# 10 Tips for Improving Workers' Mental Health

Protecting workers from getting physically injured isn't enough these days. Employers are now expected to protect their worker's mental health, too. And this duty can seem quite daunting.

The Mental Health Association of Canada recently published some tips for psychological health and safety by Dr. Merv Gilbert, a consultant and occupational health psychologist.

## Tips for Psychological Health & Safety

Gilbert explains that psychological disorders are often referred to as "invisible" because there's often no physical evidence of the condition as there is with, say, a broken arm. But mental disorders are the fastest rising cause of short and long-term disabilities—they're expected to exceed 50% of all claims administered within the next five years. And they contribute to conflict, injuries and incidents.

Many employers recognize that they have a duty to deal with psychosocial risk factors in the workplace and realize that doing nothing isn't an option but don't know what to do. Gilbert provided the following tips in response to this dilemma:

**Make managing mental health disorders in the workplace a high priority.** This strategy should be based on a solid business case that demonstrates the relevance of worker mental health

to organizational priorities and strategic plans. Support from senior management for these efforts must be clearly communicated throughout the organization.

**Measure the impact of psychological disorders in the workplace.** The most obvious indicators are things like absenteeism, number of long term disability cases and benefits costs. These so-called trailing indicators are very important but may not reflect some of the subtler signs, such as grievances, injuries, incident, "flaming out," unexpected loss of skilled staff, team conflict or low morale.

**Identify the risks to worker psychological health.** Organizations have made strong advances and progress in identifying and addressing workplace factors that contribute to physical illness and injury. Companies must now do the same for psychological injuries and illnesses.

**Address identified workplace and workforce hazards.** This step should include interventions aimed at both minimizing the presence or impact of organizational hazards while at the same time supporting the workforce in building its capacity to manage possible risks.

**Provide information, programs and policies that promote early recognition and response to worker distress.** As with any problem, the earlier that a problem's identified and acted upon the better the outcome. If an emerging psychological concern such as anxiety or depression is appropriately addressed, there's a much greater likelihood that intervention will be effective, workplace morale and functioning will be maintained and disability will be prevented.

**Provide managers and supervisors with resources and supports to address workplace mental health issues.** Managers and supervisors play a critical role in determining if worker distress is resolved or gets worse. To do so effectively, managers and supervisors need ongoing support and training and

access to useful tools and programs to address workers' mental health. It's important to recognize that managers are by no means immune to distress; they also need supports to maintain their own psychological health.

**Review current processes, programs and policies with a psychological health lens.** Do selection processes and position descriptions adequately encompass the job's interpersonal, cognitive and emotional aspects' Do health and safety and/or wellness initiatives provide information, resources and programs to help workers maintain their psychological health' Do benefits and/or EAP services provide adequate access to mental health interventions that are proven to make a difference'

**Help workers who are, or may be, dealing with psychological health issues to stay at work.** Studies have found that most individuals with a diagnosed or diagnosable mental health condition aren't off work or on disability but remain in the workplace. Employers that recognize the practical and ethical merits of providing appropriate support for workers while they address their health issues are more likely to avoid extended absenteeism and disability.

**Work together to help workers with psychological health conditions return to work in a timely, safe and appropriate manner.** Regardless of the condition, the longer someone's away from work, the harder and more difficult it's going to be to successfully return to work. Thus, the best form of planning for work return begins at the point where the worker goes off work in the first place. There should be honest and respectful communication between the employer, the insurer or disability manager, the union (when appropriate), the worker and his/her treatment or rehabilitation provider.

**Prevent or minimize relapse or recurrence.** Although there are effective treatments for psychological disorders, they may recur. So it's important to plan for "slips" in a timely

manner so that they're less likely to impair functioning and result in return to disability. These efforts will only be successful if the working environment is psychologically healthy.