

Teacher's Mental Health – A Shared Responsibility

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Stressed, heightened anxiety, emotionally drained, harassed, burned out, these terms are far too common amongst teachers across the country. This is not a new reality nor is it limited to the education sector; teacher organizations as well as mental health professionals and their associations have been studying mental health wellness within the workplace for decades. It is becoming widely accepted that psychological health and safety falls under the greater umbrella of occupational health and safety, which clearly addresses the shared responsibility of employers and employees to create and maintain a psychologically safe place to work.

Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) acknowledges that workplaces affect an individual's mental health, both positively and negatively. Both employees and employers benefit from a psychologically healthy workplace. ESDC notes the benefits as: improving employee engagement, morale, satisfaction, retention, recruitment, and productivity; reducing absenteeism, grievances, health costs, and workplace injuries; as well as reducing the number and duration of medical and disability leaves. Further, ESDC recognizes the link between psychological health and occupational health and safety.

The Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) in February of 2016 published a report entitled *Workplace Mental Health in Canada – Findings from a Pan-Canadian Survey*. The survey was multi-disciplined but the third largest single group, approximately one eighth of respondents, was from the education sector. The conclusions from the report specifically detail the steps employers should take to ensure a psychologically safe workplace and the factors that must be addressed to improve mental health in the workplace. These details are the foundation for the NSTU's new policy on Mental Health in the Workplace, which was adopted at Annual Council 2019 this past May.

Policy Section III – Economic Welfare and Working Conditions

10. MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE

The NSTU believes:

- A. Alleviating psychological hazards in the workplace is an extension of the Employer's responsibility to ensure teachers have a safe place to work.

- B. The Employer, in accordance with the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* and in consultation with the NSTU, shall establish policies, procedures, and practices which:
 - I. demonstrates the Employer's willingness to champion mental wellness;
 - II. allows teachers access to internal health and wellness programs and resources;
 - III. creates a culture of respect and trust;
 - IV. alleviates the stigmatism regarding mental illness; and,
 - V. mitigates psychological harm.
- C. The factors which must be addressed to improve mental health in the workplace include, but are not limited to:
 - I. work overload;
 - II. challenges with work-life balance;
 - III. lack of trust and transparency; and,
 - IV. access to tools and resources regarding health.

Reference: 2019-28

The Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF) has made this issue a priority. In November of 2018 CTF struck a Task Force on Teacher Mental Health, which is a multilateral, multi-stakeholder, and peer-reviewed research project. The aim of the project is to produce findings that will be used to influence policy, collective bargaining, inservice training, and teacher and union practice across the country. The NSTU is participating in this project and anticipates surveying members during the 2019-2020 school year.

There are tools and resources to help both individuals as well as organizations address the issue of workplace mental health. The Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety has developed *Healthy Minds @ Work*, which offers supports for employers and organized labour in their efforts to address psychological health and safety in the workplace. The Mental Health Commission of Canada has developed *Mental Health First Aid*, which is directed at individuals wishing to increase their mental health literacy and develop skills to better manage potential or emerging mental health problems in themselves or in a family member, friend, or colleague.

The Member Assistance Program of the NSTU provides one-on-one counselling for NSTU members and their families. For more information contact nurse@nstu.ca or phone 1-800-565-6788 and ask to speak with the nurse.

The Resilience® (Employee and Family Assistance Program) provides counselling in-person, by phone, or through a secure online service. For more information call 1-877-955-6788 or for online service go to www.myresilience.com and quote contract #39146.

References:

S. Gundu and J. Kaisla project leads, *Workplace mental Health in Canada – Findings from a Pan-Canadian Survey*, Canadian Mental Health Association, https://cmha.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Workplace-Mental-Health-in-Canada_CMHA_Feb2016-1.pdf

Healthy Minds @ Work, The Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, <https://www.ccohs.ca/healthyminds/>

Mental Health First Aid, The Mental Health Commission of Canada, <https://www.mhfa.ca/en/big-picture>

