

According to Health Canada, mental illness affects one in five Canadians in their lifetime. Mental illness does not discriminate based on age, gender, race, or socio-economic status. The Canadian Psychiatric Research Foundation reports that mental illness and addiction rank first and second as the leading cases of disability in Canada and the US; depression and anxiety disorders account for more than two thirds of short term disability claims; and the World Health Organization estimates that by the year 2020 depression will be second only to heart disease as the leading global cause of disability and mortality. These are pretty significant statistics, ones we need to pay attention to, and work toward improving.

Because we spend at least a third of our adult lives at work, feeling **well** and **safe** in the workplace is essential to overall good mental health. The physical, psychological, emotional and social environment in which we work will therefore play an important role in how we feel; it can be the weight that tips the scale in a positive or negative direction. In recent years, there has been more and more focus on physical health and well-being in the workplace, and this is definitely a step in the right direction to achieving good overall health. Although physical wellness plays a role in mental health, we cannot forget to focus on those aspects of the workplace that directly impact on our mental, emotional and psychological well-being. Mental health issues may be mild with little impact on an individual's work performance and difficult for others to recognize. In some cases, it is hard to ignore the significant impact it has on an individual's life at work and beyond.

The Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists (CAOT) describes a mentally healthy workplace as one which supports its employees and helps them feel good about themselves and do well at work. Such a workplace includes and supports all employees. CAOT also describes the daily essentials of workplace mental health as education, job matching, ongoing support, and positive work culture.

• Educating yourself and others about mental health issues such as stress and depression, and their effects is crucial in breaking down

barriers and stigma, and minimizing discrimination. With a greater awareness of such issues, employees will be better able to recognize and seek the support they need early in their experience. The earlier employees get this support, the more likely they will recover with fewer effects on their daily function and quality of life.

Some ways to educate yourself include inviting an expert to talk to your staff or group, consider taking a course or workshop to improve your stress management, work-life balance and fight burnout, and learn to communicate well with colleagues and build strong interpersonal relationships.

• Job matching means choosing a job or assignment that is the right fit for you. When you find this match, your interest and enjoyment in your work will increase, you will do your job well, and even find that you don't mind going to work and investing your time and energy in what you do for a living. To determine a good job match for you, consider your strengths, weaknesses, interests and goals. Keep in mind the demands of your chosen job and your ability to meet them. Teaching, with its high physical, psychological and emotional demands, for example, can easily drain you and lead to burn out if you don't find an assignment that suits your skills, interests, values and goals.

• Ongoing support from your colleagues will help you cope with stress and mental health issues when they arise. It can make all the difference when you have someone you can talk to and who can support you in communicating your concerns to your supervisor or employer, or help modify your job to meet your health needs. Support may also be available onsite from a colleague or supervisor, from a family or friend outside of work, or from a professional support network such as the NSTU Counselling Services or Early Intervention Program.

Research has shown that when employees are dealing with mental health issues, their ability to remain at work or return to work successfully improves with support from their employer. Maintaining supportive employee-employer contact during sick leave for instance, ensures employees feel valued and missed during their absence, helping them to feel connected during a difficult time. Offering clear and consistent messages



to such employees is crucial; everyone should get the same support during these circumstances. The Canadian Psychiatric Research Foundation has published a booklet outlining strategies for the workplace *When Something's Wrong*, which indicates the best way to communicate with employees during sick leave is by reassuring them their job is still available, that accommodations can be made to support their return to work efforts, and encouraging them to take the time they need to recover. Putting pressure on an employee to make decisions about a date of return can increase anxiety and should be avoided.

The important thing is to not be afraid to ask for help when you need it. For example, ask for help if you have difficulty balancing the demands of your work and personal life, if you find specific job tasks overly difficult, if you need help returning to work after a period of sick leave to deal with health issues.

• Positive work culture is the fourth essential aspect of workplace mental health. This requires positive surroundings to minimize undue stress, to promote friendliness, respect, communication and flexibility. To feel safe at our workplace, we need to feel accepted for who we are and valued for the work we contribute. You can encourage a change in work culture by

being friendly and open with the people at work, remember to be sensitive to the different needs of each individual, and take pride in your work.

In today's busy, demanding world, we may feel torn in a million different directions. Over time, this will have an impact on the satisfaction and joy you take from your work. Creating healthy workplaces benefits everyone. It can prevent injuries and illnesses, increase productivity in the workplace. It also improves employee job satisfaction, motivation, self-esteem and overall commitment to the employer. Above all else, we need to remember to invest in ourselves, take care of our needs as well as those around us, and we will reap the benefits with long-term positive mental health!

For more information, please refer to the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists ([www.caot.ca](http://www.caot.ca)), Canadian Psychiatric Research Foundation ([www.cprf.ca](http://www.cprf.ca)), Canadian Mental Health Association ([www.cmhc.ca](http://www.cmhc.ca)) and Health Canada ([www.hc-sc.gc.ca](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca)). For assistance in improving your mental health and strategies for coping with mental illness, please contact NSTU Counselling Services or the Early Intervention Program at 1-800-565-6788 or visit [www.nstu.ca](http://www.nstu.ca) for more information.

## did you KNOW?

The Early Intervention Program (EIP) invites NSTU members to sign up for our Wellness email list at [Be\\_Well@nstu.ca](mailto:Be_Well@nstu.ca).

Please contact Erin at [ekeefe@nstu.ca](mailto:ekeefe@nstu.ca) to provide her with your NSTU email address. The [Be\\_Well@nstu.ca](mailto:Be_Well@nstu.ca) list will provide information about the EIP and other wellness topics.

