

# Workplace stress exacting heavy toll, group says

Conscientious employees in their 'prime working years' found most vulnerable

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Workplace stress and depression are exacting a heavy toll, particularly among conscientious employees "in their prime working years," say a group of corporate leaders who have pledged to conduct mental health audits of their own organizations.

A set of guidelines, to be released today by the Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health, says mental illness is now the leading cause of employee disability and, as such, should be addressed at the corporate board level.

The document, which will be circulated to the boards of all publicly traded companies in Canada, clearly acknowledges that "workplace stress is a factor in the onset of mental illness," with depression being the most common disorder.

"The case for the importance and severity of mental disability is incontrovertible," said John Evans, chairman of Toronto-based Torstar Corp. and one of seven corporate chairmen or chief executive officers who have already endorsed the guidelines.

"We are dealing with something that is not under control," he said.

"In fact, it is growing," said Dr. Evans, a physician.

Business leaders not only have a moral duty, but a corporate obligation, to address mental health issues in their workplaces, Dr. Evans said in an interview yesterday.

Corporate boards should be compelled to report on what they have done to reduce the risk factors that contribute to stress and depression.

Corporate lawyer Bill Wilkerson, co-founder and CEO of the mental health roundtable, said in an interview that some of the most common triggers are "excessive and unrelenting" deadlines, too much work to do with too few resources -- "part and parcel of the whole downsizing culture that's going on" -- work rules that rob employees of any discretion on how best to do the job and "lack of recognition for good work done."

The guidelines advise corporate boards that the risks can be reduced "through sound management practices."

Granted, employees carry outside stresses into the workplace with them, said Dr. Evans, but employers should do what they can to lighten the load. Something as simple as flexible work arrangements for employees with heavy family responsibilities can go a long way to help, as can a sympathetic approach to an employee who needs time off to deal with stress or depression.

The stigma attached to mental health disorders often keeps employees from seeking help, he said. So they suffer in silence, become more ill and their productivity slips.

Dr. Evans said that more than 10 per cent of Canadians suffer from depression at one time in their lives.

The business roundtable estimates that the costs of mental illness in the labour force "exceed \$33-billion a year in lost production alone."

And those most vulnerable are men and women in mid-career "with 10 or more years of service with their current employer -- the heart of our labour force, the most loyal and productive of our people and the backbone of our economy," according to the document to be released today.

"Evidence is well mounted to suggest that the current rates of untreated mental illness in the work force pose material risks to the realization of optimal shareholder value and may constitute a form of unfunded liability in the affairs of public companies."

The roundtable is supported by a coalition of business leaders who have long advocated better mental health practices in Canadian workplaces.

In addition to Dr. Evans, those committed to adopting the guidelines for their corporate boards include: Yves Fortier, chairman of Montreal-based Alcan Inc., John Hunkin, president and CEO of Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce, Michael Wilson, chairman of Toronto-based UBS Global Asset Management (Canada) Co., Tim Price, chairman of Toronto-based Brascan Financial Corp., Guy Saint-Pierre, chairman of Royal Bank of Canada and Gordon Nixon, president and CEO of Royal Bank of Canada.

"We think this gives the issue real muscle," Mr. Wilkerson said yesterday.



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