations. Correspondingly, 45 percent of small business believe that only large companies can afford to invest

THE EMPLOYEE PERSPECTIVE

A recent Canadian Mental Health Association survey found that the top factors employed Canadians believe need to be addressed to improve mental health in their workplace are:

- Work overload/demands
- Challenges with work-life balance
- A lack of trust in leadership
- A lack of transparency and honesty
- A lack of support/tools²³

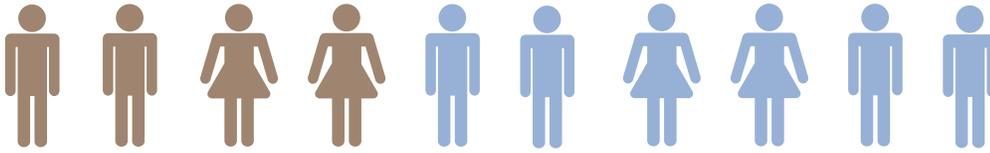
in employee health and well-being – compared to 22 percent of medium-sized businesses and 20 percent of large ones.

Of additional concern is that only four in ten businesses report having a formal strategy for employee health and well-being. The gap between business sizes here is particularly acute, as only 35 percent of small businesses have a strategy compared to 65 percent of medium and 76 percent of large businesses. Adding to this challenge is that such strategies are not unfailingly

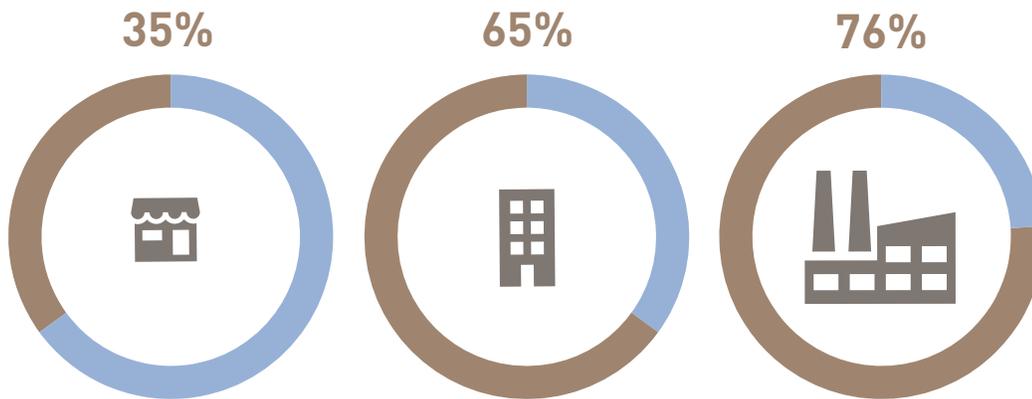
effective; in a survey commissioned by the Canadian Mental Health Association, 42 percent of respondents rate their organization as “not doing well” in their efforts to address workplace mental health.²⁴

These statistics reveal a troubling gap. On one hand, the business community believes that it is important to support their employees’ mental wellness in the workplace. On the other, businesses are not always prepared to act on that belief.

Only four in ten Ontario businesses report having a formal strategy for employee health and well-being.²⁵



Only 35 percent of small businesses have a strategy compared to 65 percent of medium and 76 percent of large businesses.²⁶



What is the cause of this gap? Mental health is an often intimidating and confusing topic for employers to broach, much less tackle effectively. There are many understandable explanations for why a business may fail to take action on mental wellness: cost, perceived scope of responsibility, privacy concerns, or simply a lack of knowing what to do.²⁷ This challenge is particularly acute for small businesses. While large enterprise in Canada has made considerable strides in placing mental health alongside physical health in importance, small operations may struggle to know where to begin, what the financial consequences of acting (or not acting) could be, or what resources are available and appropriate to their organization.

Additionally, studies have found that there exists a lack of understanding between employers and employees. According to a survey conducted by Mental Health Works, in spite of only a third of managers having had mental health training, 81 percent say they are comfortable talking to their employees about this subject. In contrast, less than 30 percent of employees believe their managers are knowledgeable about mental health.²⁸

More than a quarter of Canadian employees believe that if they faced a mental health challenge at work and revealed it to others, it would jeopardize their career.²⁹ Overall, employees perceive their employers to be less accommodating of mental health issues than physical health.³⁰ Regardless of the strides made in increasing public dialogue, many barriers to building mentally healthy workplaces in Canada remain in place.

Why Should Employers Take Action on Mental Wellness?

The Human Case

70% of Canadian employees report “some degree of concern with psychological health and safety in their workplace”.³¹

It is expected that employers will enact strategies and policies to ensure the success and sustainability of their business. Research has shown that one of the keys to this success and sustainability is a functioning team of healthy employees.³² Workplaces that promote wellness of both mind and body lead to reduced health care costs, increased morale and productivity, the avoidance of legal challenges and the attraction and retention of top talent.³³



For most employed individuals, much of their week is spent at work and in the company of co-workers. Employees bring daily challenges to the workplace, in the form of family, finances and relationships-and take home any job-related stressors and concerns.³⁴ The workplace can aggravate mental illness either by being a direct source of stress or by exacerbating issues that exist in other parts of an employee’s life. If not managed properly, workplace-related mental health issues can lead to increased rates or levels of illness, absenteeism, presenteeism, tension and conflicts between colleagues, deteriorating employee performance, reduced morale and a need for disciplinary action.³⁵ In both the short- and long-term, such challenges can cost businesses real money.³⁶

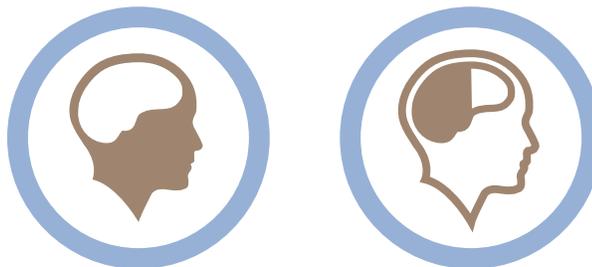
It should be noted that stress is a normal part of the workplace; however, there are two different kinds of stress.³⁷ Good stress is stimulating; it challenges and motivates us. Bad stress makes us feel as though we have no control, and can be caused by poor workplace management, bullying and harassment, physical environmental factors, lack of recognition and workplace instability.³⁸

To ensure that employee productivity and overall workplace functions are not adversely affected by stress, or that the workplace is not causing undue harm to employees’ personal health, employers should create a positive and functional environment. Such an environment should be one in which individuals feel respected, safe and heard so that they have the opportunity to perform to their best ability.³⁹

The Business Case

Absenteeism and presenteeism due to mental health problems account for more than \$6 billion in lost productivity.⁴⁰

\$6B



Most companies have developed strategies to ensure the physical safety of their workplace, resulting in lower insurance and workers' compensation costs.⁴¹ While some may recognize that mental safety is also relevant to their bottom line, fewer organizations take comparable action due to perceptions of difficulty, concern about efficacy, or a belief that the cost will outweigh the benefit. The true opportunity cost of failing to manage mental health issues in the workplace is often misunderstood or underestimated by employers.⁴²

Research has found, however, that the cost of doing nothing with regards to mental health in the workplace is higher than most employers imagine.⁴³ When viewed over time, unhealthy workplaces take their toll, leading to outcomes that have financial consequences.⁴⁴ According to the Canadian Mental Health Association, disability claims alone can be responsible for up to 12 percent of overall Canadian business payroll costs.⁴⁵ Another study found that mental health problems and illnesses account for approximately 30 percent of short- and long-term disability claims.⁴⁶

However, if the stressors that cause these outcomes are prevented, or if an employee receives timely and effective treatment for mental illness, it is likely that the workplace will see a lower spend on benefits and disability, lower presenteeism and absenteeism, and increased productivity.⁴⁷ Research has found that wellness programs can save approximately 1.5 to 1.7 days in absenteeism per worker over 12 months, or an estimated \$251 per employee per year.⁴⁸ In the UK, managing mental health through prevention in the workplace (i.e. early identification of problems and early action to reduce stress) was estimated to decrease productivity losses by 30 percent in large organizations.⁴⁹

Employers should also consider the reputation of their business as motivation for taking action on mental health. Healthy workplaces can increase employee retention and help a firm become an employer of choice.⁵⁰ Consider the cost of acquiring a new employee and the cost of training that individual. That outlay is lost if employees are less productive, absent or leave the organization entirely. Ignoring the health of the workplace can increase those costs, diminishing an employer's return on investment.⁵¹ In contrast, mentally healthy workplaces are better able to attract and retain talent, and have higher levels of productivity – including higher profit levels.⁵² Given the talent shortages facing employers of all sizes, across all sectors and in all regions, a mentally healthy workplace could provide an advantage over competitors.

The Legal Case

Although employers may have their own policies and procedures related to accommodation of mental illness, they must ultimately comply with relevant provincial, territorial and federal Human Rights Codes, as well as the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

In Ontario, the Occupational Health and Safety Act states that employers must take “every precaution reasonable under the circumstances” to protect the health and safety of their employees. Historically, this has only been applied to their physical health and safety, although precedent is developing for its application to mental health.⁵³

Looking at federal legislation, there is already a legal framework in place that highlights the duty to provide for psychological health and safety in the workplace. Under the Canadian Human Rights Act, mental illness is explicitly recognized as a disability.⁵⁴ As such, employers have a duty to accommodate and to ensure equal treatment of their employees.

The duty to accommodate includes:⁵⁵

- Preventing discrimination based on mental illness, such as refusing to hire someone, or prohibiting someone from taking part in projects, promotions or training opportunities because it is assumed, based on stereotypes rather than ability, that he or she is not fit to do the job.
- Providing continuous training and information about mental illness that helps everyone in the organization to understand and accept mental illness without stigma.
- Ensuring all employees have a constructive attitude towards mental illness and feel safe in self-identifying as a person with a mental illness so that they can be offered support in accessing proper treatment.
- Providing appropriate accommodation that allows employees to perform the essential duties of the job. The types of accommodation need to be individually assessed, using a case-by-case approach.⁵⁶

Providing or maintaining a psychologically safe work environment is as important as providing a physically safe workplace. The Canadian Human Rights Commission provides guidance to help managers and supervisors take proactive steps to ensure employees with a mental illness are offered appropriate accommodation when necessary.⁵⁷ Employers may also seek to obtain professional legal advice on specific obligations that may apply in their jurisdiction or to their industry.

Building a Mentally Healthy Workplace

The preceding pages have outlined why it is important to have a mentally healthy workplace. But how is such a workplace defined, built, and sustained?

A mentally healthy workplace features:

- ✓ Leadership that is responsive to mental health issues, including taking preventative action.
- ✓ Supportive relationships between employees and supervisors.
- ✓ An open door policy, with managers willing to hear both good and bad reports.
- ✓ Flexible work conditions (where appropriate) and good work/life balance.
- ✓ A mental wellness strategy that is not drafted and forgotten, but lives on through conversation and action.
- ✓ A policy of fairness and accommodation for those struggling with mental health issues or returning to work after a leave of absence.
- ✓ An environment in which employees are able to be productive at work and leave with energy at the end of the day.⁵⁸

Building a mentally healthy workplace generally requires leadership, strategy and resources. What forms these three requirements take depends upon each individual organization, its size, industry and unique workplace needs. What is consistent, however, is the necessity to foster a culture that supports the goal of a mentally healthy workplace. Fortunately, such a culture does not require a convoluted process or large expenditure to produce.

Employers who wish to take action on mental health should first consider how to set reasonable expectations, how to create a supportive environment, and how to maintain the mental health conversation. Below, we have outlined how to approach these steps in a straightforward fashion, with overarching guidance that can be applied to your business regardless of its size or the nature of its work.

These steps should help you to create buy-in from senior leadership, peers and employees; develop the intangible cultural changes necessary for success and maintenance; and ensure that mental wellness becomes a permanent feature of your workplace. They should guide you as you consult other resources, develop a formal strategy or policies, and measure your own organizational health.

From there, we encourage you to seek out information from the many expert organizations we identify at occ.ca/mentalhealth, as well as consider engaging your benefits provider and relevant consultants who can help bring structure and expertise to your efforts.

1. Setting Expectations

Most employers are not mental health experts, nor should they be expected to be; the individual starting the conversation does not necessarily have to have all the answers. It is most important that employers make a reasonable effort to be a support, rather than a barrier, to employees taking control of their mental wellness.

An organization will not and cannot change overnight; creating a mentally healthy workplace is a journey. Employers should begin by assessing their business: look for barriers to mental wellness, gaps in support and opportunities for change, as well as identify those stressors unique to their workplace.

Next, build the case for senior leadership, using the data presented in the previous section.⁵⁹ Engage employees in this discussion and ensure there is buy-in for change from across the organization. If possible, survey and benchmark the current state of organizational health so that data exists against which future progress can be measured.⁶⁰

Once the goal of promoting mental wellness has been established and approved by stakeholders, employers may feel the need to rush in and do everything at once – write a formal strategy, set up a mental health committee, bring in their benefits provider to speak about Employee Assistance Programs (EAP), enroll management in training, host lunch-and-learns with experts, and increase social and morale-boosting activities. Like any major lifestyle change, creating a mentally healthy workplace is best accomplished gradually, by taking reasonable steps and setting realistic goals. An organization should strive to do only one or two actions a year, but do them well.

Throughout this process, managers should be continually asking themselves one question: **“What can I do every day to ensure that I’m modeling the behaviour of health and wellness?”**⁶¹

2. Creating a Supportive Environment

Whatever actions are decided upon, ensuring open communication and awareness of new policies and activities is crucial. Employees should feel comfortable with, and empowered by, the focus on mental wellness.⁶² This requires leadership to create a supportive environment in which all employees are able to talk about their mental and physical health challenges, to both their colleagues and management.⁶³ Such a workplace is one in which employees are more willing to invest in their work and the goals of the business, and are subsequently able to produce greater results.⁶⁴ Happily, an environmental change in this manner requires little financial or organizational investment, and is suitable for all sizes and sectors of business.

It should be noted that leadership need not solely rest on the shoulders of management. Employees should be tasked as organizers, resources and peer support. This tactic is valuable, in part, because healthy relationships between co-workers are critically important to a healthy workplace. Successful organizations build resilient teams that can work to overcome challenges as a group, that respect and understand each individual member’s perspective, and that are invested in the idea of the workplace being as little a contributor to mental stress as possible.⁶⁵

Teams that are focused on building a mentally healthy workplace make life easier for managers and employers, as well. A recent survey found that 60 percent of managers say dealing with conflict is one of the most stressful parts of their job.⁶⁴ But if conflict can be reduced, both the employee and employer benefit. Strategies such as engaging employees in decisions that affect them, changing management styles towards a more supportive or empathetic approach, and increasing respect shown to employees cost nothing but can have significant impacts on the health of the workplace.⁶⁶

3. Maintaining the Conversation

Mental health is currently a hot topic in Canadian society. But how do we ensure this conversation is an enduring one, especially in the workplace?

One of the biggest challenges for employers is that their organization will develop a mental health strategy only to have it collect metaphorical dust on a shelf. Having formal policies in place for when issues arise is important, but if an organization's culture is not working towards a mentally healthy workplace every day then it is not truly tackling this challenge, and will not receive the benefits of preventative action.

Regularly taking the temperature of your business – both qualitatively and quantitatively – is one way to ensure the mission to build a mentally healthy workplace is enduring.⁶⁷ Seeking feedback and producing that as data which is available to employees will inform employers as to the current status of their business, if their actions have had any effect, and where pressure points may exist. This evidence can also be used to persuade senior management to invest in formal programming, as well as provide tangible support for efforts to change workplace culture. Results can also be linked to budgetary savings by using some of the tools identified in the following pages. If an organization can measure its progress, it is more likely to maintain its direction.

Building a Mentally Healthy Small Business

Many resources for building a mentally healthy workplace recommend striking a mental health committee, drafting a formal strategy and investing in wellness programs. Unfortunately, this is not a universally feasible approach, particularly for small businesses. In such operations, structural challenges such as a lack of resources, lack of subject-matter, expertise or lack of finances are tremendous barriers to action.

Only 35% of small businesses in Ontario have a formal strategy in place for employee mental health and well-being.⁶⁸



Small business owners are also uniquely vulnerable to stress and can often feel acutely frustrated, alone or burnt out.⁶⁹ For those who are employers, they may know they are required to make legal accommodations but do not know how to do so. They may worry about becoming an employee's therapist, while still aiming to make staff feel valuable and supported. Owners may not recognize when and where help is needed, especially for themselves. They tend to be uniquely affected by attitudinal factors like refusing to ask for or accept help, or burdened by stigma, fear and shame.⁷⁰

More than any other kind of employer, small business owners need to think proactively when developing a plan for mental wellness in their workplace. The success and sustainability of many small businesses is dependent upon the health and productivity of one or a few key individuals. As a result, it is critical that owners/operators take the time to build a supportive work environment. They should also establish emergency and secession plans to ensure that their business operations can continue in the event that they experience a debilitating illness. The strategies identified on the previous page for developing resilient and supportive teams will be particularly constructive throughout these initiatives.

For more information on dedicated resources for small businesses, see occ.ca/mentalhealth.

Resources

There are countless available resources on mental health, including many that address mental health in the workplace. For many employers, a recommended first stop is to your benefits provider, to ensure you and your employees are getting the most out of your EAP and supplementary lifestyle programs.

Beyond that, the OCC has created occ.ca/mentalhealth as a preliminary resource for employers looking to build a mentally healthy workplace. On that page can be found a selection of valuable and relevant websites and tools to help employers assess their business, develop appropriate solutions and discover formal support for their journey.

A few of these valuable resources can be accessed below.

Where to start

Mental Health Commission of Canada: [The National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace](#)

Relevant legislation

- Ministry of Labour: [A Guide to the Ontario Occupational Health and Safety Act](#)
- The Canadian Human Rights Act: [Duty to Accommodate](#)

Learn more about mental health in the workplace

- Mental Health Commission of Canada: [Making the Case for Investing in Mental Health in Canada](#)
- Canadian Mental Health Association: [Mental Health Works](#)
- Great-West Life Centre for Mental Health in the Workplace: [Workplace Strategies for Mental Health](#)
- Manulife: [Workplace Solutions for Mental Health](#)
- Morneau Shepell: [Workplace Mental Health Priorities 2016](#)
- Centre for Addiction and Mental Health: [Centre for Research on Employment and Workplace Health](#)
- Dr. Joti Samra: [The Evolution of Workplace Mental Health in Canada](#)

Assess your workplace

- CivicAction: [MindsMatter](#)
- Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers: [Measure Workplace Stress App](#)
- Dr. Bill Howatt: [Cost of Doing Nothing Calculator](#)

Toolkits

- Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers: [Mental Injury Toolkit](#)
- Mental Health Commission of Canada: [Mental Health First Aid](#)
- Dr. Bill Howatt: [Three Steps for Building a Mental Health Framework](#)
- Canadian Human Rights Commission: [Policy and Procedures on the Accommodation of Mental Illness](#)
- Bell Let's Talk: [Workplace Mental Health Toolkit](#)

For Small Business

- Great West Life Centre for Mental Health in the Workplace: [Strategies for Small Business Owners](#)
- [Heads Up! Australia](#)

Expert organizations and consultants

- [Mental Health Commission of Canada](#)
- [Canadian Mental Health Association](#)
 - [CMHA: Ontario Division](#)
- [Canadian Centre for Occupational Health & Safety](#)
- [Great West Life Centre for Mental Health in the Workplace](#)
- [CivicAction](#)
- [Morneau Shepell](#)
- [Polar Wellness Consulting](#)
- [Not Myself Today](#)

Conclusion

Mental illness, like physical illness, is part of the human condition and should be normalized as such. Any workplace wellness policy must therefore include both physical and mental health components. Ultimately, it is your employees who own their mental health. But employers can – and should – help facilitate that health.

The OCC is dedicated to supporting its members as they build mentally healthy workplaces. We recognize that businesses face any number of challenges to their sustainability, but mental health does not have to be one of them. Regardless of the size of the business or the sector in which it operates, people are key to meeting organizational goals – and a mentally healthy workplace is critical to preserving that valuable human capital. Ultimately, promoting a healthy and productive workforce can help businesses and communities across the province face new challenges from a position of strength.

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