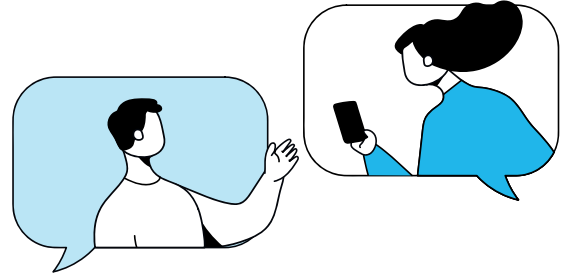


What now?

How Canadian employers can support post-pandemic trauma recovery

The following is a summary of the Canadian LifeWorks Employers Connect Mental Health Summit, held on January 26, 2022.



When Carole Dagher disclosed her ongoing battle with treatment-resistant depression in a job interview, she wasn't sure what to expect, but she knew she needed to be visible and vocal. She took the risk of asking her prospective manager to make her an offer only if he was prepared to have Carole bring her whole self to work.

The Loblaw Companies executive needn't have worried. "Not only did he make me the offer; he and my entire team have been more than supportive of my mental illness, she recalls." In fact, Carole's manager has thanked her for educating the team and showing them that employees can be high performing while living with mental illness.

Supportive, informed managers are just one of the strategies employers are embracing as they consider the post-pandemic workforce. In the LifeWorks 2022 Employers Connect Canada event, three of the country's most innovative employers also shared their focus on building out employee mental health resources and working to create destigmatized cultures where mental illness can be accommodated and discussed openly.

Presenting the latest LifeWorks research about employee mental health, Paula Allen, Global Leader and Senior Vice President, Research and Total Wellbeing highlighted some of the emerging challenges Canadian employers are confronting as a result of the societal and individual trauma of the past two years.

Isolation, with its mental and physical health implications is particularly problematic for younger workers, while parents, as a group, are between 50% and 100% more likely to be in a state of crisis than non-parents, and four times more likely to overuse prescription medications. "Parents are telling us that one their biggest concerns is the mental health of their children. And on top of the practical challenges, this has really increased the vulnerability of this group," Paula notes.

The research shows that managers and senior leaders are also struggling, with 80% reporting they have dealt directly with employee mental health concerns, along with their own family and personal stressors. Paula explains that senior leaders are feeling they don't have permission to acknowledge this strain and seek support. "That group is feeling the most traumatized in terms of their mental health," she says.

That said, other research shows that 98% of CEOs plan to prioritize mental health after the pandemic.

Supporting leaders

Leaders and frontline managers are key to building and sustaining employee mental health now and in the future. Aircraft engine manufacturer, Pratt & Whitney, recognized this, and worked with LifeWorks to deliver training for its managers to help them create safe spaces where employees can feel comfortable discussing and destigmatizing mental illness. Emmanuelle Gaudette, the company's Health & Wellbeing Program Leader reports that 80% of managers are now trained. "We want to create this ecosystem so employees and leaders have conversations together, she says. "We know that our leaders are really impacted, and we are building interventions specifically for them so they can take care of themselves; sort of like putting on their oxygen mask first so they can help and support the employees."

At Air Canada, leaders use a LifeWorks e-learning tool to explore mental health scenarios and to learn to facilitate open conversations with employees, explains Sobora Duy, Manager, Mental Health & Wellness. The airline also introduced a digital cognitive behavioural therapy tool, AbilitiCBT, to address growing manager and employee anxiety. "Within a year we had 772 open cases, and 84% of users said it helped them reduce their symptoms," Sobora reports. "Our wellness platform saw an increase in of nearly 400% and our internal social media has 89% more members and over 5,000% more comments."

Improving access

To promote Air Canada's wellness program, Unlock the Best in You (UBY), Duy took a back-to-basics approach. "I would just show up and talk to people about our programs," he explains. "To be there in person, to talk, to smile, to listen to their concerns is really key."

LifeWorks research shows that while in-person support is important, what matters to employees most is having choice in how they engage with and access mental health resources. "Digital mental health, video conferences, internet-based cognitive behavioural therapy are very effective in helping people, and are structured so they can help a greater number of people access support", Paula notes. "As we are promoting and offering these, we also need to promote and offer choice, because almost half of employees are saying they want that choice."

For Wendy Mizuno, SVP, Pensions & Benefits at Loblaw Group of Companies, accessibility is a particular challenge. "We are basically a mini city with close to 200,000 colleagues, throughout Canada and in remote locations in different roles," she says. "Leaders like Carole are demonstrating to employees the importance of being able to have authentic conversations with empathy and understanding, so everyone can come to work complete." To streamline education about mental health support, Loblaw is creating a new framework to centralize resources and ensure managers are encouraged to have those conversations and to direct employees to resources such as xxxx.

The need for robust mental health programs is big and getting bigger. The LifeWorks Mental Health Index™ shows that while mental wellness saw a small improvement, in late 2021, the decline since 2019 has been massive. One in three workers is considered to be at high risk for mental health issues, such as anxiety or substance use, and 10% fewer employees feel a sense of belonging at work. Paula also notes a risk of behavioural changes such as high-risk drinking, anger, apathy, and avoidance that may pose longer term challenges for employers.

Ready for recovery

In facing these and other long-term mental health issues, employers can turn to three areas to address individual and collective trauma. "Control, connection, and meaning are essential," Paula says. Along with quality support, focusing on flexibility will be key for restoring a sense of control, while building connections will strengthen belonging, and providing meaning will help employees feel valued. "Surveys, listening sessions, and other conversations are important to help make sure you have the right information to take the right action," she adds.

As employers begin putting the building blocks in place for a period of recovery, psychological safety will also be key. As Carole notes, "all it takes is some compassion and humanity on the part of employers to really understand and create an environment for people who suffer to bring their whole selves to work." She credits Glennon Doyle's book, *Untamed* for the inspiration to bring her authentic self into the workplace, sharing this quote:

"This way of life requires living in integrity, ensuring that my inner self and outer self are integrated. Integrity means having only one self. Dividing into two selves, the shown self and the hidden self, that is brokenness. So, I do whatever it takes to stay whole. I do not adjust myself to please the world. I am myself wherever I am, and the world will adjust."

— Glennon Doyle, *Untamed*

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