Time to brush up on your mental health skills

Formal programming required for psychologically safe workplace

Mental health and psychological safety seem to be the new science impacting the safety world. Workplaces should consider measures that may impact the mental health of workers, and OHS professionals need to have a better understanding of mental health and psychological safety.

Mental health is a state of well-being in which a person understands his own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully and is able to contribute to the community. A "mentally healthy workplace" is one in which mental health promotion is viewed as a strategy used to reduce risk factors associated with the development of mental illness. A "psychologically safe workplace" is one that employs strategies focused on preventing psychological injuries, such as stress-induced emotional conditions. The concept of "psychological safety" involves preventing injury to the mental well-being of the worker.

A psychologically safe workplace is one that promotes employees' mental well-being and does not harm their mental health through negligence, recklessness or any other intentional manner.

When the demands placed on employees exceed their resources and coping abilities, their mental health will be negatively affected. When work plans are designed that fail to recognize these limitations, the psychological safety of employees is threatened. A psychologically safe workplace is one that is generally free of excessive fear or chronic anxiety and manages factors that may increase this impact. Common challenges that may threaten employee psychological safety and create risk of mental health issues include: working long hours under difficult circumstances, underemployment, poor team and corporate communication, financial difficulties and relationship difficulties at home or at work.

We know that physical health is an important indicator for employee work readiness, job performance and workplace safety. Increasingly, it is now recognized that mental health problems and psychological safety deficiencies are also major factors and are a significant cause of workplace incidents. It is estimated that 80 per cent of serious workplace incidents are caused by human error. Some of these errors are due to latent organizational weaknesses while others are due to individual worker factors, such as memory failure and not paying attention to the task at hand. Mental health claims are the fastest growing category of disability costs in Canada, accounting for 30 to 40 per cent of disability claims, according to the Canada Safety Council.

The most common strategy for building a workplace where mental health and psychological safety are top of mind includes developing and implementing formal programming. This will help directly and indirectly by increasing productivity, which will improve financial performance, reduce organizational risk and build employee engagement. A standard for developing such a program is *CSA Z1003-13, The National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace.*

A comprehensive workplace health and safety program includes a functioning occupational health and safety management system. The focus of this is typically the physical work environment. It includes reducing work-related injury, illness and disability by addressing the hazards and risks of the physical environment. Reducing physical job hazards can also reduce stress employees may feel in the workplace.

The program includes continuously advancing the organizational culture — or the attitudes, values and beliefs that guide workplace behaviours and influence the work environment — which affects the mental and physical well-being of employees. Organizational culture focuses on factors that affect the interaction between people, their work and the organization, and includes both the protection and promotion of employee mental health and overall health. A wellness program can provide a framework to ensure a proactive approach to healthy living for all employees at the workplace and cover a broad range of health issues. The program could include initiatives around employee immunization, healthy eating, active living, smoking cessation and general fitness. The most effective programs recognize the need to incorporate awareness education, a thoughtful change management process and a supportive environment to assist employees.

Examples of a strong organizational culture include fairness in the way people are treated, appreciation and recognition for employee accomplishments, support for work-life balance and a strong trust relationship between employees and the management team. Workload should be reasonable, workplace communication clear, roles well defined and opportunities for professional development, career growth and advancement outlined. When the organizational culture remains undeveloped and the organization of work is handled poorly, stress builds and may become a factor for employees. Evidence suggests that many of these factors create greater risk of injury, workplace conflict and violence, heart disease, some forms of cancer, back pain, depression and anxiety. A process to identify real and potential hazards and risks in the psychosocial environment of the workplace must be established as part of the comprehensive workplace health and safety program.

Contributing to the community is important for an individual's mental health. A comprehensive workplace health and safety program should include support of local charity events, such as fund raising, volunteer work in the community and donation-matching.

Glyn Jones is a partner at EHS Partnerships in Calgary and he is a consulting occupational health and safety professional with 30 years of experience. He also provides program design and instructional support to the University of New Brunswick's OHS certificate and diploma programs. He can be reached at gjones@ehsp.ca.