

The High Cost of Unwellness

By Dr. Monica Vermani, C. Psych, Clinical Psychologist

Once you've seen it, it's a number you can never unsee: mental health issues cost the Canadian economy a whopping \$6 billion a year in lost productivity. With COVID-19 leaving employees more stressed than ever, today's workplaces are facing a mental health crisis of epic proportions. Let's look at the underlying causes and solutions to this pervasive problem.

In Canada, corporations lose an average of 16 days of productivity a year per employee due to stress, anxiety, and depression-related issues. In 2010, mental health issues were one of the top three causes for short- and long-term disability claims made by more than 80% of Canadian employers. The largest area of increase in long-term disability claims has been in mental health.

It's an epidemic that affects both individuals and corporate bottom lines.

While corporations develop strategies to increase profits, expand distribution, invest in technology, and recruit the best people when it comes to maintaining the workplace, mental illness is the phantom in the room: it is invisible, ever-present, and rarely — if ever — talked about.

Alarming statistics

Perhaps the most profound statistic related to mental health is this: 40% of worker turnover is due to on-the-job stress. If these numbers pertained to diabetes or heart disease, they would be considered an epidemic. But today, despite these alarming statistics, mental health in the workplace remains an afterthought, a mere ghost. Bodies go missing, and the associated costs to any company that fails to take mental health seriously are staggering.

When stress goes unchecked

When stress goes unchecked, it can lead to general unhappiness, anxiety, moodiness, poor listening and communication skills, difficulty managing life in general, unfinished tasks, unmet deadlines, anger issues, irritability, absenteeism, loss of motivation, loss of interest, decreased productivity, higher insurance costs, accidents, short- and long-term leaves of absence, an increase in workers

compensation cases, and so on... all of which are toxic to the workplace and negatively impact productivity.

When 62% of employees complain of neck pain at the end of their workday, 44% report eye fatigue, and 34% struggle to get a good night's sleep, it doesn't take a psychologist to recognize that people are stretched to the point of exhaustion. But here's why expert intervention is required: untreated fatigue will lead to increased anxiety, and when this occurs, depression and mental illness are not far behind. For corporations, the aggregate of these numbers amounts to huge losses in productivity.

Absent, present, and unaccounted for

A 2014 study found that in Canada, half a million workers are absent each day due to mental health issues. Absenteeism is a common coping mechanism for people who are stressed out in the workplace.

Another consequence of poor mental health is presenteeism when an employee shows up but their state of mind affects the quality and quantity of their work, to the point where they are not producing, and/or negatively impacts the productivity of others. A 2012 review by McIntyre, Liauw & Taylor in the Journal of Affective Disorders indicated that half of working individuals struggling with depression will not request a short-term leave at any point in their careers.

This same study asserts that a supportive work environment can go a long way in preventing episodes of depression from descending into a disability. Workplace stress can also lead to substance abuse, eating issues, conflicts between colleagues, resentment toward

management, and even stealing from the company.

How corporate wellness programs work

Workplace wellness programs work in two ways. They prevent mental illness not only by relieving the pressure of work on our brains and provide valuable coping strategies for individuals who are suffering and need to refocus. Wellness programs not only prevent mental illness but also empower individuals to achieve greater results while fostering more trust, loyalty, and team cohesion.

Investing in mental health is investing in people with the long game in mind. When mental illness is treated early and effectively, costly disability leaves can be avoided. Most programs are relatively inexpensive — as little as \$500 per individual per year — and effectively reduce costs for healthcare and losses due to absenteeism and poor productivity.

Employees who are mentally fit can handle the stress of their jobs. They are more resilient in the face of criticism, challenges, setbacks, and other adversities. Improved stress management results in fewer colds and other minor illnesses, and a reduction in cases of substance abuse.

The benefits include improved focus, attentiveness, and concentration, increased productivity, reduced absenteeism and presenteeism, reduced staff turnover and recruitment, hiring and training costs, fewer employees on disability, better workplace morale, and higher job satisfaction.

The solution is clear

Workplace wellness programs offer an effective, preventative strategy against losses from mental illness. Wellness programs teach individuals how to deal with mood and anxiety with a wide range of strategies including diet and exercise and how to best organize one's time. They encourage and cultivate ambition and concentration through various means, including meditation, yoga, exercise, and counseling. They teach employees how to build a solid team, resolve conflicts, and how to balance careers and family. Wellness programs also open the channels of communication between management and staff that lead to greater collegiality and team cohesion.

The stats are evident, the cost is measurable, and the solution is clear. Investing in the mental health of your employees is investing in the long-term stability and value of your company. Help is just a click or a call away.



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About the author

Dr. Monica Vermani is a Clinical Psychologist specializing in treating trauma, stress and mood & anxiety disorders, and the founder of Start Living Corporate Wellness. She is a well-known speaker and author on mental health and wellness. Her upcoming book, A Deeper Wellness, is scheduled for publication in 2021.

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