



NEWSLETTER

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PROMOTION OF MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE IN CANADA

In past newsletters, including [Stress, Burnout and dangers to Health of Workers and Organizations - Issue 7 - 04 09.pdf](#), [High Stress Jobs and Their Special Problems - Issue 23 - 07 10.pdf](#), [Dealing with Work-Related Stress - The British Way - Issue 28 - 12 10.pdf](#) and [Legal Liability of Organizations for Mental Injury in Canada - Issue 29 - 01 11.pdf](#), various issues have been dealt with which touch on the impact of chronic stress on the mental health of employees and their productivity within organizations. In recent years, the matter of mental health has taken on an even greater importance in society as a whole and more specifically within the workplace.

The growing number of injuries due to stress, burnout or other psychological factors demonstrates the great increase in occupational mental health problems in the last few years, which are the primary cause of the increase in absenteeism. For organizations, the lack of a strategic risk-prevention process is a major obstacle for effectively dealing with this important issue.

In Canada, Quebec's [Institut de recherche Robert-Sauvé en santé et en sécurité du travail](#) (IRSST) recently published a series of booklets dealing with mental health in the workplace in collaboration with the Chair in Occupational Health and Safety Management at Université Laval, Québec. The series is intended for persons who are involved in occupational health and safety (OHS) and especially mental health at work. Quebec has been a leading jurisdiction in regulating and promoting the prevention of stress-related diseases.

*While many people develop self-confidence and a feeling of accomplishment through work, it can be a source of stress and discontent for others. The combination of employer requirements and the demands of modern life are a growing burden for individuals. Workers increasingly complain about having **sleep disorders or various other problems** for which there seems to be no effective medication. Some admit to having **problems concentrating and maintaining their attention**, while others say they are **tired and burned out**. Individuals complain about **irritability and conflicts** with colleagues or supervisors, while some workers **isolate themselves and stop participating in social activities**. All these phenomena are related to workplace stress, which is increasingly becoming a central concern for organizations and individuals.¹*

In a June 2011 report, [The Conference Board of Canada](#), a major business organization, noted that mental health issues are prominent in Canadian workplaces and many workers are hesitant to come forward due to an apparent lack of understanding on the part of their employers.² The report highlights the workplace challenges faced by employees with mental health issues, and provides insight into how employers can best support these employees. The Conference Board also helped to run the [Workplace Mental Health 2011 Conference](#) in Toronto in June 2011, emphasizing that awareness of

¹ *Booklet 1 – Series on Mental Health at Work ... From Defining to Solving the Problem*: Institut de recherche Robert-Sauvé en santé et en sécurité du travail (Quebec), 2005

² *Building Mentally Healthy Workplaces: Perspectives of Canadian Workers and Front-Line Managers*: Louise Chenier, Karla Thorpe (The Conference Board of Canada, June 2011)

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the importance of workplace mental health is greater than ever. The above event featured the first public presentations of two new mental health research projects from The Conference Board:

- ☞ **Minding What Matters—Advancing Mental Health in Canadian Organizations**, a groundbreaking study based on extensive employee and employer surveys that identifies best practices of benefit to all organizations
- ☞ **The Costs of Poor Mental Health on Productivity and Competitiveness**, a new report that provides essential information to help build a business case for action on workplace mental health

In addition, Canadian employers have demonstrated increased support for improving the psychological health and safety of their employees with the proposed development of a new Canada-wide Standard. Development of the *National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace* was announced in June 2011 by the [Mental Health Commission of Canada](#).

What are the costs of poor employee mental health to organizations?

*Over the past five years, there has been an increase of up to 700 per cent in damages awarded for workplace mental health injury....What this says is that the courts are now recognizing that conditions in the workplace can precipitate mental illness, ... between 10 and 25 per cent of Canadian workplaces are characterized by conditions and environments considered "mentally injurious". Mental health issues are the leading cause of short- and long-term disability in Canada, affecting one in five workers and racking up an estimated \$51 billion each year in terms of lost work days and work disruptions. —Michael Kirby, Chairman, Mental Health Commission*³

The Mental Health Commission of Canada has estimated that the economic burden of mental disorders in Canada has been estimated at \$51 billion per year, with almost \$20 billion of that coming from workplace losses.⁴ Andrew Harkness, a healthy workplace specialist with the Ontario [Workplace Safety & Prevention Services](#), noted that a contributing factor is a perceived lack of metrics for capturing the workplace costs of mental injury and harm, especially among smaller employers. He also stated that if these costs are being measured, typically it's not under the umbrella of health and safety. Costing might be covered under a benefits package, but only if the workplace has benefits.⁵

One of the major contributory negative factors to potentially poor mental health is chronic stress. Indeed, the direct costs of such stress are often related to absenteeism, short-term disability, long-term disability, medication and paramedical costs. Indirect costs are deemed to be those involving salaries and training costs for replacement staff, reduced productivity, increased turnover of staff, presenteeism, deterioration of the atmosphere at work, unhappy workers, and additional overtime.⁶

In 2010, Researchers at the [Centre for Addiction and Mental Health](#) (CAMH) in Toronto, Canada, noted in a report that mental illness can be linked to more lost work days than any other chronic condition. The CAMH again estimated that this was costing the Canadian economy billions of dollars annually in lost productivity. About 10 percent of Canadian workers between 18 and 54 years old suffered from mental health issues. The Centre also looked at the cost of mental health leaves from employers' point of view and found that covering a mental health leave costs companies twice as much as a short-term physical disability leave. The study found that for every 1,000 Canadian employees, 145 short-term

³ *Canada to receive new standards to protect workers' mental health*: Amy Minsky, Postmedia News, June 17, 2011

⁴ *Psychological health and safety standard for Canadian workplaces*: Press Release of Mental Health Commission of Canada, June 16, 2011

⁵ *Watch for a new psychological health & safety standard*: New HSO Resources, July 25, 2011

⁶ *Booklet 1 – Series on Mental Health at Work ... From Defining to Solving the Problem*: Institut de recherche Robert-Sauvé en santé et en sécurité du travail (Quebec), 2005

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leaves are taken annually and about 20 of those are related to mental health. Average short-term physical disability leave was about 33 days, and on average employers paid \$9,000 for each case. The study found that the most common reasons employees took physical disability leave included respiratory illness, muscular skeletal problems, injury and digestive disorders. Meanwhile, depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder were the mental illnesses that appeared most in the Canadian workforce, with each case leading to an average 65-day leave and \$18,000 bill.⁷

Proposed National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace

In June 2011, it was announced that a technical standards committee of the [Canadian Standards Association](#) (CSA) and the [Bureau de normalization du Québec](#) (BNQ) technical committee had begun working on a management standard that will provide a step-by-step framework for controlling and eliminating workplace psychological health and safety hazards. It is anticipated that the technical committees will have a draft Standard ready for public commentary by the end of 2011, and a final version for release by summer 2012.⁸

As noted in the announcement, a worldwide precedent for psychological health and safety standards was set by the BNQ, with its 2006 [NQ 9700-800 Healthy Enterprise Standard](#). The only other existing standard is the British Standards Institute's [PAS 1010, Guidance on the Management of Psychological Risks in the Workplace](#). The British standard was released in January 2011.

The primary intent in developing this voluntary Canadian Standard is to provide systematic supports that will enable Canadian employers to expand and continuously improve psychologically safe and healthy work environments for their employees. The goal is to make the Standard user-friendly and easily accessible to Canadian employers and other interested parties.

It is believed that by complying with the voluntary Standard, Canadian employers will benefit by:

- ☞ creating workplaces free of mental injury and harm,
- ☞ helping workers receive treatment and recover sooner,
- ☞ reducing the economic costs resulting from mental injury and harm,
- ☞ helping to eliminate stigma by increasing conversation about mental health among all workplace parties, and
- ☞ meeting changing societal expectations.

Patti Boucher, Vice President of Prevention Services for Ontario's [Public Service Health & Safety Association](#), noted that there is lack of awareness and knowledge about mental health issues. Moreover, many employers are unaware of the extent of the problem, and may not know how to grapple with it. She noted that this is the beauty of the Standard. It will contain explicit language to guide employers toward creating psychologically healthy and safe workplaces.⁹

The BNQ and CSA will jointly manage the Standard development process and publication. The Standard will be developed as a "stand-alone" National Standard of Canada (NSC). The designation for the Standard shall be CAN/BNQ/CSA. A 60-day public consultation on the Standard will begin this fall, and Louise Bradley, President of the Mental Health Commission hopes to have the Standard ready for employers next year.¹⁰ Eventual implementation of the Standard will be up to individual organizations, labour groups, professional organizations, industry groups and other interested parties.

⁷ *Mental health leaves cost Canadian economy \$51 billion - study*: Carmen Chai, Postmedia News, September 9, 2010

⁸ *Watch for a new psychological health & safety standard*: New HSO Resources, July 25, 2011

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ *Canada to receive new standards to protect workers' mental health*: Op. Cit.

Accommodation by organizations of persons with disabilities

When people think of disabilities, they often think of visible disabilities. But a worker with a disabling mental illness is as deserving of accommodation under the law as a worker in a wheelchair. — Kathy Jurgens, National Program Manager for Mental Health Works, Canadian Mental Health Association ¹¹

In addition to helping to promote mental health within the workplace, organizations are legally responsible to ensure that persons suffering from some form of mental disability or related physical disability are accommodated so as to continue working and remain productive members of society. The requirement to accommodate a disability is found in human rights legislation. The governing Canadian legislation is the [Canadian Human Rights Act](#) for workplaces under federal jurisdiction, and provincial Human Rights Codes for provincially-regulated employers.

Although wordings differ, the effect is that discrimination is prohibited and organizations must accommodate the needs of a disabled employee to the point of "undue hardship," provided it does not put at risk health and safety at the workplace. Unless the employer can demonstrate "undue hardship," every effort must be made to accommodate an employee with a disability. Failure to promote mentally healthy workplaces could result not only in future compensation and liability costs associated with disabilities, but also in accommodation costs associated with return-to-work.

Recommended Reading:

- ◆ [Series of three booklets on Mental Health at Work](#): Institut de recherche Robert-Sauvé en santé et en sécurité du travail (IRSST) in Quebec, Canada
- ◆ [Guide to Business Case for Mental Health](#): European Network for Workplace Health Promotion
- ◆ [Promoting Mental Wellbeing Through Productive and Healthy Working Conditions - Guidance for Employers](#): National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (UK)
- ◆ [Building Mentally Healthy Workplaces: Perspectives of Canadian Workers and Front-Line Managers](#): The Conference Board of Canada (June 2011)

Recommended Web Sites:

- ◆ Guarding Minds at Work - commissioned by the Great-West Life Centre for Mental Health in the Workplace: <http://www.guardingmindsatwork.ca/info/resources>
- ◆ Mental Health Commission of Canada – Workplace Mental Health: <http://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/Pages/Workforce.aspx>
- ◆ Focus on Workplace Mental Health – Center for Addiction and Mental Health (Canada): http://knowledgex.camh.net/focus_pages/Pages/workplace_mh.aspx
- ◆ The Conference Board of Canada – Health, Health Care and Wellness: <http://www.conferenceboard.ca/topics/health/default.aspx>
- ◆ Bureau de normalisation du Québec: <http://www.bnq.gc.ca/en/index.html>
- ◆ Canadian Standards Association: <http://www.csa.ca/cm/ca/en/home>
- ◆ Mental Health in the Workplace - European Network for Workplace Health Promotion: <http://www.enwhp.org/enwhp-initiatives/current-initiative-work-in-tune-with-life/mental-health-at-the-workplace.html>
- ◆ Mentally Healthy Workplaces: Strategies for Success – Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety Webinar: http://www.ccohs.ca/products/webinars/mental_health/
- ◆ Mentally Healthy Workplace – Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety Podcast: http://www.ccohs.ca/catalog/products_list_ccohs.php?cPath=169&orig=/products/podcasts/&subcategory=172

¹¹ *Accommodating disabilities in workplace a 'minefield'*: Mark Sabourin, OHS Canada Newsletter, August 30, 2011

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