

## Minding the Workplace - Fostering Mental Health at Work

### Introduction

Work is an important and fundamental part of a person's life. Work not only provides income, it can also be a source of satisfaction, meaning, purpose, achievement and positive relationships (belonging). Work can be a vital contributor to our self-worth, fulfillment, family stability and community enhancement. Workplaces can provide the setting and opportunity that help workers to experience positive mental health.

Mental health has come to be viewed as multidimensional, existing on a continuum where at any given time someone may be “flourishing” or “languishing”. Mental health, according to the Public Health Agency of Canada, is “the capacity of each and all of us to feel, think, and act in ways that enhance our ability to enjoy life and deal with the challenges that we face. It is a positive sense of emotional and spiritual wellbeing that respects the importance of culture, equity, social justice, interconnections and personal dignity”.

*Flourishing people* are described as those with “complete” mental health, filled with positive emotion, and who are functioning well psychologically, socially and emotionally.

*Languishing people* are considered to have “incomplete” mental health and tend to describe themselves and their lives as “hollow”, “empty” and “stagnant”.

Even though people strive to find balance and to flourish in their daily lives, it is often difficult and stressful to meet the needs and demands of the people around them, and the things going on in their lives. This can lead to increased levels of stress and burnout, which can consequently lead to poor mental health outcomes down the road. Individuals who are considered to be languishing sometimes experience “presenteeism”, which is the reduced productivity of someone who is present at work but may be physically and/or mentally unwell, and may have difficulty concentrating due to stressors.

Organizations, work teams and individuals that support and promote mental health help employees to flourish. A supportive workplace culture contributes to business objectives such as: productivity, employee engagement, employee retention, and reduction in reduced absenteeism and disability claims due to poor mental health and/or mental illness.

Organizations sit in an unprecedented position to increase their capacity, understanding and delivery of mental health promotion initiatives in their workplaces. Promoting mental health at work is the responsibility of all levels of the organization. Any individual employee, no matter their role, can foster positive mental health in the workplace.

### **Employees can Improve their own Mental Health in the Workplace**

This resource helps to provide information, ideas and tips on mental health in the workplace, and on how individual employees can foster their own mental health and support workplace practices that improve mental health behaviours at work.

#### **Interesting Facts and Statistics**

- Three out of five workers either skip lunch or do not take their full lunch break.
- 26% of Canadian workers take lunch at their desks so they can continue working.
- Not eating properly at work is costing countries around the world up to 20% in lost productivity
- According to Statistics Canada, 47% of Canadians said that they cut down on sleep in an attempt to squeeze more time out of the day.

#### **An employee who flourishes at work:**

##### **1) Reclaims their lunch breaks!**

- To keep your mind fresh and clear, make sure to honour break times. Time away from your workstation is healthy for your mind and can help recharge your batteries. Enjoy a healthy meal at lunchtime, but don't stop there. Do something at your lunch break that is enjoyable and refreshing for you whether it's a walk or more rigorous physical activity, a cat nap, or a great conversation with your coworkers.
- Encourage your co-workers to take breaks too! You can be a role model for your team.

## 2) Manages their workload actively

An inability to manage one's workload is what many Canadian workers describe as being the biggest workplace stressor. Some workplaces have workloads that ebb and flow according to the time of year, demand, etc. Some months may be slow while others' may be "crunch times", when the workload is unavoidably heavy or an important deadline is looming. Some workplaces constantly have heavy workloads, and the work never seems to slow down. Here are some tips for managing either scenario:

Tips for "crunch times":

- Pace Yourself
  - Write out a schedule with timelines for each part of the project.
  - Set aside discretionary work that is not related to the major task, and make this project your sole priority.
  - Assemble the resources you'll need including asking others for help.
  - Take time outs. Regular breaks of even 5-10 minutes will help clear your head, reduce your stress and restore your energy.
  - Avoid long hours. 12 and 14-hour days lead to exhaustion and inefficiency, 9 or 10 hours of work will serve you better.
  - Don't work on your days-off. Instead, use these days for leisure, relaxation and resting your mind.
  - Have perspective; you are not alone. Your colleagues are probably in the same boat.
  - It's time-limited- most of the stress will end at a defined point in time.

Tips for Ongoing Workload Issues:

- Address concerns with your employer about deadlines, deliverables and an over-excessive workload early. Set up a meeting to talk in person about this. While it might be tough for you to have this kind of conversation, remember that it is better for your employer to be aware of this earlier rather than later when deadlines come due. Let your employer know that you are feeling burdened by the amount of work you have, and suggest that you brainstorm together on how you can reduce your

workload. This way, neither you nor your employer takes sole responsibility for figuring out where to distribute the extra work.

- Don't work overtime if you can avoid it, and take all of your allotted vacation time- this allows you to come back to work refreshed and more productive.

### 3) Balances their work-life with their home-life

Almost half of all Canadians today are experiencing a moderate to high level of stress as a result of trying to balance their work and home lives. Just 10 years ago, only 27% felt this way.

An appropriate work-life balance is important to mental health and wellbeing. Work-life balance is different for everyone, and what might be a healthy balance for one person may not be a healthy balance for another. It's vital to have balance, and finding one that suits your personal needs is a process and takes a measure of self awareness and consistent monitoring.

Tips:

- Evaluate your work-life balance by making a pie chart of the priorities in your life with the percentages based on the amount of time you spend in each area (i.e., the more time you spend in one area, the bigger the piece of the pie it gets). Analyze your pie chart to decide if and where in your life you may need to make changes to achieve better work-life balance. Create another pie chart with your ideal balance. Your ideal balance may have to do with the way you feel about the different priorities. Make a list of things that you can change that will help you to stay on track with your ideal balance. For example, if there is something on your pie chart that you dread doing and that seems to be taking up a lot of you time, try to change or eliminate it, or at least reduce the amount of time you spend on it
- Make it part of your weekly routine to stop and check your balance. Look back over the past week to see if there are moments where your balance could have been better. Make a list of ideas to achieve a better balance for the next week.
- Know when to say "No". This may be hard because you don't want to let others down. However, you are the only person who can determine what

you do and do not have time for. Remember, “No” is a complete sentence. You don’t have to give a bunch of reasons for why you are saying no.

- Don’t sweat the small stuff! Learning to let things go once in a while is good for you.
- Don’t procrastinate - We stress more when we put things off.
- Be realistic - Keep your goals in mind and look forward to your future and the potential it holds.

#### 4) Engages in healthy lifestyle behaviours

Lifestyle factors are just as important to your mental health as they are to your physical health. They can help to reduce your overall levels of stress as well as enhance your ability to cope with stressors and challenges at work. Some key lifestyle factors that can either positively or negatively affect stress at work are: sleep, diet, use of alcohol and drugs, exercise and relaxation.

Tips:

- Establish a regular sleep/wake cycle, including a fixed wake-up time and regular bedtime. Most adults need about seven or eight hours of sleep.
- Develop a sleep ritual – For example, meditation or relaxation (see tips for this at the end of this section), bathing, or drinking herbal tea. “Put away” any ongoing problems or upcoming tasks.
- Don’t use your bedroom for non-sleep related activities (i.e., reading or watching TV.). If you are having problems falling asleep or falling back asleep after waking up in the middle of the night, leave your bedroom and do a quiet activity in another room (try not to turn any bright lights on) until you feel tired enough to go back to bed.
- Avoid exercise, caffeine, alcohol or tobacco in the few hours before you go to bed, as they can keep you from falling asleep.
- Try not to nap during the day or you won’t feel tired at night.
- If your sleep problems last for a while (2 weeks or more), talk with your physician.

- Eat regular meals and snacks. If you tend to lose your appetite when things get stressful, this will help you to eat anyways. If you tend to overeat due to stress, this will help you to only eat at set times.
- Make healthy choices, and try to maintain a balanced diet including: vegetables and fruits, whole grains, low-fat milk and alternatives, and low-fat meat and alternatives. Try to keep healthy snacks at work and if you find it difficult to prepare meals (like lunch), have a selection of convenient but nutritious meals available.
- Connect healthy eating to pleasurable activities, such as socializing. For example, enjoy a healthy lunch while visiting with a co-worker.
- Alcohol and drugs can impair work performance, create dependencies and compromise general health. Set realistic and attainable goals related to decreasing or eliminating substance use. Don't think that you have to do it alone. There are places you can call for help (see Appendix A)
- Regular physical activity leaves people less vulnerable to stress and depression (including reducing the symptoms), and can help you sleep better!
- Pick physical activities that you enjoy and that are realistic for you to accomplish. A variety of activities is important, so be sure to pick more than one activity and alternate. Try to put the emphasis on how you will feel after exercising rather than on how you want to look.
- Frequency is more important than duration. Therefore, short but regular exercise sessions are better than long but irregular sessions.
- Look for opportunities to be active during your workday. For example, walk to work, take the stairs rather than the elevator, or go for a walk with a co-worker at lunch.
- The goal of relaxation is to “empty the mind” of thoughts and concerns, and to let it simply exist in a relaxed state.
- To prevent distracting thoughts during relaxation, concentrate on a mantra (a word or formula chanted or sung), or your breathing or other calming, repetitive images (such as a balloon floating in the air).



- Five principles of relaxation breathing:
  1. Breathe in through your nose and out through your nose or mouth (opened slightly).
  2. Breathe into your abdomen and feel it rise as you inhale and fall as you exhale.
  3. Breathe slowly, otherwise you'll hyperventilate.
  4. Start by breathing out, to empty your lungs in preparation for the first deep breath.
  5. Focus on and observe your breathing. If you're having trouble coordinating this, put one hand on your abdomen and the other hand on your chest. As you breathe, focus on the abdominal hand moving, but the chest hand staying still. Practice this for five minutes to start, and then slowly increase to 15 or 20 minutes.
- Progressive muscle relaxation is another form of relaxation and involves focusing on different muscle groups and consciously letting them relax. Start from your toes and work up, going slowly and with conscious awareness.
- Relaxation (and/or meditation) exercises are learned skills and take time to develop. Try not to get frustrated if it's a slow process for you. It's not about how quickly you "learn" to relax; it's just about taking some time to do it in the first place! [Click here](#) and follow the instructions to listen to a sample relaxation method.

### Examples of Activities to Promote Mental Health in the Workplace:

- Designate one meeting room in your office to be the quiet meditation/relaxation room. Have a sign-up sheet where staff can sign up for 10-15 minute intervals.
- Start an exercise club at lunch, where each member takes turns choosing the physical activity for the lunch break.
- Start a healthy recipe exchange at work.

### 5) Solves problems efficiently and effectively

Problem solving is an important way to cope with stress. After acknowledging your feelings, it is important to move on to thinking about how deal with stress. A person's ability to solve problems declines when their mood is low.

Tips:

- *Assertive action* is more effective than *Passive action* or *Aggressive action* to solve problems effectively. *Assertive action* occurs when a person acts in a way that balances their own rights with the rights of others, or expresses their own ideas and feelings while allowing or even encouraging others to do the same. *Passive action* is when a person does not stand up for their own rights or does not express their own ideas and feelings, where these would be appropriate. Finally, *Aggressive action* happens when a person gets their own way at the unfair expense of others or expresses their own ideas and feelings without allowing others to do the same. To learn how to be more assertive for a better work life balance [click here](#)
- Steps to Effective Problem Solving:
  - Choose and then clearly define the problem.
  - Write down three actions to help solve it.
  - Write down and compare the advantages and disadvantages of the three actions.
  - Listen to your emotional “gut” reaction to the options and balance that with what you are thinking about it.
  - Pick the best action.
  - Make an action plan - Your action plan should be manageable, action-oriented, specific and time limited.
  - Evaluate - Come back to this section when the set time has passed or when you have achieved your goal.
  - Move on - If you have not yet solved your problem, you have three options: you can keep going, revise your goal and try again, or take a new approach based on what you learned from your first effort.



## 6) Uses realistic thinking

*Realistic thinking* is a more accurate way of thinking about your current situation (seeing things as they are). This includes being fair about yourself (a balanced view of the positive and negatives in your life); and accurate about your future (not exaggerating the chance of bad outcomes and ignoring the chance of positive outcomes).

The steps to realistic thinking are:

- Learn to identify depressive thoughts (unfair, unrealistic, and inaccurate reflections of yourself, the past, the future and the world around you) and turn them into more balanced and realistic thoughts.

Tips:

- Focus on a more realistic balance between the positive and the negative.
- Don't sweat the small stuff! Try not to view small disappointments or problems as bigger than they really are.
- One negative event is just one event. It does not mean the start of a never ending pattern.
- The world does not just consist of extremes (i.e., good/bad, kind/evil, ugly/beautiful). There is always a range of "in-between's".
- Be kind to yourself by using positive self-talk. Don't call yourself insulting names. Talk to yourself like you would your best friend.
- Feeling bad about something doesn't necessarily mean that it is bad.
- If you're not sure what others are thinking about something, ask them. Don't assume that you know what they are thinking and that it is negative.
- Try to look at all the factors that contribute to a negative event and don't just blame yourself.
- You never know what the future will bring; therefore it doesn't hurt to think positively about it. Don't jump to conclusions.
- Things don't have to be perfect to be good. Take pride in and be satisfied with your best work.
- Take the world, yourself and others for what they are, not for how you think they should be.



- Recognize your depressive thoughts and how they trigger low mood. Try to be aware of depressive thinking and where it comes from. You may find that you take depressive thoughts less seriously once you know where they come from. Depressive thoughts can be a product of low mood and/or your personal history.
- Learn to challenge depressive thoughts and replace them with fair and realistic ones. Take a piece of paper and divide it into two columns. First make a brief note of the situation at the top of the page. Next, write down the depressive thoughts that seem related to how you feel in the left-hand column. Finally, think about the situation and try to come up with a more fair and realistic assessment of the situation in the right-hand column.
- Practice realistic thinking. It's not enough to come up with a fair and realistic thought just once. Depressive thinking gets repeated over and over, until it becomes automatic. Realistic thinking may be something that you need to deliberately practice for a while.

### 7) **Reactivates their life when they feel stressed**

When people feel down or stressed at work, they often stop doing the activities they once enjoyed. The three main areas in which people with low mood tend to reduce their activity in are hobbies/pleasurable activities, self-care and spending time with family and friends.

Tips:

- Steps to reactivate one's life:
  - Identify those activities that have been neglected, that tend to give you a sense of mastery or pleasure and need to be increased (i.e., going for massages, going out with friends, leaving work on time, etc.).
  - Choose two of these activities that you can start doing right away.
  - Set realistic goals. For each activity, set a manageable goal for the coming week. If needed, break down larger goals into smaller more manageable parts. To succeed your goals must be specific, realistic and scheduled.
  - Carry out your goals. Write down a schedule of when you will start taking action to achieve the goals. If you have low mood, you

probably won't feel like doing your activity goals. Push yourself to do them because they will help you to feel better. Focusing on the positive outcome of carrying out the activity can help get the ball rolling. Avoidance of needed changes in one's life only maintains the status quo and doesn't solve the problem.

### **Next Steps – Taking Action**

Knowing what you can do to promote mental health at work is only the first step. The next step, and usually the harder step, is to start taking action by using some of these tips and strategies at work every day!

Even small changes can help employees to feel better in their work environments, promote positive changes and support the development of mental health practices at work. All employees have a role to play in creating mentally healthy work environments, for their own health and for the health of the organizations that they work for.

## Appendix A

### Programs, Services and Resources

Access Mental Health (Calgary and Area) - Mental health information and access to services: (403) 943-1500

Alberta Health Services: Addiction & Substance Use Health Information  
<http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/addiction.asp>

Alberta Health Services: Mental Health & Wellness Health Information  
<http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/mentalhealth.asp>

Antidepressant Skills at Work: <http://www.comh.ca/antidepressant-skills/work/>

Canadian Centre for Occupational Health & Safety: <http://www.ccohs.ca/>

Canadian Mental Health Association: [www.cmha.ca](http://www.cmha.ca)

Employee Assistance Program (For AHS employees): 1-877-273-3134 or  
[www.workhealthlife.com](http://www.workhealthlife.com)

Great West-Life Centre for Mental Health in the Workplace:  
<http://www.gwlcentreformentalhealth.com/index.asp?>

Guarding Minds @ Work: <http://www.guardingmindsatwork.ca/info>

Health Link Alberta: 1-866-408-Link (5465)

Mental Health First-Aid, Mental Health Commission of Canada:  
<http://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/Pages/MentalHealthFirstAid.aspx>

Mental Health Help Line (Province of Alberta): 1-877-303-2642

Mental Health Works: <http://www.mentalhealthworks.ca/>

Addiction Services 24 hour Help Line (Alberta): 1-866-332-2322

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