

Mental Health Issues in the Workplace

Introduction

We all can have mental health issues from time-to-time. At some point, we likely will all experience times of depression or anxiety, as these are natural responses to certain life events.

Mental illness is a term that describes a broad range of conditions. Mental health issues can become a mental illness, sometimes called mental health disorders, when ongoing signs and symptoms of mental health issues cause frequent stress and affect a person's ability to function. A mental illness can significantly interfere with the person's ability to perform life activities including, but not limited to, working, learning, thinking, communicating, and sleeping.

A mental illness typically affects all areas of the person's life and a decline in physical health can also be experienced. There are many types of mental illnesses; some examples include clinical depression, bipolar disorder, anxiety disorder, trauma related disorder, schizophrenia, and substance use disorders.

Someone can experience a mental illness over many years. The type, intensity, and duration of symptoms vary from person to person. They come and go and do not always follow a regular pattern, making it difficult to predict when symptoms and functioning will worsen, even if treatment recommendations are followed. For many people, the symptoms of mental illness often can be controlled effectively through medication and/or therapy (such as working with a psychologist, therapist, or counsellor). However, for some individuals their illness can have periodic episodes that require additional treatment.

Consequently, some individuals with mental illness will need no support, others may need only occasional support, and still others may require more substantial, ongoing support to maintain their productivity at work.

There are many myths and stigmas that exist regarding mental illness. For instance, some people assume that mental illness is something individuals choose to have, or that it is something that they should just be able to snap out of. This is simply not true. Mental illnesses are diagnosable conditions that often require treatment, no different than any other conditions, such as diabetes, heart disease, or cancer.

Many people living with mental illness continue to come to work and do their job while experiencing symptoms. As people continue to break down the stigma often associated with mental illness, employers need to support employees with mental health illnesses and provide a safe zone for people to work in.

Mental Illness

There are many types of mental illnesses. Though not an exhaustive list, the following are some of the more common types of mental illness:

- **Anxiety disorders:** These are the most common group of mental illnesses which are characterized by severe fear or anxiety associated with particular objects and situations. Anxiety becomes a problem when feelings of tension and fear prevent a person from carrying out everyday tasks. In some cases, people may suffer panic attacks or phobias. Signs and symptoms of anxiety disorders include:
 1. Sense of fear or impending doom or death
 - Excessive worrying.
 - Decrease in concentration.
 - Rapid or slow thinking.
 - Irritability, easily distracted, difficulty sleeping.
 - Physical symptoms (heart racing, chest pain flushing, shortness of breath, dizziness, headaches, nausea, muscle aches and pains).

Most people with anxiety disorders try to avoid exposure to the situation or situations that causes anxiety. Anxiety disorders include but are not limited to:

- Generalized anxiety disorder: This is characterized by at least six months of persistent and excessive anxiety and worry about a number of events and activities. People who have it may experience:
 - Inability to relax.
 - Inability to fall asleep or stay asleep.
 - Trembling or irritability.
 - Twitching or muscle tension.
 - Headaches.
 - Sweating or hot flashes.

- Lightheadedness or breathlessness.
 - Nausea.
 - Going to the bathroom frequently.
 - Fatigue or lack of concentration.
2. Panic disorder: Includes the sudden onset of paralyzing terror or impending doom with symptoms that can closely resemble a heart attack. Included in this category is agoraphobia, which is the fear of having the symptoms of a panic attack where escape may be difficult, or the person would be judged.
 3. Phobias: Excessive fear of particular objects, or situations that expose a person to the possible judgment of others (social phobias).
 4. Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD): Persistent distressing thoughts (obsessions) that a person attempts to alleviate by performing repetitive, intentional acts (compulsions) such as hand washing.
 5. Trauma related disorders: A disorder that occurs after exposure (either direct or indirect) to terrifying, life-threatening trauma such as an act of violence, accidents, war, or a natural disaster. PTSD, or post-traumatic stress disorder, is one example.
- **Mood Disorders**: Also known as depressive disorders. These illnesses involve changes in mood, usually involving either depression or mania. With appropriate treatment, many people with mood disorders improve substantially. The treatments of mood disorders vary, but often include medications, therapy, or other specialized treatments

The signs and symptoms of mood disorders vary from person to person, and may include, but is not limited to:

1. Overwhelming feelings of sadness.
2. Decrease in personal appearance.
3. Decreased energy and feeling tired.
4. Feelings of worthlessness.
5. Withdrawal from others or seem 'down'.
6. Neglecting responsibilities.
7. Appetite changes.
8. Difficulty in thinking and making decisions.

Mood disorders include but are not limited to:

9. Major depression: An extreme or prolonged episode of sadness in which a person loses interest or pleasure in previously enjoyed activities.
 10. Bi-polar disorder: Also known as manic depressive disorder, with this illness a person may swing between episodes of extreme depressive symptoms to extreme mania (feeling of elation, high energy, grandiose ideas, and risky behaviour).
 11. Seasonal affective disorder (SAD): A form of major depression that occurs in the fall or winter and may be related to shortened periods of daylight.
 12. Post-partum depression: A form of depression that can occur after the birth of a child. This can occur following any pregnancy, including miscarriages and abortions.
- **Psychotic Disorders**: Psychosis is a term used when a person appears to lose some touch with reality. The most commonly known psychotic disorder is schizophrenia. The illness is highly complex, and few generalizations hold true for all people diagnosed with schizophrenia. However, most people initially develop the symptoms between the ages of fifteen and twenty-nine. Typically, the illness is characterized by thoughts that seem fragmented as well as difficulty processing information. The treatment of schizophrenia will require medication and therapy. Many people who are diagnosed with schizophrenia will go through cycles where they may stop taking their medication, which then results in the symptoms recurring and acute episodes of psychosis occurring. At these times, medication and therapy will be required.

The signs and symptoms of schizophrenia are categorized as either "negative" or "positive". Negative symptoms are things that decrease for the person and can include social isolation and withdrawal, loss of motivation, and a flat or inappropriate affect (mood or disposition). Positive symptoms are things that start to occur for the person and can include hallucinations (hearing voices), paranoia, delusions, or thought disorders.

- **Substance Related Disorders:** People use substances, such as drugs and alcohol, for various reasons. Using a substance does not mean that someone has a substance related disorder. However, people can develop a substance related disorder when negative patterns of behaviour are developed as a result of using the substance. The result is many different areas of the person's life becoming negatively affected. The behaviours associated with substance related disorders fall into the following four categories:
 1. Impaired control (inability to quit or limit, craving, requiring larger amounts, etc.).
 2. Social impairment (failing to meet obligations, interpersonal issues, interfering with social, work and recreational activities, etc.).
 3. Risky use (endangering self or others, physical harm, psychological harm, etc.).
 4. Pharmacological criteria (needing increased amount of the substance to get the same effect and withdrawal).
- **Eating disorders:** These are extreme ways of controlling food intake and weight gain, usually as a way of coping with emotional difficulties. People with anorexia nervosa severely restrict their calorie intake, while those with bulimia nervosa may binge eat. Both conditions may lead to people using other techniques to lose weight including vomiting, use of laxatives and excessive exercising.

Mental illnesses are treatable, and the cost of not treating them may be high in personal, work, and financial terms. An untreated mental illness can disrupt every area of a person's life, including personal, social, educational, and work. In some cases, untreated mental illnesses may lead to an increased risk of suicide.

[Characteristics of Mental Illness that Affect Functioning in the Workplace](#)

Mental illnesses can have a negative effect on the workplace. Some of the most common impacts include:

- The irregular nature of mental illness may create problems in establishing or maintaining consistent work patterns. Some individuals may need time off for medical appointments, treatments, or to recuperate. The irregular nature of mental illness might also impair an individual's performance.
- Increased stress associated with non-disclosure as the person tries to hide an illness and its symptoms. Many employees do not disclose an illness for fear of discrimination. This fear may be compounded if an employee feels that a job is in jeopardy.
- The side effects of medications. Despite their effectiveness for many employees, medications can also have side effects that create difficulties at work. Each employee has an adjustment period after starting, changing doses, or stopping medication. Some of the most common side effects include drowsiness, dizziness, dry mouth, nervousness, headaches, shakiness, confusion, and weight gain.
- Having more than one mental health illness (also known as co-morbidity). It has been reported that up to 20 percent of individuals with a mental illness have had a co-occurring substance related disorder. In addition, studies have shown more than 15 percent of people who have had substance related and/or addictive disorders have a co-occurring mental illness. Treatment and accommodation in these cases need to address the effects of substance abuse, as well as the effects of the person's mental illness. People can also have more than one mental illness diagnoses.

Mental Health Warning Signs

Symptoms of mental illnesses vary depending on the type and severity of the condition. Some general symptoms that may suggest an employee has a mental illness include, but are not limited to:

- Confused thinking.
- Long-lasting sadness or irritability.
- Extreme highs and lows in mood.
- Excessive fear, worry, or anxiety.
- Social withdrawal.
- Dramatic changes in eating or sleeping habits.
- Strong feelings of anger.
- Delusions or hallucinations (seeing or hearing things that are not there).

- Decreased ability to cope with daily problems and activities.
- Thoughts of suicide.
- Denial of obvious problems.
- Frequent outbursts of anger.
- Many unexplained physical problems.
- Increased use of drugs and/or alcohol.

If employees observe these behaviours in another employee, especially if it is out-of-character behaviour for that person, they should discuss the situation with the employee or their supervisor. The reality is that many employees do not seek treatment because of the “stigma” associated with mental illness.

Employees are not experts on mental health issues, but they are usually the first to observe when another employee starts to act differently.

Treatment

There are many different options for treating a mental illness, depending on the illness and circumstances. Some of the general options for treatment include:

- **Physician:** Often, the first step is for the employee to talk to their physician and be open and honest with them.
- **Self-help services:** Employees may find useful information on the internet or in the surplus of self-help literature available on topics relating to mental health. There are many different voluntary or nonprofit organizations offering help and support to people with mental health problems and include telephone support lines, self-help groups, advocacy services, and living accommodations.
- **Medication:** Employees with mental health problems can be prescribed medication to help relieve their symptoms. Medication can be very effective especially if used alongside other treatments, such as counselling, support from others, and lifestyle changes. However, medication can also cause side effects or symptoms when they stop taking them, and this and requires careful monitoring by a medical practitioner.
- **Psychological therapies:** There are many different types of psychological treatments which range from short term to long term. Employees can attend individually, with partners or families, or in a group setting. Therapy can cover a number of things including talking about difficulties and

feelings, changing the way they communicate or behave, or make decisions that affect their lives. Some common psychological treatments include counseling, cognitive behaviour therapy, and psychotherapy. Therapies can be offered through an organization's Employee Assistance Program (EAP), via a medical practitioner's referral, or paid for privately.

- Specialist services: A person's physician may make a referral to a specialist or mental health services, including but not limited to:
 1. Community mental health: These usually include psychiatric nurses, social workers, occupational therapists, and community support workers. These professionals may also receive input from psychiatrists and psychologists.
 2. Crisis resolution: A rapid, home-based assessment and short-term treatment for people in mental health crisis as an alternative to hospital admission.
 3. Early intervention: A specialist service for people who may be experiencing early signs of psychotic illness.
 4. Drug and alcohol supports: A specialist service that is aimed at helping people with substance related disorders
 5. Hospital: People may require a stay in hospital for treatment.

Employers need to remember that their role is to be aware of potential mental health issues in the workplace and to speak up if when there is cause for concern. The employer can then discuss the matter with the employee and encourage them to seek professional help and support.

Employer Actions in the Workplace

Under the *Saskatchewan Employment Act, Part III – Occupational Health and Safety* the employer and employees have a responsibility to create a safe work environment. In order for an employer to support those with mental health issues in the workplace, they must first identify potential situations. Again, if an employee observes out-of-character behaviour they should discuss the situation with the employee or their supervisor. Employees are not experts on mental health issues, but they are the first individual to observe when another employee starts to act differently.

The major benefit the employer can provide, along with a safe work environment, is education. Providing employees with information on mental health issues will:

- Increase the employer's opportunity to identify potential situations early.
- Inform employees about the warning signs.
- Allow the employees to react positively to potential situations and help to dispel the common myths and stereotypes associated with mental illnesses.
- Help employees feel comfortable talking about mental health and mental illness.
- Educate everyone on the employer's, employees', and the union's responsibility regarding the duty to accommodate.
- Inform them about the support provided through the Employee Assistance Program (if the organization offers one).

Although the employer has the major responsibility in the workplace, all employees also are accountable to support their fellow employees and to help maintain a safe working environment. By ending the stigma associated with mental illness, and encouraging open discussions with staff, employers are better equipped to maintain a safe working environment for all employees.

Best Practices

Some suggested best practices to assist the employer in dealing with mental health concerns in the workplace include:

- Treat potential mental health concerns in the workplace like any other workplace issue. First, investigate; provide the employee an opportunity to disclose, providing a safe place for conversations. If there is a disclosure, work with the employee and their medical practitioner to determine what a reasonable accommodation would be.
- If an employee exhibits out-of-character behaviour, express empathy and concern for their well-being, and encourage them to seek support. If they refuse to seek support and the behavior continues, the employer would need to deal with this by following procedures to deal with the behaviour itself.
- Provide employees with information on mental health concerns and remind them of any Employee Assistance Programs that exist.

- Ensure that employees are aware that if they observe out-of-character behaviour they should discuss the situation with the employee or bring it to the attention of their supervisor.
- Supervisors and managers should not attempt to diagnose or treat symptoms but instead refer employees to the appropriate support.

Summary

It is reported that in any given year, 1 in 5 Canadians experience a mental illness. Mental illness does not mean that an individual cannot work. People can work effectively while experiencing symptoms.

Someone can experience a mental illness over many years. The type, intensity, and duration of symptoms will vary from person-to-person. They come and go and do not always follow a regular pattern, making it difficult to predict when symptoms will appear. As a result, some individuals with mental illness will need limited support, others may need only occasional support, and still others may require more substantial, ongoing support to maintain their productivity.

Through educational initiatives and open dialogue regarding mental illness, the employer can help to end the stigma surrounding mental health and ensure a safe working environment for all employees.