

Mental Health Promotion in the Workplace

A Toolkit for Workplaces



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Mental Health Promotion in the Workplace

Workplaces can have a major impact on a person's mental well-being. If the work environment is a stressful one, it can contribute to health problems such as anxiety, depression and burnout. According to Statistics Canada, employed Canadians spent an average of 36.6 hours per week in the workplace during 2012. Because so many people spend a big chunk of their day at work, workplaces are a great place to promote and support mental health for all employees. This toolkit has information, resources, activities and tools to help your workplace get started in promoting mental health.

1. The Business Case for Mental Health Promotion in the Workplace

- Reality and impact
- Costs and benefits

2. Mental Health Promotion: The Bigger Picture

- What does a healthy workplace look like?
- Mental health vs. mental illness
- Physical activity
- Healthy eating
- Stress management
- Substance use
- Sleep
- Shiftwork

3. Promoting Mental Health in the Workplace

- Getting started: Information sharing and sample activities
- The HealthWorks program
- Evaluating change in your workplace

4. Put it in Writing: Policies to Support and Promote Mental Health in the Workplace

- Getting started with policy work

5. Additional Resources

6. References

The Business Case for Mental Health Promotion in the Workplace

The reality and impact

One in four Canadians spend 50 hours per week or more at work, compared to 1 in 10 a decade ago (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2014), so it makes sense that workplaces can have a major impact on a person's mental well-being. A mentally healthy workplace is one where all employees enjoy work-life balance, clearly understand their roles, and have the chance to contribute to decisions about how work gets done (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2014). Unhealthy employee lifestyle choices and habits can contribute to:

- Absenteeism or missed workdays including sick days,
- Health insurance claims,
- Presenteeism or when an employee attends work even though they are sick,
- Short- and long-term disability,
- Depression, and
- Accidents.

Work related stress can make it more difficult to lead a healthy lifestyle, and can even encourage unhealthy habits. For example, if work demands a lot of unplanned travel or overtime, it may be hard for the employee to eat properly or find time to get enough exercise or sleep (Burton, 2008).

The costs and benefits

Unhealthy workplaces cost money for employers and organizations. It has been reported that workplace losses from mental illness cost Canada \$20 billion each year (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2014). Mental illness is the fastest growing category for workplace disability costs in Canada (Canadian Alliance on Mental Illness and Mental Health, 2012).

In addition, laws are evolving and changing to hold employers increasingly responsible for their employees' mental and physical health. According to Health Canada (2002), workplace health-related claims hurt the defending organization by ruining their reputation and by forcing them to pay legal fees. The promotion of mental health within the workplace will have a positive impact on all employees, not just those living with a mental illness. Mental health promotion includes creating environments that are supportive and that help people to adopt and maintain skills for healthy living (World Health Organization, 2014).

Mental Health Promotion: The Bigger Picture

What does a healthy workplace look like?

The word 'health' can mean different things to different people. The health of employees is optimized when a workplace recognizes and provides support to employees in the three main areas of workplace health promotion:

1. Individual health and lifestyle practices – providing employees with the information and skills needed to make healthy choices and build healthy habits both in the workplace and at home.
2. Workplace culture and supportive environments – creating a respectful and supportive work environment where making the healthy choice is the easy choice and all individuals feel valued and that they can contribute to decision-making.
3. Physical environment and occupational health and safety – reducing physical and chemical hazards in a workplace to reduce work-related injury, illness and disability.

Both management and employees should play a part in creating a healthier work environment. Here are a few quick examples of small changes that can be made:

Management

- Encourage employee involvement in decision making related to workplace health initiatives. (This will increase employee buy-in and support.)
- Demonstrate consistent and fair management of employees.
- Offer awareness raising and skill-building opportunities for your staff.
- Develop a system for honest 'two-way' workplace feedback so that managers and employees are able to communicate and share ideas without fear of judgment.
- Measure employee satisfaction regularly and develop a plan to make changes based on employee concerns and feedback.
- Implement policies that create a supportive work environment for employees so that making healthy decisions at work is easy.

Employees

- Participate in skill-building sessions when they are offered in your workplace, or request such workshops if they are not already happening.
- Join or create a workplace wellness committee.
- Take frequent stretch breaks, start a break-time walking club or a healthy recipe exchange, or try new activities over lunch with your coworkers.
- Address health concerns with management
- Participate in community workplace wellness challenges, or organize your own.

Mental health vs. mental illness

Mental health and mental illness are often confused as being the same thing. They are very different though and the two terms should not be used interchangeably. While there is no one definition of mental health, it was defined in 2007 by the World Health Organization as "...a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community". Mental illness refers to mental disorders like depression, anxiety disorders, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, eating disorders and more. Mental health is much more than simply living without a mental illness.

The goal of mental health promotion is to optimize health and maximize productivity. It does not address a specific problem, but is a larger scale approach to overall well-being.

Mental health and the workplace

According to the Canadian Mental Health Association (2012) there is no "one size fits all" solution to workplace mental health promotion:

"Each workplace is unique – the people doing the work, the work that needs to be done, the leaders running the organization, the size of the organization, the external environment that influences the societal norms, and the external resources that the company draws. They all affect employee mental health".

Workplaces can promote mental health by:

- Focusing on positive skill-building to give employees the skills they need to make positive change in their own life;
- Fostering positive relationships and employee feelings of connection to the community;
- Increasing access to mental health supports;
- Supporting positive lifestyle choices, such as healthy eating and physical activity; and
- Providing work spaces that make the healthy choice the easy choice.

Employees can support their own mental health by:

- Learning more about the impact of personal health behaviours on mental well-being
- Becoming aware of their own health behaviours (ie: coping techniques, eating habits, physical activity levels) and identify areas where change may be needed
- Accessing mental health supports if and when they are feeling overwhelmed

Physical activity and mental health

The Canadian Mental Health Association (2014) recognizes exercise as an essential element in building and maintaining mental fitness. Most Canadians believe that regular physical activity improves the ability to manage or cope with and reduce stress (91%), increases productivity (89%), and helps them to be more effective on the job (85%) (Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute, 2006).

Physical activity may improve or prevent symptoms of poor mental health, such as distress, depression and anxiety (University of Waterloo, 2014). The Canadian Society of Exercise Physiology (2011) reports that regular physical activity can lead to improved mental health (morale and self-esteem), and that more physical activity provides greater health benefits.

Only about 15% of Canadian adults meet the recommended physical activity guidelines of 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity per week (Participaction, 2011). Since adults spend so much time at work, it is a good place to promote physical activity.

Physical activity and the workplace

Workplaces can support active lifestyles by encouraging active choices in the workplace and at home, adopting policies that allow for flexible working schedules to fit in physical activity, and providing subsidies for physical activity-related expenses.

Adding physical activity to your work day and at home is easier than you might think. It does not always mean going to the gym or an exercise class. You can get your recommended minutes of activity in by trying out these simple tips.

Try these suggestions yourself or share them with your coworkers:

- Start out by doing an activity you are comfortable with or already know you like – walking, dancing, or gardening – then try new activities during or after work hours.
- Park farther from your destination so that you have to walk a little further, or get off the bus earlier and walk the rest of the way.
- Take the stairs and not the elevator.
- Turn your coffee break into an active break by going for a walk with coworkers.
- Go for a 10 minute walk with a friend, your family or your pet after dinner.
- Bike or walk somewhere instead of driving or taking public transit.
- Walk to a coworker's office or neighbour's home instead of emailing, texting or phoning.
- Stretch or do yoga during a webinar or phone meeting, or while watching your favourite tv show at home.
- Turn a family game into an active one by adding rules that get you out of your chair, or play an active game with coworkers during lunch or coffee breaks.

- Track your physical activity throughout the day using a pedometer or other step tracking method.

Workplaces can support physical activity:

- Implement flexible work schedule policies so that employees can fit physical activity opportunities, such as exercise classes, into their lunch break or workday.
- Provide on-site opportunities for physical activity (i.e., space to use exercise DVD's; inviting a fitness instructor in to deliver classes, etc.).
- Develop a partnership with a local recreation centre to offer memberships to employees at a lower cost.
- Provide pedometers for employees to wear during the work day to log their steps.
- Ensure that employees that are more active (on their feet for most of the day, lifting, etc.) are fully aware of proper procedures, proper footwear and other tools that ensure safety and decrease the likelihood of on the job injuries.
- Introduce a Healthy Meeting and Events policy to make sure your workplace provides the opportunity to get active and encouraged healthy eating.

Healthy eating

Healthy eating and mental health are inter-connected. A poor diet has been linked to signs and symptoms of poor mental health. Eating a diet low in vegetables and fruit but high in processed foods is linked to poor mental health outcomes (University of Waterloo, 2014).

Many of the nutrients found in a healthy, balanced diet (one rich in dark green leafy and orange-coloured vegetables and whole grains) are commonly associated with positive mental health (Dietitians of Canada, 2012).

Healthy eating and the workplace

Being in a workplace where unhealthy food is available makes it very hard for a person to make a healthy choice. While at work, employees should not have to consistently resist temptations and unhealthy food choices around them. Their workplace should be a space that encourages good health and makes healthy eating the easy choice (University of Waterloo, 2011).

Workplaces can also provide opportunities for employees to increase their skills and knowledge related to nutrition and healthy food choices. Providing information on topics such as label reading, meal planning and general healthy eating can help employees build confidence and valuable skills that will help them live healthier at work and at home. The health unit has presentations on many healthy eating topics that workplaces or individuals can use to build healthy eating skills. Health unit staff persons are also available to provide presentations to workplaces.

We need food to fuel our bodies. Eating well is important to help ensure we have the energy needed to interact with colleagues, contribute to our workplaces and perform our jobs to the best of our abilities.

Employees can make small changes towards healthier eating at work and at home. Try these suggestions yourself or share them with your coworkers:

- Pack your own lunch from home instead of eating at a restaurant.
- Cut up a bunch of your favourite vegetables and store them in the fridge for quick healthy snacks during the work day or at home.
- Set up a recipe exchange to share healthy recipes with coworkers.
- Use skim, 1% or 2% milk instead of cream or whitener in your tea or coffee and only add a small amount of sugar.
- Instead of pop or sugary drinks, choose water, tea, lower fat milk or 100% fruit juice.
- Skip dessert or choose fruit instead of a sugary treat.
- Provide healthy food options and physical activity opportunities at meetings.
- Use Canada's Food Guide as a model to make healthy food choices.
- Plan healthy "potluck" meals at work to share favourite recipes with one another.

- Encourage your partner/spouse/family members/children to get involved in responsibilities related to food (meal planning, grocery shopping, packing lunches) and try new foods together.

Workplaces can support healthy eating:

- Provide healthy food choices in on-site vending machines and/or cafeterias.
- Introduce a Health Meeting and Events policy to make sure your workplace provides the opportunity to get active and encouraged healthy eating.
- Provide learning opportunities for employees to increase their knowledge on various nutrition topics (label reading, meal planning, healthy recipes, etc).

Stress and mental health

We have all heard the word 'stress' used and can understand the feeling we get when are stressed in our daily lives. It is important to explore what stress really means so that we can better understand what makes us feel stressed and find positive ways to deal with it.

By definition, stress is mental or emotional strain or tension that a person feels because of an event or situation. A person may feel or experience stress because of positive or negative life events. For example, starting a new job, moving into a new home, having a baby or starting a family are all 'good' or positive life events that can create stress on a person. Negative or 'bad' stress, on the other hand, can result from loss of a job, death of a loved one, overwhelming work pressures or conflict in the home.

According to the Canadian Mental Health Association, a moderate amount of stress actually improves our efficiency and mental sharpness. However, when a person feels that they do not have the support or skills needed to cope with stress in their life, their mental health can be negatively impacted. Over half of Canadians report "overload" as a result of the pressures associated with work, home and family, friends, physical health, volunteering and community service. Over time, stress can contribute to an increased risk of mental illness and many chronic diseases, including heart disease and stroke (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2014).

Everyone experiences stress differently and therefore will cope with and manage stress differently (Heart and Stroke Foundation, 2013). Learning to deal with stress in a productive way is an important part of a healthy lifestyle.

Employees can make small changes to manage stress in a positive way at home and at work. Try these suggestions yourself or share them with your coworkers:

- Get active – being physically active can help you deal with stress by elevating your mood, reducing tensions and increasing your energy levels. Try going for a walk or stretching.
- Eat well – a well-balanced diet that includes vegetables, fruit, whole grains, low-fat dairy and lean meat will give your body the energy needed to deal with stress. Avoid caffeine, and foods high in fat and sugar.
- Get enough rest – aim to get the recommend 6 to 8 hours of sleep every night. If you are having trouble sleeping, try not to get frustrated. Instead, get up and read a book or do some gentle stretching.
- Breathe deep – when you are feeling overwhelmed take some time to slow your breathing. Take several full deep breathes that expand your chest and fill your lungs.
- Talk to someone – you should not deal with stress alone. Share your feelings with a family or friends whom you trust, or speak to a mental health professional, or use a personal journal as a way to express and sort out emotions.
- Make time for yourself – allow time for yourself, whether it is for a quiet individual activity or spending time with family and friends.

- Give yourself a “time out” – if you are feeling overwhelmed, excuse yourself from the current situation and walk away for a few minutes to collect your thoughts and refocus.
- Get to know your triggers – recognize aspects of your life that make you feel stressed. Either avoid those triggers or develop a plan to positively cope with those challenges.
- Just say ‘No’ – both at work and in your personal life, it is sometimes necessary to say ‘no’ to a situation that you feel add an unhealthy amount of stress to your life. It can be difficult, but prioritizing activities and refusing to take on more tasks will help you manage stress and feelings of being overwhelmed.
- Use your supports - seek out community supports available to help you with your needs. Consider what or who might be able to help you to ease your stress – counsellor, doctor, financial advisor, fitness instructor, food box program, or friends and family. It is ok to ask for help; you do not need to deal with your feelings alone.

Negative coping

Although there are many positive ways to deal with stress, the reality is that many people may find other less healthy ways of dealing with stress. These unhealthy habits could occur often or only every once in a while. No matter what, it is important to explore and understand some of the negative ways that individuals cope with stress so that you can try to avoid using these methods whenever possible. Some examples of negative coping methods include:

- Anger, emotional outbursts or violence.
- Skipping meals, overeating or unhealthy eating choices.
- Consumption of alcohol that exceeds Canada’s [Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines](#) (Guidelines: no more than 2 drinks a day (10 drinks a week) for women and no more than 3 drinks a day (15 drinks a week) for men with at least one alcohol-free day a week).
- Drug use or substance misuse.
- Physical inactivity.
- Irregular sleep patterns.

Try to recognize the unhealthy coping mechanisms you tend to use. Whenever possible, try to substitute a positive coping activity instead of a negative one.

Stress and the workplace

In the workplace, stress can damage an employee’s health and job performance. The World Health Organization (2014) defines work related stress as “...the result of demands and pressures that are not appropriately matched with employee’s knowledge and abilities, a feeling of little or no support from supervisors and colleagues, or a lack of control over work processes”.

Workplaces can support employees in managing and eliminating stress:

- Strive to provide a low-stress, supportive working environment for all employees, recognizing that individual needs may vary and “one size” does not fit all.
- Provide clear and concise job descriptions for all employees to ensure that each individual knows what is expected of them.
- Be aware of individual needs and what demands are being placed on individual employees.
- Maintain positive relationships and open communication with all employees. Check in regularly and provide support to employees when necessary.
- Implement an Employee Assistance Program so that employees have access to various supports that they may require.
- Share information about local supports available that can support employees in their life at work and at home.
- Provide skill building opportunities for employees to learn about stress management and positive coping skills.
- Provide skill building opportunities for employees to learn about work-life balance, and ensure a working environment that supports employees in achieving this balance.
- Implement policies that support work-life balance

Substance use and Mental Health

For thousands of years, people have been using substances to help them manage their daily lives. We use substances to celebrate our success, or to deal with grief and sadness. We use them to get going, or to unwind. They are part of our culture. Consider the following examples of substance use:

- Caffeine to help us perk up.
- Pills for weight loss.
- Alcoholic drinks to 'relax' after a stressful day or to celebrate special occasions and victories.
- Experimentation with substances out of boredom, frustration, or as an escape.
- Sleeping pills for a full night's sleep.
- Medications to help deal with anxiety, depression, etc.

Substance use may range from being beneficial to being problematic depending on how much and/or how often we use them. Substance misuse occurs when an individual's substance use begins to have a negative impact on their overall well-being, and on the well-being of those around them.

Some harmful effects of substance misuse are immediate such as risky behavior that results in injury, violence or unwanted sexual activity. Long-term substance misuse may lead to chronic health conditions and may impact your relationships, finances and work.

Many people use substances without issue while others experience problematic use. Various factors, including poor coping skills and lack of support, may influence whether or not a person develops a substance misuse problem. It is therefore important to provide support to every employee at all levels and stages of use.

Substance use and the workplace

Recognizing that most people in society use some sort of substance, a 'harm reduction' approach is usually encouraged. Harm reduction is any policy or program designed to reduce drug or substance related harm, without requiring the user to completely stop using that drug or substance. The focus of this approach is to help people already experiencing harm because of their substance misuse to take steps to minimize or decrease that harm. This is the best alternative for people when treatment or prevention has not been successful.

Employees can make small changes to minimize the impact of substance use, and whenever possible, choose healthier habits or coping mechanisms. Try these suggestions yourself or share them with your coworkers:

- Talk to someone – counsellor, peer support, friends or family.
- Eat well, be active and get enough sleep. Try going for a walk at a time when you would normally consider using a substance.
- If you smoke, try to decrease the number of cigarettes you smoke each day.
- Limit the number of alcoholic drinks per week – try substituting non-alcoholic drink options.
- Stay positive. If you have a slip one day, try again the next.
- Take steps to limit stress in your life. Substance use can be a negative way of dealing with stress.
- Speak to your health care professional about any of the substances you are using.
- Limit the amount of time you spend with people you tend to use substances with.
- If you are using drugs, visit your local health unit location for information about minimizing risks associated with drug use.

Workplaces can support employees to prevent or manage substance use:

- Learn more about substance use and abuse.
- Participate in provincial and national awareness campaigns related to mental health and substance misuse to reduce stigma in your workplace.
- Openly encourage employees to speak to upper management about issues that may be affecting job performance and work with them to develop a plan to manage these problems.
- Implement an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) that provides qualified, confidential support for your employees and their families.
- Share information about local supports available that can support employees to prevent or manage substance misuse at work and at home. Post the information in areas where employees visit often, or through all staff email communication.
- Provide pamphlets, videos and resources to all employees on topics such as smoking, alcohol and drug use, gambling, financial problems, stress management and anger management.
- Provide skill-building opportunities for employees to learn about positive coping, tobacco cessation or management of substance use.
- Develop a workplace alcohol and drug policy to ensure a safe working environment for all employees. This promotes healthy lifestyles, prevention of substance use, early detection and treatment for people who abuse drugs and alcohol.

Addiction

Addiction refers to a person's dependence on a substance (ex. drugs) or activity (ex. gambling). It can be physical, psychological, or both. The degree or severity of dependence can range from mild to compulsive. If someone falls in the 'compulsive' category they have an addiction. If you or somebody that you know is living with an addiction, speak to a health care professional about supports available to deal with dependence.

Sleep and mental health

Studies show that sleep has a significant impact on one's physical and mental well-being (Mental Health Canada, 2014). Due to various reasons, many adults function regularly on amounts of sleep that are less than optimal. Irregular work schedules, high stress levels, demands from work and/or other responsibilities, and busy family life may all be reasons that an individual gets less sleep than required. The amount of sleep that a person needs depends on a number of factors. Most adults require about 7-8 hours of sleep, although some people may need as few as 5 hours or as many as 10 hours each night (Mental Health Canada, 2014). While people might adapt to a schedule that deprives them of sleep, many functions are still impaired as a result, including reaction time and judgment (Mental Health Canada, 2014). Caffeine and other stimulants cannot effectively overcome the effects of sleep deprivation.

Sleep and the workplace

Some studies have shown that when people have slept for less than 5 hours before work, or when they have been awake for more than 16 hours, the chances of them making a mistake due to fatigue are significantly increased (Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, 2012). When we don't get enough sleep, our productivity and behavior are affected, which in turn affects the quality of work we do (Hurst, 2008).

Employees can support their own sleep habits by:

- Keeping a regular sleep schedule (when possible). This will support the internal "clock" and make it easier to fall asleep.
- Participating in regular physical activity. Physical activity improves sleep and also reduces stress, which may be a factor contributing to sleep difficulties. Some people find it difficult to fall asleep right after exercising, so try going for a walk when you first get up or before you go to work.
- Implement physical activity into your work day – take a walk during break time, do stretches or use a resistance band at your desk, or even just stand up instead of sitting down.
- Make healthy food choices. This will reduce the risk of digestive problems and other health concerns that may interfere with sleep. Healthy eating also will improve your overall well-being and job performance.
- Limit caffeine (found in coffee, pop and chocolate) intake, and avoid caffeine completely for at least 4 to 5 hours before going to sleep. Caffeine affects people differently, but may affect co-ordination, concentration, sleep patterns and behavior.
- Prioritize commitments both in and outside of the workplace. Feeling stressed or "over-booked" can have a significant impact on quality and amount of sleep.

Workplaces can support optimal sleep habits:

- Provide resources relating to fatigue/sleep and the relationship between sleep and overall well-being.
- Provide skill building opportunities for employees to learn about work-life balance, and ensure a working environment that supports employees in achieving this balance.
- Ensure that demands placed on employees do not exceed their capabilities or availability. Recognize that added stress is a factor that can be detrimental to sleep habits.
- When creating work schedules, consider factors such as time(s) of shifts, shift rotations and work-rest ratios. Ensure adequate breaks and days off to allow employees to achieve optimal sleep and attend to their personal lives.
- Provide work schedules well in advance. This will allow employees to plan for time with family and friends outside of work.
- Allow flexibility within work schedules when possible, which will help employees to meet the demands of their personal lives without affecting their work (i.e., allowing co-workers to switch shifts).
- Ensure adequate lighting, fresh air, proper heat and air conditioning in the workplace.

Shiftwork and mental health

“Shiftwork” generally refers to work schedules outside of a regular daytime work schedule (Institute for Work and Health, 2010). Shiftwork includes rotational shifts, evening/night shifts, split shifts and extended duty hours. Split shifts involve working two short shifts that are broken up by an extended break. These shifts are common in tourist camps, where workers might work breakfast and dinner shifts.

Working shiftwork can have effects on a person’s physical health as well as family and social life. Shiftwork is a reality for a quarter of the North American working population (Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS), 2010). Considering that shiftwork is most common in workplaces like mines, hospitality, health care settings, industrial work, protective services, and transportation services, the rate of shiftworkers in our region is significant.

By nature, many of our physical functions follow a 24-hour cycle, called “circadian rhythms”. Sleeping, waking, digestion, secretion of adrenalin, body temperature, blood pressure, pulse and many other functions and behaviors are regulated by this cycle (CCOHS, 2010). The human body naturally uses cues from the environment to keep these various rhythms on track. However, when a person is working irregular hours, their body rhythms can be thrown off.

Each individual adapts differently to changes in schedule, however, frequent changes in schedule and disruption to circadian rhythms can lead to chronic fatigue and other health problems. In fact, shiftwork can have a significant impact on an individual’s health. It can contribute to disruption of sleep patterns, higher risk of injury, unhealthy eating patterns, gastro-intestinal disorders and adoption of negative stress coping strategies.

In addition to the physical effects, shiftwork affects one’s family and social life. It may be more difficult for shiftworkers to form regular routines and attend to family obligations. They may have less regular social contact which can lead to feelings of loneliness. Shiftworkers may experience mental health issues as an outcome of the above described effects. However, these issues may go unrecognized, being attributed to fatigue, stress or family issues (Workplace Strategies for Mental Health, 2013).

Shiftwork and the workplace

Shiftwork is a reality for a large percentage of workers, and will continue to be. Due to the fast paced nature of our society, the number of shiftworkers seems to be increasing. While shiftwork is unavoidable in a number of sectors, there are a number of things that workplaces, as well as employees working shiftwork, can do to minimize or avoid the potential negative effects of an irregular schedule.

Employees can eliminate some discomforts of shiftwork at work and at home. Try these suggestions yourself or share them with your coworkers:

- Maintain a healthy diet and regular eating patterns. No matter what your schedule, aim to have 3 meals and no more than 3 snacks in a 24 hour period.
- Drink plenty of water to stay hydrated. Water is necessary for your body to digest food and properly absorb vitamins, and to remove waste products from your body.
- Limit your caffeine intake, and avoid caffeine for at least 4-5 hours before going to sleep.
- Maintain an active lifestyle. This may mean finding time to exercise outside of working hours, or simply incorporating physical activity into your work day (if your job is sedentary).
- Maintain a calendar of family events in the home. If the entire family is able to see the calendar and add important dates and notes to it, it can help you to feel more in tune.
- Do your best to make time spent with family and friends quality time. Turn off screens and enjoy conversation with one another, or play a game or other activity that everyone enjoys.
- Request support from your employer if you find that shiftwork is disrupting the quality of your life.

Workplaces can support employees working shiftwork by:

- Creating work schedules with factors such as time(s) of shifts, shift rotations and work-rest ratios in mind. Ensure adequate breaks and days off to allow employees to achieve optimal sleep and attend to their personal lives.
- Schedule days off for weekends and other “socially advantageous” times when possible.
- Keep schedules simple and predictable, and inform employees of their schedules well in advance so that they are able to plan activities outside of work.
- Provide educational opportunities for employees to learn about the challenges associated with shiftwork, as well as methods of facing these challenges.
- Provide rest facilities if possible.
- Consider providing access to quality day-care for the children of shiftworkers. This may be on- or off-site, and would alleviate some strain on the family.
- Provide healthy food choices in vending machines and/or cafeteria so that workers are better able to meet their nutritional needs.

Promoting Mental Health in the Workplace

Getting started: information sharing and sample activities

When it comes to a mentally healthy workplace, there is no “one size fits all” approach, due to the many differences between workplaces. There is also no single solution that will create positive mental health – an effective approach requires multiple strategies to be implemented as a part of a larger, more comprehensive approach to workplace health promotion. Here are some ideas of ways in which your workplace can support mental health promotion:

Promote mental health and support well-being

Mental health promotion does not focus on treating a specific problem, but rather on building resiliency and supporting overall well-being:

- Share information (posters, brochures, bulletin boards, etc.) on a variety of healthy living topics. Ensure that the information is appealing and easy to find.
- Highlight local events and supports related to healthy living through the use of email, payroll inserts or by posting in busy locations (coffee room, restroom, entrance area).
- Provide concise job descriptions for all employees. Uncertainty and confusion about duties can be a large source of stress.
- Develop a Workplace Wellness committee to support the planning and implementation of a comprehensive approach to workplace health.

Decrease stigma around mental illness

Attitudes and misconceptions about mental illness can prevent employers from understanding how to deal with mental health issues in the workplace. Stigma surrounding mental illness in the workplace can also make employees feel the need to hide their condition, or become withdrawn or isolated within the workplace:

- Invite speakers to staff meetings or provide opportunities for staff to learn more about mental illness.
- Involve both employees and management in learning about mental illness and available supports.
- Support and promote provincial and national mental illness awareness campaigns.

Teach people new skills

Provide opportunities for employees to increase skills that support overall well-being. Assisting employees in developing healthy living skills will increase confidence levels and coping mechanisms:

- Ask employees for their feedback to identify areas of interest/need.
- Start an exercise or walking program.
- Host a healthy cooking demonstration or hands-on cooking class.
- Invite a professional to present on skills related to work-life balance or stress management, such as goal setting, journaling, or stretching and relaxation.

Make the healthy choice the easy choice at work

Healthy employees are happy employees. When the workplace environment is supportive, healthy choices are easier to make:

- Encourage (and model) active coffee breaks, walking meetings, healthy recipe swaps, regular stretch breaks, workplace wellness challenges.
- Provide exercise classes on-site if possible, provide an area to lock up bicycles, set up a pedometer loan program.
- Fill your vending machine or cafeteria with healthy choices.
- Provide basic cooking facilities, such as refrigerator, stove, microwave, access to water.
- Plan organization-wide events that embrace healthy living, such as physical activity days, family fun days, 'try-it-out' sessions, work/life balance workshops, healthy pot-lucks, etc.

Put it in writing!

Health and wellness policies reflect a commitment to build an organizational culture that supports health. Organizational culture is the working environment – management practices, the way work is organized, social support, leadership style, and values and norms. Not all policies fit with all workplaces – but here are some examples.

- An alternate work schedule policy can offer employees the opportunity to drop off or pick up their children at school, or to attend exercise classes during the workday.
- A respectful workplace policy can provide a positive and inclusive working environment for all staff.
- An employee assistance program (EAP) policy can provide staff with confidential and free assistance in managing work and non-work related issues.
- A workplace mental health policy can demonstrate commitment to supporting mental well-being of all employees.

- A workplace alcohol and drug policy can set definite guidelines for employees of what is acceptable and what is not acceptable in the workplace and can outline appropriate actions to take if an employee has a concern about alcohol and drug use in the workplace.

Offer resources and supports

Presentations can be a great way to share information quickly with a large number of people. Presentations can be built into staff meetings or planned as a “lunch and learn” session taking place over a lunch hour. Longer presentations can take the form of workshops and may be planned for a half or even a full day.

Videos are another quick and easy method of sharing information with employees. Videos can be shared with staff via email, or played during staff meetings. Consider sharing the following videos with employees as a means of getting started and introducing the concept of mental health in the workplace:

- Dr. Mike Evans – “The Single Most Important thing you can do for your stress” www.evanshealthlab.com
- Dr. Mike Evans – “23 ½ hours: The Single Most Important Thing we can do for our Health” www.evanshealthlab.com
- Queen’s University – “What is Mental Health? – with Dr. Mike Condra” www.queensu.ca/sgs/hclds

The HealthWorks program

The HealthWorks program, offered through the Northwestern Health Unit provides information, support and resources to workplaces in the Kenora and Rainy River Districts. The goal of the program is to help workplaces across the region create healthy work environments that support and promote healthy lifestyle choices.

Through access to web-based resources and support from local NWHU health educators, HealthWorks can provide the following to your workplace at no charge:

- Resources to support your health at work and at home.
- Support in working through the ‘8 key steps to workplace health promotion’.
- Policy development tools to create healthy environments where you live, work and play.
- A step-by-step guide to starting a workplace wellness committee.
- Annual challenges during Healthy Workplace Month (October).
- Free monthly email tips on a variety of topics to support your health at work and at home.
- Ready-to-use materials and toolkits to support workplace health initiatives.

For more information, contact your local Northwestern Health Unit office, or visit www.nwhu.on.ca.

Evaluating change in your workplace

All workplaces are unique and just as there is no one approach to mental health promotion that fits all workplaces, there is no one evaluation method that meets the needs of all workplaces. It is important to remember that change will take place over time, and not overnight.

In general, program evaluation refers to the process of measuring the quality, value and significance or importance of an initiative or program (CDC, 2012). Evaluating your workplace health initiatives will help employers to know if they are devoting time, resources and funds to effective initiatives.

The Health Communication Unit (2005) identifies that evaluation serves a number of purposes and answers important questions, including:

- Determining the effectiveness or impact of a program – Were the goals and objectives met?
- Ensuring accountability to stakeholders, employees and the workplace as a whole – Were funds and resources allocated to appropriate and effective workplace wellness programs?
- Identifying strengths and weaknesses of the program – What could be improved? How can you build off of current successes?
- Assessing the efficacy and reach of programming – How many people were impacted by the program or change? How many people learned new information/skills and plan to apply that new information/skill?
- Comparison of initiatives to 'baseline' measures from previous or alternate programming (internal or external) – Has there been a change from the baseline levels measured?

There are many tools that can assist your workplace in evaluating change related to your mental health promotion efforts. Contact your local health unit office to discuss evaluation in your workplace, visit us at www.nwhu.on.ca or visit one of the following:

Evaluating Workplace Health Programs – www.gwlcentreformentalhealth.com

Workplace Mental Health Promotion: A How-To Guide – www.mentalhealthworks.ca

Put it in Writing: Policies to Support and Promote Mental Health in the Workplace

Getting started with policy work

Policy in a workplace demonstrates commitment on the part of an organization to the health and well-being of their employees. Workplace health policies, which typically support healthy lifestyle choices, help to provide a supportive working environment.

In order to be successful, policy development should involve employee input from all levels. If employees are “told” or “forced” into change, rather than consulted and involved in the policy process, they are less likely to support the policies and more likely to feel their work environment is beyond their control (Simcoe County Workplace Wellness Network, 2002). A need for a policy must be identified by the workplace and must suit their needs. Pushing a policy that is not needed or wanted will not be successful. Surveys and environmental scans can help workplaces to identify areas for improvement and begin to create a plan to address those needs.

Policies are statements about how workplaces will operate, the sort of behaviour that is acceptable from both employees and management, and what will happen if individuals do not follow a given policy. To make workplace policies as user-friendly as possible, they should explain the importance of the policy and why it is being introduced and should offer employees and employers a list of guidelines outlining actions that either align with or violate the given policy. Straight forward language should be used when writing a policy so that the expectations are clear to anyone who will be influenced by or required to follow the policy. Also, you should try to limit the length of the document – aim for no more than one page in length (New South Wales Industrial Relations, 2013).

Contact your local Northwestern Health Unit or visit www.nwhu.on.ca to access helpful tools in getting your workplace started with workplace health policy development.

Additional Resources

Additional information to support workplace mental health promotion available at:

- Canadian Mental Health Association – Mental Health Works www.mentalhealthworks.ca
- Mental Health Commission of Canada – www.mentalhealthcommission.ca
- Workplace Mental Health Promotion: A How-To Guide – www.wmhp.cmhaontario.ca

Additional information on one of the topic areas outlined in this toolkit:

Mental Health

- Queen’s University – “What is Mental Health? – with Dr. Mike Condra”
www.queensu.ca/sgs/hcnds

Physical Activity

- Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines – www.csep.ca
- Dr. Mike Evans – “23 ½ hours: The Single Most Important Thing we can do for our Health” www.evanshealthlab.com
- Promoting Physical Activity at Work: A Toolkit for Workplaces – www.nwhu.on.ca

Healthy Eating

- Eat Right Ontario - www.eatrightontario.ca
- Eating Well with Canada’s Food Guide - www.hc-sc.gc.ca
- Healthy Eating Workplace Handbook - www.durham.ca/healthyeating

Stress Management

- Dr. Mike Evans – “The Single Most Important thing you can do for your stress”
www.evanshealthlab.com
- Canadian Mental Health Association – www.cmha.ca
- Mayo Clinic – Coping with Stress: Workplace Tips – www.mayoclinic.org
- Self-Assessment: Check up from the Neck Up – www.moooddisorders.ca

Substance Use

- Canadian Centre for Addiction and Mental Health - www.camh.ca
- Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety - www.ccohs.ca
- Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse - www.ccsa.ca
- Workplace Strategies for Mental Health: 10 Steps to Help Address Addiction in the Workplace - www.gwlcentreformentalhealth.com

Sleep

- Better Sleep Council Canada – www.bettersleep.ca
- National Sleep Foundation – www.sleepfoundation.org
- Canadian Sleep Society – www.canadiansleepsociety.ca

Shiftwork

- The Shift worker's Handbook – www.canadapost.ca
- Shift worker app for smartphone – www.shiftworkerapp.com

For additional resources or support related to any of the above topics, contact your local Northwestern Health Unit office.

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