

WHY DO YOU NEED A MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT PLAN IN YOUR ORGANIZATION?

TAKE A POSITIVE AND PREVENTIVE APPROACH TO MENTAL HEALTH CONCERNS

By Bill Shapiro

Mental health issues can affect us all – regardless of our age, economic standing, race or gender – and if we are living with a mental health issue, we know the importance of seeking help. When we consider how many

of us spend hours a day at work, it is imperative that our workplace is supportive.

There has been much said about post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and stress-related work incidences that are leading some to ask that work-related stress be



covered by the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB).

Everyone in the workplace can be susceptible to work-related stress, and organizations need to have a mental health plan in place to deal with these issues and provide a supportive work environment for their employees. Taking a preventative approach when preparing a mental health strategy should provide for better support and response for all employees, and could involve building on existing workplace programs, such as workplace harassment and bullying.

Workplaces with a positive approach to mental health issues have improved employee engagement, enhanced productivity, are more creative and innovative and have higher profit levels. Other positive impacts include a reduction of several key workplace issues including the risk of conflict, grievances, turnover, disability, injury rates, absenteeism and performance or morale problems.

Employers that implement a strategic mental health plan see the benefits of risk mitigation (including compliance with

existing legislation and regulation), cost savings, improved processes for recruitment and staff retention and organizational distinction and sustainability.

A successful mental health support plan has several components. These include strategies that are integrated and inclusive of employees, their families, the WSIB, unions and management.

When creating a plan, employees' active participation is a requirement for successful policy development. The objective is to integrate the plan into existing and future organizational policies and processes, including occupational health and safety, throughout the organization.

Opportunities for improvement can be identified, ensuring alignment with best practices and legislative requirements. A program can then be developed to accompany appropriate change management initiatives to ensure sustainability and buy-in from all stakeholders, both internal and external to the organization. A proactive approach to risk management, through the identification and mitigation of



THE MENTAL HEALTH PLAN NEEDS TO BE FLEXIBLE AND CONSIDER INDIVIDUAL CIRCUMSTANCES, WITH PROGRAMS CREATED ON DIFFERENT PLATFORMS.

exposures before risks ensue, shows the organization as a whole that the priority lies with their greatest asset, their human capital.

The plan should aim to change the organizational culture to reduce stigma. An environment that focuses on inclusion, understanding, communication and open dialogue can help ensure the development and creation of a culture free from stigma and shame, helping to break down the barriers associated with mental health issues.

Another component of a successful mental health support plan is for it to be in place prior to incidents occurring. By acting preventatively, a healthy and resilient workforce can be created, one where senior leaders have the opportunity to demonstrate their commitment, ensuring that the tone is set at the top level, with available resources and supports.

The plan should include regular follow-ups if workers go off work,

and a plan to re-integrate workers when they return and normalize the return-to-work process. Key metrics need to be met to ensure that wellness check-ins for staff are effective, and employees at risk can be identified, based on the efficacy of the program.

Data collection processes can include but are not limited to job descriptions or demands analyses, rates of turnover, rates of absenteeism, worker feedback from surveys and their participation rates and reports from unions or worker groups regarding exposure and risk, return-to-work accommodations, STD and LTD costs and employee assistance plans. Evaluation of outcomes leads to continual improvement.

The mental health plan needs to be flexible and consider individual circumstances, with programs created on different platforms, such as web-based resources, to ensure employees' privacy and the accessibility of the programs. Also,



there needs to be practices in place that foster a psychologically safe environment that allows workers to report errors, hazards, adverse events and close calls without fear of reprimand.

Lastly, a successful mental health plan provides ongoing resiliency training, from the hiring stage to refresher training. Programs incorporating these approaches have shown that they can improve the ability to recover quickly after stress and trauma, enhancing employees' quality of life. Taking a continuous risk improvement approach to managing mental health in the workplace allows for the opportunity to prioritize emerging risks, and subsequently align with the company's strategic objectives.

The organization's mental health plan should ultimately assist the company to have processes in place to intervene if an employee looks distressed while at work, where the organization supports workers who are returning to work after time off

due to a mental health condition, where workers feel supported by the organization when they are dealing with personal or family issues and staff feel that the organization has a good understanding of the importance of worker mental health.

The benefits of a mental health support plan are numerous. When the focus is on prevention of harm, promotion of health and concern resolution, the positive outcomes can include stress reduction in staff, an increase in productivity and can reduce absences in the workplace.

As with most initiatives, the challenge is with implementation and execution. Keys to implementing a successful mental health support are the same as any management initiative: senior executive support, program ownership and accountability, achievable milestones and, of course, measurement of results.

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