

A big business disability

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A healthy workplace used to mean chairs with good backs, bananas in the cafeteria, and hard hats where necessary. But until now, that definition did not include mental health.

Mental health claims are on the rise and depression has overtaken cardiovascular disease as the fastest-growing category for days lost to disability in Canada. As a result, employers who claim people are a company's best asset can no longer ignore depression and workplace stress.

According to a recent survey by Mercer Human Resource Consulting, mental health issues have caused an increase in the usage of group benefit plans for 77% of those surveyed, and an increase in short-term disability claims for 75%.

Of short-term disability insurance claims of six months or less, more than one-third are related to depression, says Bill Wilkerson, founder of the Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Mental Health, a consortium of chief executives committed to addressing mental health in the workplace.

Not only are mental disorders driving the incidence of employee disability, but also the use of anti-depressant medications are reflected in many major corporations' group drug plans, says Mr. Wilkerson, who has called depression "an invasive capturing of the human spirit."

"Among long-term disability claims, nearly half will exhibit either a primary or a secondary diagnosis of depression," he says.

In a single day, three million to four million Canadians suffer mental illness, and 70% of those are in the labour force.

"The language is definitely becoming more common," says Estelle Morrison, director of program development at LifeWorks Services Canada, the EAP division of Ceridian, a managed HR service.

"You now commonly hear HR people speak about mental health issues in the workplace. Today, mental health is out of the closet. It's the safety issue of the past."



CREDIT: Peter Redman, National Post
Bill Wilkerson, founder of the Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Mental Health, says stress and depression are hitting companies' bottom lines as lost work days and health benefits continue to climb.

Stress and strain are part of a continuum that includes serious depression, and research is showing that depression is linked to heart disease, diabetes, and autoimmune disorders.

Work and role overload, assuming responsibility without authority and lacking control over the things that need to get done are commonplace in today's demanding workplace. "We are bombarded with information and we take on the ownership to do more with less time," Ms. Morrison says.

"Because there is no longer a clear line between someone's workplace and someone's home life, people carry the burden of doing more in their day."

Employers are doing little to help employees manage the information overload, and employees are not building in coping skills. "Making self-care a priority is unfamiliar territory for all of us," says Ms. Morrison, who believes downtime must be pencilled in daybooks just as meetings are.

Clinical depression is far more serious than the typical return-to-work Monday blues, and on average takes an employee off the job for 40 days. As a result, HR departments are waking up to prevention and early detection.

Ceridian's clients have online access to stress and depression tutorials where they can anonymously learn about symptoms, take a test to see if they're depressed, and find out more about coping strategies or where to get help

"Depression is really important to recognize because it can have significant impact on the workplace environment, on productivity, on employee morale and absenteeism," says Dr. Andy Cheek, a psychiatrist at Toronto's Goldmount Clinic who leads corporate stress-management workshops. He points out that stress levels in the workplace are increasing.

"With enough stressors, either personal or workplace, a clinical depression may be triggered. There are certainly multiple factors but one of them may be the workplace."

He encourages managers to check out their surroundings to see what may be improved.

Mr. Wilkerson goes a step further and challenges managers to examine their style of management.

"Ambiguity, inconsistency, uncertainty, insecurity, arbitrariness, bad decision-making, self-centredness, rewarding the wrong things in the office, the fostering of office politics, and rewarding political behaviour -- that's the earmark of weak leadership," he told one audience.

"If you're a lousy leader, you are making people sick."

In sickness and in health, Estelle Morrison says companies can be more responsive to employees' needs by offering a variety of solutions -- from flextime to putting limits around response issues: "For example, when is it that someone has to return an e-mail within 24 hours? When can you legitimately shut off your phone and say, 'My day's over.' And if not a formal policy, then certainly some communication needs to happen between a manager and an employee about limits."

Ceridian's management consultation service spends 90% of its time advising managers how to help employees.

"We ask managers to do their job, which is to manage performance. It's not their job

to say, 'I think you're depressed.' Managers can comment on changes they observe and let people know about EAP services. A manger can say, 'I'm not a professional, but if you are having issues of a personal nature, here's the number to call -- and I guarantee I won't even know that you've called.' A manager can say, 'Is there anything I can do to help you?' But that individual also has the right to say 'no.' "

Mr. Wilkerson says, "Certain forms of stress can become chronic and migrate toward burnout, which ultimately can trigger depression." His Roundtable released a "road map" with input from 37 private companies and health networks in June, which is designed to help employers navigate sensitive workplace mental health issues.

Who is at risk? Men and women in their prime working years (many in their 10th to 14th year of service) are most vulnerable to mental illness, Mr. Wilkerson says. "So employers should definitely pay attention."

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