

MENTAL HEALTH at work

Why it matters



Public Service Alliance of Canada
Alliance de la Fonction publique du Canada
www.psac-afpc.com

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Levels of stress, depression, burnout have reached epidemic levels

Are our workplaces healthy? Stress, anxiety, and depression are experienced by many among Canadian workers, and it seems that many of our workplaces are a major contributor to the growing rate of mental health related illnesses. A 2010 survey by the Desjardins Group found that 30% of Canadian workers were feeling more stress than they reported the year before¹. Sick leave days taken due to mental health related conditions are on the rise. Recent media reports have highlighted the alarming rates of depression, anxiety, burnout and stress among federal public service workers, so much so that one expert has called Ottawa “the depression capital of Canada”².

What are the causes?

There is a wealth of recent medical research on the causes of poor workplace mental health. Some of the well-known factors are: precarious work, job insecurity, work intensification, poor work-life balance, harassment, discrimination, and others.

In the Desjardins survey of Canadian workers, survey participants indicated an insufficient salary, work overload, a lack of recognition and a negative work environment as major stressors.

Many PSAC members have told us that these factors exist in their workplaces.

The yearly grind of expenditure review, work reorganization and program cuts set against increased public demand has meant that public sector workers have to do more with less. In the federal public service, 68 per cent of workers in the said that the quality of their work suffered

1. “Canadian workers feel more stressed and less appreciated, Desjardins Financial Security National Survey on Canadian Health finds”
http://www.desjardins.com/en/a_propos/salle_presse/la_une/communiques/2010090801.jsp

2. Bill Wilkerson, as quoted in, “Public sector a toxic place to work”, Ottawa Citizen, June 16, 2008

because of having to do the same work with fewer resources, according to the 2008 Public Service Employee Survey (PSES).

Some of our members tell us that their requests for telework or flexible working hours, in order to accommodate family situations or disabilities, have been denied by the employer.

This issue goes to the very heart of workers' rights that unions have fought for: the right to a safe and healthy workplace, the right to a work environment free from harassment, the right to have decent working conditions, the right to be able to fully participate and contribute in the workplace, and the right balance personal and work life.

WORKERS HAVE A RIGHT TO A HEALTHY WORKPLACE!

What does a healthy workplace look like?

According to psychological experts who specialize in workplace mental health³, the following are some of the important elements in building a workplace that is supportive of good mental health:

- **Good leadership:** workplace leaders that inspire and engage workers, and that are open, consultative and keep workers informed of important workplace matters and changes
- **Workload & work pace:** a workload that is manageable at a reasonable pace; not having impossible expectations of workers
- **Work schedule (work-life balance):** schedules that are predictable, and that can be flexible where needed
- **Role clarity:** providing workers with detailed information about what is expected of them, and what their role is in the organization
- **Job security:** stable employment and career opportunities and alternatives during restructuring
- **Autonomy (independence):** Independence to be able to make decisions and the support to do so. Employees must be properly trained and provided with the tools to make effective decisions in their work.
- **Involvement & Influence:** Some measure of involvement and influence over the decisions regarding work, tasks, and organizational goals.
- **Development & recognition:** Career development opportunities, training and skill development, and recognition of accomplishments.
- **Workplace justice (fairness) and organizational culture:** a workplace culture of fairness, accountability, and a workplace free from arbitrary, unfair, or discriminatory treatment.

3. Information from Guarding Minds @ Work <http://www.guardingmindsatwork.ca/> and Workplace Strategies for Mental Health <http://www.gwlcentreformentalhealth.com/index.asp?l1=144>

- **Physical environment:** the physical environment at work can also affect one's mental health. For example, safety, noise levels, allergens, ergonomics, and having the tools to be able to do one's job safely.
- **Psychological support & protection:** A work environment where employees' psychological safety is ensured, i.e. protection from harassment, bullying, and other forms of psychological violence.

It's not rocket science. But the factors necessary for a health workplace aren't often given commitment by organizations when designing and managing their workplaces.

It affects us all

Research shows that as many as 1 in 2 Canadian workers will experience a serious mental health problem during their lifetime⁴, and in any given year 1 in 5 people are suffering from a mental health disability⁵. This affects people of all ages, income and education levels, cultures, religions, and types of jobs. In the workplace, many more workers are affected by chronic stress which can lead to a significant or long term mental or physical health problem. Chances are that you, a close co-worker, a family member or a friend is currently experiencing a significant mental health problem.

When a workplace is toxic or psychologically unhealthy, all workers in that workplace are affected. Poor mental health affects workplace productivity and morale, which in turn can create additional stressors.

People who experience mental health disabilities are often isolated and stigmatized. They may not want to come forward and speak to co-workers, union representatives or managers for fear of being labeled, further isolated, or harassed. They often suffer in silence. When their health deteriorates, long term absence can be the result. But this does not have to happen: workers with mental health disabilities can be productive, engaged workers when they have the right supports in place.

Take Action!

PSAC is committed to fighting for a healthy and safe workplace for its members, and a work environment that is discrimination and harassment free. As union representatives and union members, there is a lot we can do, collectively and individually, to address this important issue.

1. Prevention: Supporting Healthy Workplaces

Our workplaces must support good mental health. All of the factors listed above are markers of a healthy workplace: things like a reasonable workload, autonomy, balance, and flexibility. Job security and workplace justice are of primary importance.

4. Mental Health Commission of Canada; Conference Board of Canada, *Building Mentally Healthy Workplaces*, June 2011

5. Mental Health Commission of Canada

PSAC has fought for provisions in our collective agreements such as leaves of absence for family responsibilities which recognize employees' needs outside of the workplace. Protections such as those contained in the workforce adjustment agreement are important for providing job security to our members. But more must be done to ensure that our workplaces are well-resourced and that services are not cut to the bone, leaving workplaces with fewer workers to deliver the same important services to the public. PSAC's Think Public campaign is about supporting the public services that our members deliver and that are so vitally important to Canadians.

2. Health and Safety

Occupational health and safety is not just about physical hazards or the physical work environment. It is also about invisible hazards in the workplace that includes psychological health and psychological safety. Psychological safety is about preventing mental distress and illness in the workplace by ensuring that control measures are in place to deal with existing and potential psychological hazards. Psychological health is about promoting good psychological health in the workplace and offering ongoing support to all employees. Workplaces are not neutral to one's psychological health: they can either support the mental health of workers or damage it. That is why it is important that psychological health and safety go hand in hand with physical health and safety and why psychological health and safety issues must be dealt with by occupational health and safety committees.

Part XX of the Canada Occupational Health and Safety Regulations, "Violence Prevention in the Work Place," contains the prescribed steps that must be implemented by the employer. We must continue to pressure provincial and territorial until similar protection is made available to workers in every jurisdiction of Canada.

Currently, PSAC representatives are working with employers to address the lack of attention to psychological health and safety, and to ensure that policies and committees are put in place to deal with this issue. PSAC and other unions are also part of a national working group that has been tasked with developing a national psychological health and safety standard for all Canadian workplaces.

3. Accommodation in the Workplace

The employer and the union have a duty to accommodate. This means that workplaces or jobs must be adapted when a worker needs modifications in order to perform their work. For mental health disabilities, this often may mean graduated return to work, flexible work hours or work schedule, and the reduction of stressors in the workplace. The duty to accommodate also means designing workplace policies and practices so they are inclusive at the outset, so they do not have a negative impact on workers with mental health disabilities.

When the employer does not provide accommodation, a grievance can be filed by the member through their union representative.

PSAC has developed a Duty to Accommodate Guide for Union Representatives which provides information on the duties of the employer and the union. For a copy of the Guide go to http://www.psa.com/what/humanrights/duty_to_accommodate-e.shtml

4. Confronting Discrimination

People with mental health disabilities face discrimination in the workplace. Human rights legislation and our collective agreements prohibit discrimination against people with disabilities, which includes physical disabilities, learning or cognitive disabilities, and mental health disabilities. Members who have faced discrimination in the workplace because of a mental health disability, whether in the form of unfair treatment at work, harassment, or the failure of the employer to accommodate, can file a grievance through their union representative regarding discrimination. Employment equity is also a way of addressing systemic discrimination against people with disabilities.

PSAC works to achieve equality and justice for members of all equity groups. PSAC believes that human rights are an essential part of the union's agenda. Confronting discrimination involves both representing our members when human rights are violated, as well as addressing systemic discrimination in the workplace (discrimination that is embedded in workplace policies and practices).

5. Addressing Fear, Ignorance and Stigma

It is important that we talk about this issue and bring it out into the open. Ignoring the problem does not help. We must address the negative stereotypes that persist about mental health issues.

PSAC as a union is addressing this issue head on. Through our union work such as education and representation, we are working to get the message out and to counteract the silence and stigma.

6. Compensation

Of course, it's also important that when a worker needs to take time off for mental health related illness, he or she has the financial support necessary. Sick leave, disability insurance, and workers compensation are examples of the programs in place that may provide financial support when a worker must be absent from the workplace.

PSAC has fought to ensure that workers receive compensation when they are unable to work due to an illness, whether physical or psychological.

7. Collective Agreement Enforcement

The PSAC has successfully bargained work life balance provisions in its collective agreements. Too often, workload is offered as an excuse to bypass those obligations. Workers must demand that their collective agreement rights be respected and work with their union to implement appropriate corrective actions to ensure that this is the case. Increased workloads should be addressed through increased staffing and not work design or scheduling activities that are contrary to bargained rights.

What you can do

- Find out what measures your employer has put in place to prevent mental health hazards in the workplace.
- Learn more about your workplace rights through union or joint employer-union workshops
- Get to know your workplace policies, including the duty to accommodate and anti-harassment policies
- If you have been the victim of discrimination or have been denied accommodation in the workplace, contact your local union representative about filing a grievance
- Speak to co-workers and management about the role of the union in addressing discrimination in the workplace
- Learn more about the issue. Talk to your co-workers and managers about it. Treat others with respect be supportive of your co-workers that are facing mental health problems.