

The Elephant in the Office

Addressing mental health in the workplace

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Cheryl Legate

There's a reason mental health ranks top of mind for Canadian employers. Mental health issues cost the Canadian economy \$51 billion annually, of which Canadian employers pay more than \$6 billion directly in lost productivity, absenteeism, presenteeism, and turnover. What's more, 1 in 5 Canadians experience a mental health problem every year and 500,000 Canadians miss work due to mental illness every week.

“And those are just the reported numbers,” adds Cheryl Legate, President and Facilitator with Cheryl Legate & Associates, an Ontario-based business offering mental health information and Mental Health First Aid certification training to corporate and non-profit companies.

Without knowledge and understanding of potential signs and symptoms, she adds, mental health problems in the workplace can be easily overlooked and viewed as a lack of motivation, and not being engaged in the job: “The harsh reality is that at least a quarter of all Canadians classify their workplace-related stress as 'high' and 60% of individuals who suffer from a mental health problem or illness, are unlikely to seek help or medical care for fear of being shunned, labelled and stigmatized. This is an issue that employers can't afford to ignore.”

No doubt, people are often at a loss when it comes to helping those with mental health and substance-related problems.

“When someone shows obvious signs of physical illness or injury we are compassionate, understanding and forthcoming in offering assistance. Unfortunately when it comes to mental health, we tend to do the opposite; we can't see the illness and because it is invisible and not widely recognized as a real medical condition, we may ignore, isolate, and even blame the individual for being ill. Early detection and intervention are essential as research indicates that the longer a person is away from the job, the greater the likelihood that they will have difficulty returning to a fully productive working status,” Legate adds.

Today's employees spend the majority of their waking hours in the workplace. As such, there is a need to break down the barriers and acknowledge mental health as an increasingly common health issue. That means investing in resources, training, and education to ensure that those who are suffering feel supported and do not go undetected in the workplace and health care system.

“It's important that employers approach mental illness in much the way same way as they approach physical illness,” affirms Legate, who has trained thousands of professionals in Mental Health First Aid (MHFA), Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST), and crisis response.

Fortunately, mental health has become front of mind for many Canadian employers in recent years. Many executive leaders are looking at ways to bring awareness to the workplace, acknowledging mental health training as a top priority and understanding that investment in employee wellness is good for business.

To that end, there are many resources and tools that help employers identify and support mental health in the workplace. The National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace, for one, was launched by the Mental Health Commission of Canada in 2013 to provide voluntary guidelines, tools, and resources for promoting mental well-being and preventing psychological harm at work.

More directly, employers can create a culture of acceptance by equipping all staff with the knowledge and skills to proactively address workplace-related stress and identify its many root causes (e.g. depression, anxiety, substance use, etc.). Being proactive improves productivity and attitudes around mental illness while raising morale and lowering the costs associated with lost time and poor work performance.

MHFA training, for example, aims to improve mental health literacy and provide the skills and knowledge to help people better manage potential or developing mental health problems in themselves, a family member, a friend, or a colleague.

It's a simple truth, but it's worth repeating: physical and psychological safety must have equal merit when it comes to workplace health and safety standards as we all perform at our best when our psychological health is optimized and supported. And yet, for almost 7 million Canadians living with a mental health or substance use problem today, reaching optimum performance at work can be a challenge. Here's where employers and co-workers play a critical role in making the workplace a more supportive, understanding, and healthy environment for all.

Notes Legate: “When employers are proactive in educating their staff to recognize, respond, and promote good mental health, they are investing in a healthy work environment, in their employees, and ultimately, in the company's bottom line.”

Cheryl Legate is the President and Facilitator with Cheryl Legate & Associates (www.cheryllegate.ca).

- More than 30% of workplace disability claims are related to mental health problems
- By 2041, cases of Canadians living with mental illness are estimated to climb up to 8.9 million, a 31% increase from 2011.
- MHFA is an international program adopted by 25 countries
- In Canada, almost 4,000 people die by suicide each year