

PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH AND SAFETY IN CANADIAN HEALTHCARE SETTINGS

By: The Canadian Healthcare Association

*(Now merged with the Association of Canadian Academic
Healthcare Organizations to form HealthCareCAN.)*

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HealthCareCAN strongly encourages members and all health system stakeholders to adopt the standard on Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace – Prevention, Promotion and Guidance to Staged Implementation.

HealthCareCAN recognizes the importance of psychological health as a key component to creating a productive, effective and psychologically healthy workforce and strongly encourages its members and all health system stakeholders to adopt and take action to implement the standard on *Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace*.

Approved by Canadian Healthcare Association (CHA) Board of Directors October 2013

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HealthCareCAN is the national voice of healthcare organizations across Canada. We foster informed and continuous, results-oriented discovery and innovation across the continuum of healthcare. We act with others to enhance the health of all Canadians; to build the capability for high quality care; and to help ensure value for money in publicly financed, healthcare programs.

Introduction

Psychological health and safety is a growing priority in Canadian workplaces, including Canadian healthcare settings. One in five people will experience a mental health problem or illness in any given year.ⁱ Nearly half of all Canadians will have had some form of mental illness by the time they turn 40.ⁱⁱ We all know someone who has experienced a mental health problem or illness.

In 2013, Canada became the first country in the world to develop a voluntary standard on psychological health and safety in the workplace, *Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace – Prevention, Promotion, and Guidance to Staged Implementation*ⁱⁱⁱ (the *Standard*). The *Standard* was championed by the Mental Health Commission of Canada and developed collaboratively by the Bureau de Normalisation du Québec and CSA Group.

HealthCareCAN recognizes the importance of this *Standard* to healthcare settings. HealthCareCAN encourages members and all health stakeholders to adopt and take action to implement the standard on *Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace – Prevention, Promotion and Guidance to Staged Implementation*.

Background

The workplace clearly has a key role to play in promoting mental health. Many Canadians spend more waking hours at work than at any other place.^{iv} Those most at risk for mental illness or problems are often in their prime working years. Promotion and prevention efforts in the workplace can therefore make a real difference in the health and lives of Canadians.

Promoting positive mental health also contributes to productivity and economic prosperity. Mental health problems contribute to employee turnover, absenteeism, presenteeism,¹ and lost productivity. Each day, over 500,000 Canadians are away from work because of mental health-related reasons.^v The cost of mental health problems and illnesses has been estimated to represent 2.8% of Canada's Gross Domestic Product.^{vi}

Taking steps to protect and promote mental health can also reduce the number of disability claims. One in three disability claims in Canada are related to mental illness,^{vii} and the numbers are growing. Mental health claims represent 70% of the total cost of disability claims.^{viii} This is partly because a person dealing with a mental health issue is likely to be off work much longer than someone dealing with another type of disability.^{ix}

Under existing health and safety legislation, employers have a legal obligation to maintain a healthy and safe work environment. Recent decisions suggest that this obligation also extends to the need to maintain a psychologically healthy and safe workplace.^x Workplace practices that create the risk of mental injury can, therefore, lead to legal liability. In recent years, Canadian courts have been awarding workers increasingly large damages for mental health injuries.^{xi}

The first mental health strategy for Canada, *Changing Directions, Changing Lives: The Mental Health Strategy for Canada* (the *Strategy*), released May 2012,^{xii} addresses a range of issues related to workplace mental health, including the promotion of psychological health and safety in creating mentally healthy workplaces. CHA's 2013 position statement on *Mental Health* strongly endorses the *Strategy*, which specifically recommended the implementation of the *Standard* in the private and public sectors.²

¹ Situation "where an employee is physically at work, but not fully productive due to physical or mental conditions." Towers Watson. (2010). *2009/2010 North American Staying@Work Report: The Health and Productivity Advantage*. Watson Wyatt Worldwide, p.p.4

² Although the *Standard* was released after the *Mental Health Strategy for Canada*, its development was well underway when the *Strategy* was released in May 2012. The *Strategy*, therefore, specifically recommends the implementation of the *Standard* in the private and public sectors.

Canadian workplaces, including healthcare settings

“...a fundamental way to better healthcare is through healthier healthcare workplaces; and it is unacceptable to work in, receive care in, govern, manage and fund unhealthy healthcare workplaces.”

Quality Worklife–Quality Healthcare Collaborative, 2006

Many Canadian workers report rising stress levels, increasing work pressures, and challenges balancing competing work and family demands.^{xiii} Pressures in the workplace can contribute to mental health issues. An April 2013 survey of working Canadians found that nearly half of those surveyed said that work was the most stressful part of their lives.^{xiv} Sixteen percent of those surveyed said that their job is a frequent or ongoing source of feelings of depression, anxiety or other mental health symptoms.^{xv}

Healthcare settings can be particularly challenging environments. Healthcare workers are 1.5 times more likely to be off work due to illness or disability than people in all other sectors.^{xvi} Chronic stress and burnout are common. A lot of health workers report a wide range of health conditions related to work-related stress including depression, anxiety, weight gain, substance abuse, and even suicide.^{xvii} Many Canadian physicians report that they are in the advanced stages of burnout,^{xviii} and burnout is also a critical issue for Canadian nurses.^{xix}

Many healthcare workers have heavy workloads, significant pressures and a lack of time and resources to adequately do their jobs.^{xx} Staff shortages as a result of cut-backs and layoffs are common and can lead to longer and/or more frequent working periods and an increase in personal stress. In addition to “doing more with less,” work in the healthcare sector can be emotionally demanding. Ongoing work with patients and their families, and helping people cope with illness and death can result in “compassion fatigue”. Healthcare workers can also face challenges associated with shift work, workplace violence and bullying, and dealing with rapidly changing practice environments.

Promoting and protecting the psychological health of workers is essential to a well-functioning health system, as well as being “the right thing to do.” Like physical illness, psychological illness can lead to absenteeism, loss of skilled workers, presenteeism, and high levels of staff turnover – all to the detriment of the overall healthcare system. Good psychological health is also integral to being an effective healthcare worker.^{xxi} It is difficult, for instance, for a health worker to provide high quality patient care if she or he is overly stressed or emotionally exhausted. The psychological health of individual workers also affects the day-to-day dynamics of the entire workplace. People who don’t feel well, for instance, may not behave well and there may be heightened interpersonal conflict. Good psychological health may contribute to fewer medical errors and patient-safety incidents. It may also contribute to increased productivity and efficiency. Research shows that organizations that actively support the physical, emotional and interpersonal well-being of their employees are more likely to have highly engaged employees – essential to high productivity.^{xxii}

Healthcare leaders should also be aware that promoting psychological health - including respecting work-life balance and promoting good worker psychological health and safety – matters to Canadians, and can be an important factor to attract and retain talented workers. A global study by Mercer Consulting Group found that Canada was the only country worldwide where workers chose extra paid time off instead of an increase in salary as a preferred benefit.^{xxiii} Young people are also reportedly more concerned about work-life balance than financial rewards, and may be more likely to change jobs if they are not getting what they want and expect. A survey of “Generation Y” workers found that they are more likely to stay in a job if they feel supported and appreciated, are part of a cohesive team, and have flexibility over where and how much they work.^{xxiv} This generation will make up 50% of the workforce by 2020. Furthermore, with the growing de-stigmatization of mental illness, talented employees may be increasingly attracted to companies where mental illness can be talked about openly.

Finally, health workplaces, like all workplaces, are faced with the enormous challenges associated with reducing stigma around mental illness. Many employees do not feel comfortable talking with their employers about mental illness.^{xxv} And, of course, stigma and discrimination greatly exacerbate the many difficulties faced

by people with mental health problems. However, with increasing measures being taken to combat stigma related to psychological illness, more and more employees are going to feel safer saying that they have a mental health issue. Healthcare settings need to be able to support those employees who come forward.

Current status in healthcare settings

Successful workplace initiatives require leadership, commitment, and active participation of all stakeholders. It is also essential that workplaces engage in a structured planning process so that initiatives are based on clearly defined workplace and workforce needs (further discussion of these aspects can be found below in the section on the *Standard*).

Many healthcare settings are taking important steps to address psychological health in the workplace by developing innovative programs to help address emotional and mental health. Some, for example, provide training on emotional intelligence, as well as strategies to teach employees how to pause, reflect and manage their emotions. Employee wellness programs are well established in many places. Some settings are increasingly emphasizing the importance of striving for excellence (rather than perfection) and enhancing the resilience of healthcare workers.^{xxvi} In some large healthcare organizations, clinical specialists (e.g., psychiatry, psychology, social work, nursing and other healthcare professionals with specialization in mental health issues) are working alongside administrative teams to develop and deliver best practice mental health programs for healthcare workers.^{xxvii} Innovative approaches to peer support are also being considered for use in workplaces and also have application to healthcare settings.^{xxviii}

Leaders in some settings are also learning from segments of the Canadian business community that have played a leadership role in this area. Bell, for instance, supports various mental health initiatives aimed at reducing stigma, increasing access to services, and creating an overall culture of mental health support across the Canadian business landscape.^{xxix} Bell has trained all of its managers on how to recognize instances of mental illness in the workplace and how to respond professionally and appropriately.

A scan of the websites of Canada's provincial and territorial departments of health and their respective regional/district health authorities shows that there is a wide range of policy and/or activity related to employee wellness within health organizations across the country. Some websites suggest little activity or policy in the domain of employee wellness and others reflect only the components of what would be considered a traditional occupational health and safety program. Employee and Family Assistance Programs, which are an important support for employees facing a broad range of everyday challenges including mental health challenges, are commonly offered. Other organizations have expanded further into employee wellness, again to varying degrees. However, very few openly acknowledge psychological or mental health as part of overall employee wellness and/or workplace health and safety programs. Greater work in this area is expected as Canadian workplaces become more and more aware of the importance of promoting psychological health in the workplace.

What is a psychologically healthy workplace?

The *Standard* identifies a number of key factors involved in creating a psychologically healthy workplace, including:

- Civility and respect in the workplace;
- Supported and valued employees;
- Praise, recognition, acknowledgement, fairness;
- Growth and development opportunities;
- Leadership and expectations are clear;

- Need for balance (personal life, family, work) recognized;
- Manageable workloads; responsibilities can be accomplished within time available;
- Adequate resources to do the job;
- Workers have some control over how they organize their work;
- Opinions and suggestions of employees are considered; employees participate in decision-making; and
- Psychological services and supports to employees with mental health issues are available.

Standard on Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace

As mentioned above, in 2013, Canada became the first country in the world to develop a voluntary standard on psychological health and safety in the workplace. The new *Standard* provides guidance for changing how mental health and mental illness are approached in the workplace. Key characteristics of the *Standard* including the following:

Purpose of the Standard: The *Standard* aims to prevent psychological harm from conditions in the workplace; and, to promote psychological health in the workplace through support.

The Standard is voluntary and is available at no cost: It is intended to guide organizations in improving psychological health and safety (“tools, not rules”).³

The Standard is a continuous improvement tool: It is recognized that implementation is a journey of continuous improvement. The *Standard* “...provides a framework to create and continually improve a psychologically healthy and safe workplace...”

The Standard is designed to be used by every kind of organization: Large and small – and it can be applied within any kind of work environment, in any sector.

The Standard is flexible: Using the framework and its key elements, the *Standard* can be customized to every organization and healthcare setting. Adopting/implementing the *Standard* will look different in each organization.

The Standard requires a commitment by leaders in the workplace. Leaders play a key role in promoting mental health in work settings, and committing to and implementing the Standard: Leaders should be able to recognize signs and symptoms of mental health and ensure proper resources and supports. They also need to think about their own positions as role models and setting the tone for their organizations.⁷

Mental health is a shared responsibility for all workers: All members of the workplace have a role in promoting and protecting psychological health and safety. Engagement and commitment are essential. For instance, workers need to be aware of the demands placed on them both at home and in the workplace, and take steps to achieve a balanced lifestyle and manage stress. Workers also have to take part in measures to promote psychological health in the workplace – measures that may also provide benefits to workers’ families and their communities.

The Standard serves to reduce stigma: Implementing the *Standard* in the workplace can serve to reduce stigma. Having people talk about mental health in the workplace can be a good first step in stigma reduction.

³ The *Standard* includes a number of appendices, available at no cost. They are included to help employers put the *Standard* into action. Appendices include: Additional background information; Resources for building a psychological health and safety framework; Sample implementation methods; Implementation scenarios for small and large enterprises; Sample audit tool; Discussion of relevant legislation or regulation; and, Related standards and guides.

What can workplaces do to address psychological health and safety?

There are many steps that health workplaces can take to protect and promote the psychological health and safety of their workers. Reviewing and committing to the new *Standard on Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace* is a good start. As mentioned above, implementation of the *Standard* will look different in every organization and will depend on the size and resources of the organization. Some organizations may use the *Standard* as a starting point. Others may already have several aspects of the *Standard* in place,^{xxx} and will use it to build on their existing efforts.^{xxxi} While not an exhaustive list, below are some examples of things that workplaces can do as part of their commitment to psychological health and safety:

- **Ensure commitment of organizational leadership** (including demonstrated leadership, the allocation of resources, and the encouragement of participation by all stakeholders).
- **Establish a baseline profile of the organization** (including assessing absenteeism, disability claims resulting from psychological issues, etc.) **and conduct a needs assessment**, including assessment of: risks to the psychological health and safety of workers; resources available to employees, including psychological services and drug plans; the extent to which benefit plans align with the broader goals related to psychological health in the workplace (e.g., are the limits related to counselling/psychological services reasonable?); the extent to which employees are aware of the benefits and resources available to them; and so on.^{xxxii}
- **Develop a policy/intent statement** for psychological health and safety in the workplace.
- **Identify a workplace champion.**
- **Provide mental health training for managers** to help them recognize the signs and symptoms of mental health problems, provide initial help, and refer employees who might have a mental health issue to appropriate professional help.^{xxxiii} Managers should be able to professionally and confidently respond to someone dealing with a mental health issue. Early recognition can lead to better prognosis for the employee, as well as reduced costs to the employer.
- **Provide mental health training to employees** to help them understand the signs and symptoms of mental health problems, learn mental health promotion practices, coping strategies, resiliency skills, and understand how to get help when needed.
- **Promote awareness of available employee benefits.** For instance, employee and family assistance programs may be underutilized. Greater use of available benefits may cost employers more in the short-term, but, over the long-term, could help employees stay at work, and result in less absenteeism and lost productivity.
- **Put in place return-to-work strategies** to help employees return to work after being treated for a mental illness or problem.
- **Undertake a communications campaign** to promote mental health awareness in the workplace.
- **Measure success (both short- and long-term).** Measurement methods should be identified early in the planning process. Success metrics might include: the level of participation in wellness initiatives; absenteeism (incidence and duration); health costs; utilization of employee and family assistance programs (increased utilization may be an indicator of early success); incidence and duration of disability claims; improved staff morale; and so on.
- **Be aware of issues related to privacy and stigma associated with mental health.** For instance, employees may be concerned about confidentiality when filling in surveys that address mental health issues. Privacy/confidentiality must be respected.

The importance of mobilizing leadership

HealthCareCAN recognizes the importance of mobilizing leadership and influencing stakeholders across Canada's health system in support of psychological health and safety in the workplace. Leadership is fundamental for changing the culture in an organization. Furthermore, a key task of healthcare leadership is to develop its most critical assets – its workers. HealthCareCAN strongly encourages health leaders to play a key role in creating psychologically healthy workplaces and actively supporting the broader movement for improved mental health.

Resources

The National Standard of Canada, *Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace – Prevention, Promotion and Guidance to Staged Implementation*, can be downloaded free of charge at www.shop.csa.ca. In addition, many resources are available at the following websites:

- Mental Health Commission of Canada: <http://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/>
- Mental Health Works: <http://mentalhealthworks.ca/>
- Guarding Minds at Work: <http://www.guardingmindsatwork.ca/>
- Partners for Mental Health: <http://www.partnersformh.ca/>
- Canadian Mental Health Association: <http://www.cmha.ca/>
- Mental Health First Aid: <http://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.ca/EN/Pages/default.aspx>
- Great West Life Centre for Mental Health in the Workplace: <http://www.gwlcetreformentalhealth.com/english/index.asp>

Endnotes:

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