

## Understanding and Overcoming the Hurdles of Psychological Health and Safety

By Greg Swaine, Chair, Mind Ally Board of Directors



*Greg Swaine is Chair of the Board of Directors for Mind Ally, a registered Canadian Mental Health Charity. He is a CMHA Certified Psychological Health and Safety Advisor and is considered a subject matter expert in workplace mental health. In 2019, Greg was recognized as one of "Canada's top 15 Leaders Leading Change in Mental Health at Work" by CivicAction. His efforts have inspired dozens of organizations worldwide to follow his lead and change how they approach psychological safety in the workplace.*

The availability of workplace mental health services for employees became a major focus of my life as a result of my own personal work-life experiences. For 20 years, I worked in the services sector, teaching self-defense programs and as a special needs developmental services worker to assist affected children and adults. I was good at it too, until May 5, 2012, when, at work, I unfortunately witnessed a fatal motorcycle accident where I then attempted – unsuccessfully – to save the life of the man involved. To say I was shocked and horrified is probably an understatement.

Following this experience, I looked for help to ease my very troubled mind. I found no services available from my employer and believed that this could mean there were no services available anywhere to help workers like me. And so I went four years with undiagnosed PTSD before finally getting the help I needed in 2016. The help came after family and friends convinced me to get advice on the physical and emotional changes that had been taking its toll on me and my relationships with others since the accident. During those four years where I wasn't seeking help, I missed a significant amount of time from work; at my worst, I missed 73 days of work over a 14-month period.

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### **Help at Last**

In commencing my treatment program and beginning to feel better, I was invited to serve on a committee that our organization had created to improve organizational health and culture. I proposed a workplace wellness plan for our employees and offered to conduct the research and help operate the program. Six months later, I presented my proposed plan to senior management, and it was readily accepted. My employer became the first Developmental Services Agency in Canada to implement the National Standard of Canada for Psychological

Health and Safety in the Workplace (The Standard)<sup>1</sup> and to sign the Declaration of Commitment to The Standard. The Standard is a first of its kind in the world: a set of voluntary guidelines, tools and resources intended to guide organizational capacity to promote mental health and prevent psychological harm at work.

The current state of mental health in Canada is as follows: In any given year, one in five Canadians experiences a mental illness or addictions problem. By the time Canadians reach 40 years of age, one in two have – or have had – a mental illness and/or addiction.<sup>2</sup> There is consistent evidence that certain workplace situations, including occupational uncertainty, excessive job stress and lack of value and respect in the workplace, are associated with an increased risk of common mental disorders.<sup>3</sup>

Let's consider the future of the Canadian workforce and take note of who our future leaders and employees are: young people aged 15 to 24 are more likely to experience mental illness and or substance abuse disorders than any other age group.<sup>4</sup>

The time is now for positive change in how we will support workplace mental health. The speed in which to reach this critical and life-saving goal will depend on how our business, government and community leaders approach and understand mental health programming within their respective work environments.

So how do we take the workplace, where 47% of Canadians say they spend the most stressful part of their day,<sup>5</sup> and tactfully make it easier for them to navigate their specific jobs and employer/employee relationships on a day-to-day basis?

### **How to Use These Statistics to Make Sense of Current Trends in Your Organization**

Researchers at Simon Fraser University have found 13 psychosocial risk factors “based on extensive research and review of empirical data from national and international best practices; these risk factors were also determined based on existing and emerging Canadian case law and legislation.”<sup>6</sup> These risk factors will affect the overall health of every organization, the health of individual employees, the financial bottom line and how employees can perform their day-to-day tasks with commitment, ingenuity and effectiveness.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.csagroup.org/article/canca-s-z1003-13-bnq-9700-803-2013-r2018/>.

<sup>2</sup> Smetanin et al. (2011). *The life and economic impact of major mental illnesses in Canada: 2011-2041*. Prepared for the Mental Health Commission of Canada. Toronto: RiskAnalytica.

<sup>3</sup> Harvey, S. B., Modini, M., Joyce, S., Milligan-Saville, J. S., Tan, L., Mykletun, A. & Mitchell, P. B. (2017). *Can work make you mentally ill? A systematic meta-review of work-related risk factors for common mental health problems*. *Occup Environ Med*, oemed-2016.

<sup>4</sup> Government of Canada (2006). *The human face of mental health and mental illness in Canada*. Ottawa: Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada.

<sup>5</sup> Morneau Shepell. (2017). Media Room. Morneau Shepell finds organizational change linked to physical and mental health sick leave.

<sup>6</sup> Merv Gilbert, Dan Bilsker (2012) *Psychological Health and Safety: An Action Guide for Employers*. Vancouver: Centre for Applied Research in Mental Health & Addiction (CARMHA), SFU Faculty of Health Sciences.

The 13 risk factors are:

1. Organizational Culture
2. Psychological and Social Support
3. Clear Leadership and Expectations
4. Civility and Respect
5. Psychological Demands
6. Growth and Development
7. Recognition and Reward
8. Involvement and Influence
9. Workload Management
10. Engagement
11. Balance
12. Psychological Protection
13. Protection of Physical Safety

A full breakdown and review of each psychological factor is available at the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety.<sup>7</sup>

So now that we know the risk factors that can contribute to the mental health of our employees and we also understand the statistics of mental health in working-age Canadians, where do we go from here?

### **Learn Where You Stand**

To gain an understanding of where your organization stands regarding its psychological health is a relatively inexpensive process. One can determine an organization's score by completing a free organizational audit, which considers current policies and procedures and administering a free and confidential assessment survey. Both the audit and survey are issued by Guarding Minds at Work and are available for download on their website.<sup>8</sup>

**Establishing a psychologically safe workplace humanizes an organization. It provides relief for all current employees, allowing them to be healthier and perform better in the workplace**

Setting up the survey can take about 30 minutes if one is familiar with the organization. The survey takes about 15 to 20 minutes for each employee to complete and it takes only minutes to close off the survey and download the results, which will provide aggregated data reports and side-by-side analysis of where the organization stands against the average score of other

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<sup>7</sup> [https://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/psychosocial/mentalhealth\\_risk.html](https://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/psychosocial/mentalhealth_risk.html).

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.guardingmindsatwork.ca/resources>.

Canadian organizations. At this stage, one can start implementing a framework for the low scored areas and start aligning the organization with The Standard.

It is highly recommended that, before administering the survey, management develops an appropriate communication document to inform all employees of the plan to implement a workplace wellness strategy in order to optimize their trust and support. Many employees have stated that they would not tell their current manager about their mental health problems,<sup>9</sup> so, to create a clear statement explaining what the survey is, how their privacy is protected and how the data will be used with clear lines of confidentiality will be a crucial step in the development and implementation process. With more data collected comes a more efficient action plan that can be efficiently and effectively implemented to address any problem areas.



Establishing a psychologically safe workplace humanizes an organization. It provides relief for all current employees, allowing them to be healthier<sup>10</sup> and perform better in the workplace<sup>11</sup> while setting up a secure workplace for future employees to join. Further to the above, those exploring new employment opportunities and the next generation of employees are becoming more likely to ask employers if they have a psychological safety plan for employees before accepting a position with them.

This helps to prove that workplaces need to invest in initiatives that promote positive workplace mental health to reduce psychological distress and protect employees from the negative impact of job stress and other risk factors.

### **Costs Associated with Doing Nothing**

What happens when we don't implement workplace mental health strategies for our employees? The costs associated with mental illness (in terms of absenteeism, productivity losses, indemnities and healthcare) were estimated at \$51 billion in Canada in 2003. The estimate is that, by 2041, the cumulative cost of mental illness in Canada will be \$2.5 trillion.<sup>12</sup> What are the costs to be encountered by each organization? Want to find out for sure? Try out this "Cost of doing nothing" (CODN) calculator.<sup>13</sup> This calculator estimates the cost of employee workplace mental health due to lost productivity and then compares these costs to the estimated amount being invested in programs and policies. The end goal is to provide a lens on the "cost of doing nothing" and to gain insight into the current state of an organization.

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<sup>9</sup> Dewa, C. S. (2014). "Worker attitudes towards mental health problems and disclosure." *The international journal of occupational and environmental medicine*, 175-185.

<sup>10</sup> Ipsos Reid. (2017). Workplaces that are implementing the National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace Described by Employees as Psychologically-Safer Environments.

<sup>11</sup> Lowe, G. (2014). *The Wellness Dividend: How Employers Can Improve Employee Health and Productivity*. Kelowna: The Graham Lowe Group INC.

<sup>12</sup> Lim, K. L., Jacobs, P., Ohinmaa, A., Schopflocher, D., & Dewa, C. S. (2008). "A new population-based measure of the economic burden of mental illness in Canada." *Chronic Diseases in Canada*, 92-98.

<sup>13</sup> The Cost of doing nothing calculator. <https://ca1se.voxco.com/S2/s>.

What is preventing organizations from starting their own psychological safety programs? There can be many different reasons ranging from not wanting to risk professional embarrassment to not understanding how to undertake the process or to determine the investment that may be required. Let's discuss this further so that we can see things more clearly.

I worked as a front-line employee with little knowledge of mental health programming when I started my workplace mental health journey. While one needs little related knowledge to implement The Standard or any other kind of employee wellness program, having a keen interest in starting a program is essential to begin the process. Not knowing where to begin and also not having the budget to support the planning and process was my experience. The Standard was designed to be adapted to any size organization with any sized budget. There is no set timeline that needs to be followed, so there is no need to allocate major funding to the project to tick off all the boxes. It actually doesn't work that way.

### Prioritizing the mental health of employees can have far-reaching financial benefits for businesses.

Psychological safety in the workplace is a journey, not a destination. Completing the Guarding Minds audit and survey, finding the organization's problem areas and starting a framework to get the organization on track to align with The Standard is all part of a continuous flow of organizational growth and development. As an organization grows and changes, so will the complexities and issues around employee psychological health. Monitoring your organization's trends will allow you to stay agile and adapt to your employee's health changes as they arise. This allows for a smoother transition during organizational change, improved quality of service and performance,<sup>14</sup> employee retention and decreased absenteeism, long and short-term disability claims<sup>15</sup> and even reduced workplace accidents.

A hurdle to overcome – which is also a significant concern for senior management and other management level employees – is how this workplace wellness initiative will affect their current workload? The good news is that it actually will make things easier for them. Four in five managers believe it is part of their job to intervene with an employee showing signs of mental illness or addictions. While 55% of managers reported intervening, only one in three report having had appropriate training to do so.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, 65% of managers say they could do their jobs much more effectively if they could find ways to manage distressed employees more efficiently and with greater organizational support.<sup>17</sup>

#### **Bringing all of The Pieces Together**

According to a study by Deloitte Canada, prioritizing the mental health of employees can have

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<sup>14</sup> Royal College of Psychiatrists. (October 2010), *No health without mental public health: the case for action*, 7-10.

<sup>15</sup> Dewa CS, Hoch JS, Carmen G, Guscott R, Anderson C. "Cost, effectiveness, and cost-effectiveness of a collaborative mental health care program for people receiving short-term disability benefits for psychiatric disorders." *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, 2009; 54(6):379 - 388.

<sup>16</sup> Ipsos Reid. (2012). *Emotional Intelligence at Work*.

<sup>17</sup> Ipsos Reid. (2012). *Ibid* .

far-reaching financial benefits for businesses. Companies in Canada with mental wellness programs for workers for at least one year experienced a median annual return on investment (ROI) of \$1.62 for every dollar invested. Meanwhile, organizations that had similar programs in place for three or more years enjoyed a median annual ROI of \$2.18 for every dollar invested.<sup>18</sup>



We know how to get started and which tools are available. We understand the foundation that needs to be laid and the positive benefits that it will bring once it starts. But is the organization ready to begin this project? For various reasons, some organizations won't be at this stage yet. It could be anything from current labour disputes, going through layoffs, financial reasons or due to limited resources to dedicate to the process. Ensuring that an organization is ready to take on the project is critical to its overall success. There is no shame in acknowledging the need for a program while waiting for the appropriate time to develop and implement it.

#### **Services Available to Help Promote Wellness**

But what if there is still hesitation to initiate a workplace mental wellness program? The good news is there are services available that can help with every step of the employee wellness journey. Mind Ally,<sup>19</sup> a Canadian registered charity established in 2013, offers a full range of Psychological Health and Safety services in the workplace. The services range from completing an organizational assessment to implementing and maintaining an organization's long-term mental health programming and everything in between. The benefit of taking advantage of these services is that a secure and qualified third-party advisor can complete organizational workplace wellness reviews, give accurate needs assessments and save management time.

With flexible workplace wellness service options plus a good communication approach to inform employees of the new plan, an organization will increase the likelihood of a higher engagement rate and more honest responses from employees, providing the best possible outcomes to establish a successful path toward organizational worker wellness.

Also, Mind Ally will provide the best advice on which relevant products and services to acquire to achieve the organizational goals without incurring a trial and error process with the different available programs.

Finally, implementation and ongoing maintenance plans for the mental wellness program are available. Therefore, Mind Ally can develop and organize the program launch and kickoff, help adapt the program to address current trends and needs as they arise and provide ongoing

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<sup>18</sup><https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/ca/Documents/about-deloitte/ca-en-about-blueprint-for-workplace-mental-health-final-aoda.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> <https://mindally.org/>.

support. Because each company is different, no one size fits all when it comes to addressing workplace wellness needs. Mind Ally can help achieve each organization's long term wellness goals to provide employees with a safe, secure and healthy work environment and to reap the future benefits that come along with promoting that type of environment.

Mind Ally's Workplace Mental Wellness advisory services are driven by Canadian Mental Health Association certified Psychological Health and Safety Advisors, along with appropriate training and programs. This certification qualifies Mind Ally professional advisors to design and deliver Workplace Mental Wellness plans and programs aligned with the National Standard for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace. Mind Ally can advise on current programs or create new programs for any sized organization with any sized budget. Mind Ally, with a reputation and wide recognition for its expertise in Workplace Mental Wellness programming services, is often invited to speak at workplace wellness events and conferences coordinated by organizations such as ThoughtExchange, Unsinkable, Never Alone and Simon Sinek's Inspired Safe and Fulfilled.

### **A Better Life for All**

Since joining Mind Ally in March 2020 and being appointed as Chair of the Board of Directors in July 2020, my prime role is to lead and direct the Mind Ally Workplace Mental Wellness fee-for-services program and conduct a "train-the-trainer" program for new Advisors to deliver our Workplace Mental Wellness services to workplaces across Canada. I take immense pride in how we effectively help many organizations and their employees to become psychologically safe and healthy. We are giving them tools that they can use both at work and in their personal life. In doing so, we are improving the quality of life for thousands of people in their daily work lives.