



# Improving mental health in the workplace



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The World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health as:

*a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.*

Although it may sound like an achievable goal, Canadians are falling short. Despite not always in the public eye like cancer or heart disease, mental health issues are widely prevalent in this country. In fact, 28% of Canadians have experienced a mental health issue such as debilitating stress, anxiety, depression or substance abuse, according to the 2016 Sun Life Canadian Health Index. Incidence is greater in women vs. men (35% vs. 23%) and significantly higher in single Canadians than those who are married or have a partner (41% vs. 24%).

The Canadian Mental Health Commission reports similar findings:

**28%** of Canadians have experienced a mental health issue

- one in five Canadians experiences a psychological health problem or illness in any given year;
- psychological health problems and illnesses are the number one cause of disability in Canada;
- 500,000+ Canadians are off sick due to mental stress or illness every week
- one in four Canadians leaves work due to anxiety, stress and depression.<sup>1</sup>

As the statistics indicate, modern workplaces can provide a stressful environment that contributes to the rise of mental health issues. Companies can support their employees by taking mental health seriously and making their people's wellbeing a top priority.

## THE HIGH COST OF MENTAL ILLNESS

Mental health issues are taking a heavy toll on businesses and individuals alike. WHO reported depression and anxiety disorders cost the global economy \$1 trillion annually in lost productivity. Closer to home, the [Canadian Mental Health Commission](#) estimates poor mental health is a \$50 billion burden on our economy each year. Specifically, a [report](#) from the Conference Board of Canada found that depression costs the economy at least \$32.3 billion annually, while anxiety costs another \$17.3 billion each year.

*Mental health issues cost the Canadian economy **\$50 billion** annually*

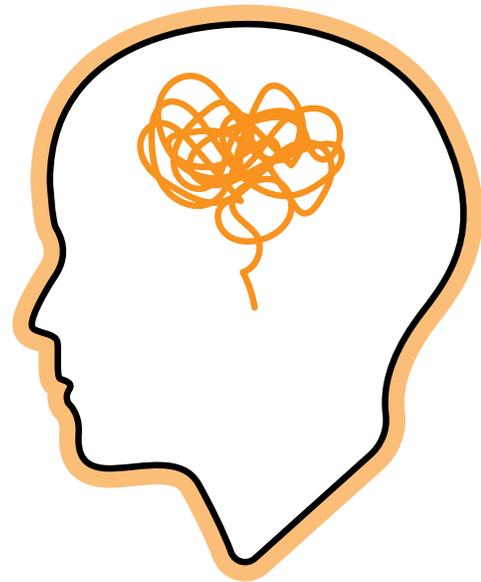
In addition, mental illness is one of the [top three drivers](#) for 80% of short and long-term disability claims, with more than 500,000 Canadians off sick due to mental stress or illness every week. In fact, [nearly a quarter](#) of Canadians living with mental health issues are unable to work.



**Depression is the single largest contributor to years lived with disability...and is the top cause of disability in the world today.**

**DR. DAN CHISHOLM,**

DEPARTMENT OF MENTAL HEALTH AND  
SUBSTANCE ABUSE, WHO



Psychological health problems [affect mid-career workers](#) the most, lowering the productivity of the Canadian workforce; as employees attempt to cope with apathy or a lack of energy attributed to mental health issues, they are unable to function in their jobs. Employees struggling with mental illness face [numerous challenges](#) in the workplace:

- Difficulty concentrating
- Taking longer to complete tasks
- Difficulty making decisions
- Inability to juggle multiple tasks effectively
- Less patience with clients/customers

Productivity is lost both through absenteeism—when employees are not physically at their jobs—and presenteeism—when they show up for work but are functioning at reduced productivity due to ill health. Presenteeism appears to be even more costly than absenteeism or disability. Indeed, on-the-job productivity lost due to depression and pain is roughly three times greater than the absence-related productivity loss attributed to these same conditions.

## STRESS: THE MENTAL HEALTH LYNCHPIN

Canadians are stressed—and it’s wreaking havoc with people’s health, relationships, workplace productivity, and healthcare costs. In the workplace, employees are struggling with unmanageable workloads, job insecurity, long hours, inequitable pay, and mounting deadlines. Add poor financial health, relationship conflicts, and a lack of time to the picture and Canadians are grappling with the consequences of a high-stress lifestyle.

**1 in 4** Canadian employees report being highly stressed

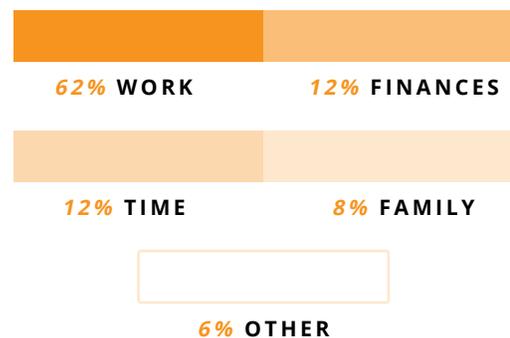
**25%** of Canadians have left a job due to unmanageable stress

Stress in the workplace is reaching new heights, negatively impacting employee health and productivity. [StatsCan reports](#) that 27% of Canadian workers claim to have high to extreme levels of stress on a daily basis, while 62% consider their work to be the primary source of stress.

One in four employees admits to leaving a job due to unbearable work-related stress—and another 17% have considered walking away—according to a [survey](#) from job search website Monster Canada. Notably, employees earning less than \$40,000 were more likely to have left a job due to stress (38%). [Millennials](#) were more likely to say they’re overworked and more likely to leave a job due to stress.



### WORKERS' REPORTED SOURCES OF STRESS



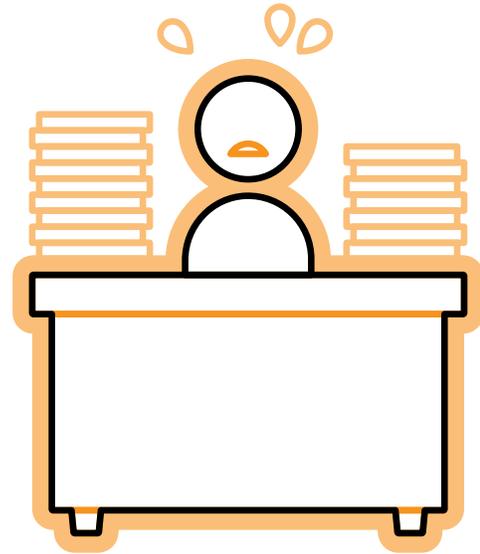
## THE HEAVY TOLL OF STRESS

Chronic stress negatively affects employees' health, raising blood pressure and increasing the risk of cardiovascular disease. Compounding the issue, stress can promote unhealthy lifestyle behaviour—smoking, poor eating habits, and increased alcohol intake—while taking its toll emotionally. Long-term stress in the workplace also makes employees prone to weight gain, susceptible to minor illnesses (e.g., colds, flu), and can trigger gut problems, asthma symptoms and headaches, according to a recent [Entrepreneur](#) article.

In addition to the personal health costs, prolonged stress in the workplace also negatively impacts a company's bottom line. Employees who experience high stress cost employers almost 50% more in health expenditures, according to a study published in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*.<sup>2</sup>

Towers Watson's Global Benefits Attitudes survey of 22,347 employees across 12 countries demonstrated the destructive relationship between stress and productivity. The survey found that engagement significantly decreased when employees experienced high levels of stress, while sick days and presenteeism increased:

- **57%** of employees experiencing high levels of stress were disengaged;
- In contrast, only **10%** of low-stress employees were disengaged and **50%** were highly engaged;
- Highly-stressed employees took an average of **4.6** sick days per year vs **2.6** for low-stress employees;
- Presenteeism was **50%** higher for employees experiencing high stress.



## WHAT'S STRESSING PEOPLE OUT @ WORK?

**WHO** points out:

*Work-related stress can be caused by poor work organization (the way we design jobs and work systems, and the way we manage them), by poor work design (for example, lack of control over work processes), poor management, unsatisfactory working conditions, and lack of support from colleagues and supervisors.*

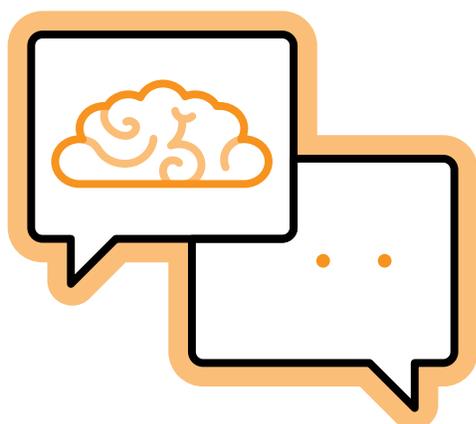
With work-related stress affecting the mental wellbeing and job performance of employees, companies should thoroughly explore the causes of stress within their organization in order to develop effective stress-reducing strategies. The [Wellness Council of America](#) suggests that stress in the workplace can be caused by factors such as:

- Poor company culture
- Long hours & excessive workload
- Worrying about job security
- Poor management, including both over-and under-managing
- Lack of communication & transparency about business changes
- Workplace harassment

## WHAT CAN EMPLOYERS DO: WELLNESS PROGRAMS

The [Deloitte Global Human Capital Trends](#) report found that, in response to the needs of employees and corporate leaders, many major organizations are rethinking their reward and development strategies to include holistic wellbeing programs—and mental health initiatives are an integral component of an effective workplace wellness program. As HR professionals and leaders across the organization are recognizing their role in promoting the mental wellness of their employees, mental health strategies are starting to take shape.

A UK [survey](#) found employers were taking the following steps to improve the mental health of their staff:



- Offering flexible working hours (**52%**)
- Increasing awareness of mental health issues across the workforce (**31%**)
- Providing training to build personal resilience (**16%**)
- Nominating mental health champions across the organization (**6%**)

In North America, a [study](#) by Mental Health America found that benefits (above and beyond basic medical insurance) and perks in the workplace are predictors of increased employee engagement and reduced workplace stress—boosting productivity, improving attraction and retention, and heightening workplace morale. Across all industries, the following [perks](#) were associated with the healthiest workplaces and greatest mental wellbeing:

1. **Flexible work arrangements:** flexibility in structuring work schedule to accommodate personal needs;
2. **Open door & relaxed work environment:** accessibility to management with a focus on two-way communication & feedback;
3. **Opportunities for professional growth:** job-specific training, increasing responsibilities, continuing education.

### TAKING STRESS OUT OF THE EQUATION

Workplace wellness programs that include a stress management component are critical for supporting the mental health of employees. The [Wellness Council of America](#) notes that reducing stress in the workplace promotes a strong company culture, reduces the number of sick days, and boosts employee retention and talent acquisition efforts.

In order for stress management programs to be effective, a [study](#) of mind-body stress-reduction workplace initiatives suggested that programs must be “accessible, convenient and engaging to the employees.” Using yoga and mindfulness meditation programs to decrease employees’ stress and sleep issues, researchers demonstrated the cost-effectiveness and viability of integrating mind-body stress management programs into the workplace.

## CHALLENGES IN IMPROVING WORKPLACE MENTAL HEALTH

### STIGMA REARS ITS UGLY HEAD

A sense of shame or taboo about mental health has cast a shadow over sufferers for years, despite the widespread prevalence of mental illness. Although we are encouraged to view mental health as a key component of overall health, only 34% of Canadians surveyed would feel comfortable seeking professional help for a mental health issue; however, nearly half (45%) would seek out help for a physical health problem.

*77% of Canadians feel uncomfortable discussing a mental health issue with their employer*

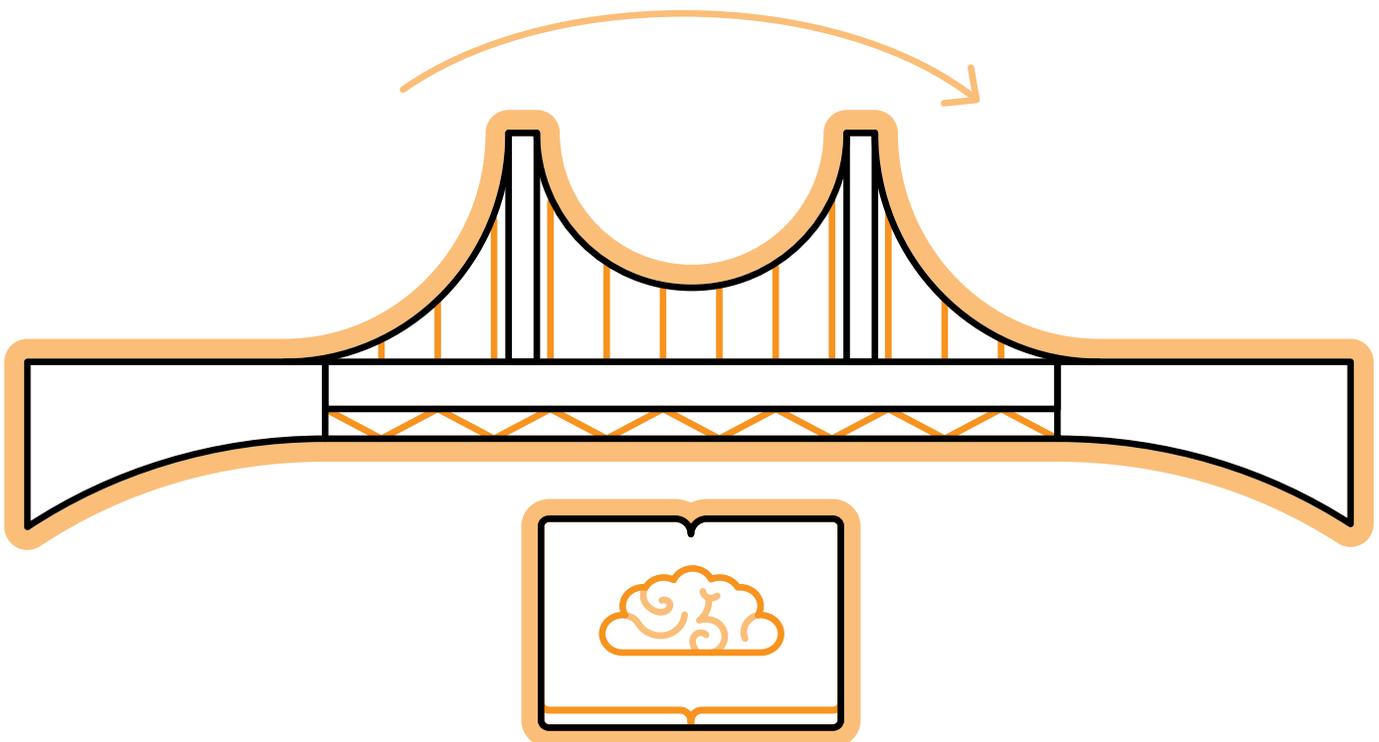
The workplace is certainly not exempt from the stigma of mental illness. Only 23% of Canadian employees would feel comfortable discussing a mental health issue with their employer, according

to the [Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety](#). Encouraging transparent communication and two-way dialogue is critical for fostering a supportive culture in which employees feel they can talk openly about mental health at work.

### KNOWLEDGE GAP

Recognizing and addressing mental health issues is not as straightforward as other HR challenges that people managers and leaders across the organization may face. A [UK study](#) found that survey respondents were twice as likely to disagree than agree that their managers are confident and competent to spot the early warning signs of poor mental health.

Mental health training can help bridge the gap. The Mental Health Commission of Canada has trained more than 300,000 Canadians since 2007 in [Mental Health First Aid \(MHFA\)](#). In the workplace, the MHFA Canada program aims to improve mental health literacy and provide the skills and knowledge to help people better manage potential or developing mental health problems in themselves or a colleague.



## MENTAL WELLNESS IN ACTION

According to the Global Benefits Attitudes Survey published by Willis Towers Watson:

*Employers increasingly recognize mental health and stress among the biggest challenges to health and well-being in the workplace, and many are trying to find better ways of reducing work-related stress.*

Indeed, with mental health increasingly on HR professionals' radar, companies are expanding their health and wellness programs beyond just physical health benefits to include mental wellness strategies. Whether it's adding cognitive behavioural therapy to the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or introducing stress-reducing workshops, organizations are opting for a more holistic approach to their benefits offerings and reaping the rewards of healthier, happier employees.

Honoured for its mental health programs at Benefits Canada's Workplace Benefits Awards, Michael Garron Hospital in Toronto is an excellent example of mental wellness initiatives paying dividends for employees and the organization alike. The hospital offers several mental health support programs for its health workers: peer support for staff suffering secondary trauma after witnessing a difficult event; an educational program that helps employees combat compassion fatigue; and de-escalation training to help staff work with unstable patients.

Both staff and patients are benefitting from the hospital's mental health strategy. Since implementing its mental health initiatives, employee engagement scores increased from 53.1% in 2004 to 72.1% in 2015. In addition, staff members were more likely to feel that Michael Garron Hospital promotes health and wellness, as compared to the average employee at an Ontario Hospital Association organization (72.6% vs. 58.3%). On the patient front, satisfaction scores rose from 85% to 92% over four years.

The hospital also enjoyed financial rewards from implementing its mental health initiatives. Long-term disability claims related to psychological conditions dropped by more than half between 2011 and 2014; drug costs for psychological conditions decreased from \$17,013 to \$16,025 during the same period, and those same medications fell out of the top five prescription drug consumption costs.

### ROI for mental health initiatives:

- 19% increase in employee engagement
- Disability claims related to mental health cut in half
- Decreased drug costs & consumption
- Significant reduction in depression, anxiety & stress at work

— MICHAEL GARRON HOSPITAL & ST. JOSEPH'S HEALTHCARE

## REAPING THE REWARDS

Recent Deloitte [research](#) into mental wellness in the workplace noted that a mentally healthy workplace and increased employee engagement are interdependent; by supporting employees' mental wellbeing, companies benefit from a rise in staff loyalty, innovation, productivity, and profits. Indeed, the benefits of having a stress-free workplace are felt across the enterprise:

- Improved employee retention and recruitment
- Improved employee engagement, thereby reducing presenteeism
- Decreased disability coverage costs
- Increased productivity and growth
- Reduced risk of workplace accidents and injuries
- Higher employee morale

Organizations that have implemented wellness programs to address burnout due to stress have a [staff turnover rate of just 6%](#) compared to the national U.S. average of 38%. Employees at the same organizations also reported higher job satisfaction scores, thereby improving retention rates. Indeed, investing in a mentally healthy workplace buoys the bottom line, contributing to effective cost management of absenteeism, grievances, disability, retraining, and turnover, and improved productivity, retention, recruitment, and engagement.

A [report](#) from the Conference Board suggests that if Canadian employees struggling with mental health issues had access to better treatments and supports, the economy could see up to 352,000 Canadians with depression or anxiety enter the workforce as fully functional employees each year until 2035.



1. [HTTPS://WWW.BENEFITSCANADA.COM/BENEFITS/HEALTH-WELLNESS/SOUNDING-BOARD-MANAGEMENT-STYLE-EMPLOYEE-EXPECTATIONS-KEY-TO-SUPPORTING-MENTAL-HEALTH-104426](https://www.benefitscanada.com/benefits/health-wellness/sounding-board-management-style-employee-expectations-key-to-supporting-mental-health-104426)

2. [HTTPS://WWW.SUNLIFE.CA/STATIC/CANADA/SPONSOR/BRIGHT%20PAPERS/CHI%20BRIGHTPAPER%20E.PDF](https://www.sunlife.ca/static/canada/sponsor/bright%20papers/chi%20brightpaper%20e.pdf)

# Going forward: Healthy jobs

In the long run, everyone loses out from a high-stress workplace environment in which mental wellbeing is not prioritized. Organizations must make mental health a priority against other operational demands, fostering a culture in which “healthy jobs” are the norm. WHO defines a **healthy job** as one where the pressures on employees are appropriate in relation to their abilities and resources, to the amount of control they have over their work, and to the support they receive from people who matter to them.

## | *Healthy job =*

- Demands & pressures of work matched to knowledge & abilities
- Control over work & the way they do it
- Support from supervisors & colleagues
- Participation in decisions that concern their jobs

By raising the visibility of mental health and wellbeing to create an environment in which employees can thrive in healthy jobs, employers can support the overall health of their people while investing in the future growth and sustainability of the company.