# PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY: Factors that Impact Workers' Mental Health



According to the Mental Health Commission of Canada's 2011 report, 21.4% of the working population suffers from a mental health disorder or mental illness, which cost Canadian businesses approximately $6.3 billion annually. And various studies have shown the impact of psychological health and safety on workers' physical health and the workplace overall. So it's clear that safety professionals can't ignore their workers' mental health. That's why the Commission and its

partners released CSA Z1003/BNQ 9700, the first Canadian standard for [psychological health and safety in the workplace](). But actually improving mental health in the workplace has proven challenging. A recent study looked at the factors that contribute to the incidence of major mental health disorders. Here's a look at the study and its results.

**The SALVEO Study**

The SALVEO Study was conducted by researchers from the School of Industrial Relations at the Université de Montréal, Concordia University and the Université Laval with the support of Standard Life Canada. The researchers were interested in validating the assumption that the effects of personal and professional problems can't be considered separately when evaluating individuals' mental health. The study addressed a variety of factors, including work organization, family and workplace relations, individual traits, such as self-esteem, and other potential risk factors, such as chronic diseases and alcohol consumption.

The researchers questioned more than 2,100 employees from 63 companies and organizations using a questionnaire with nearly 300 questions. The results from the self-reporting questionnaires were then matched with biological indicators, including a measure of cortisol level. (Cortisol is a hormone found in saliva and an indicator of an individual's stress level.) Samples were taken on two work days and on one rest day from 401 of the 2,162 participating employees. Five individual samples were taken at regular intervals on these days. They also compared 65 different management practices.

*The results*: The study found that mental health disorders, even those associated with the workplace such as burnout, don't necessarily originate only in the workplace. That is, even if psychological distress, depression and burnout (see the box for definitions) are partly linked to the workplace where their effects (such as absenteeism and [presenteeism]()) are

the most visible, several individual factors are also linked to the incidence of these problems.

The researchers concluded that one of the most significant factors leading to burnout, psychological distress or depression lies in work-life balance. For example, a worker whose family life infringes on his or her employment tends to be better protected from burnout. But the opposite occurs when employment infringes on family and personal life. In addition, management practices must be targeted to prevent abusive supervision, which was identified as a trigger for burnout, depression and psychological distress.

**The Key Lesson**

The key lesson from the SALVEO study is that employers must correctly identify mental health problems specific to their organizations, such as an abnormally high level of depression. They can then focus preventive measures, such as wellness programs, on the underlying factors that impact the incidence of those problems.

There's no universal recipe for addressing the issue of mental health in the workplace. But in general, a successful approach is one that's:

**Comprehensive and integrated.** The approach must be an integral part of a company's culture and account for existing programs, such as those dealing with absence management or employee assistance. In other words, links must be established between all programs.

**Targeted.** It's critical to determine precisely workers' physical and psychological problems in order to implement actions that'll have an optimal impact.

**Measurable.** You must be able to evaluate the effects of quantitative and qualitative actions to determine whether they're effective in improving mental health.

**BOTTOM LINE**

Stress isn't new to workers' lives. Its effects on the incidence of mental health problems have been well documented. The SALVEO study is important because it uses empirical data to clearly identify factors specifically related to the incidence of mental health disorders. Employers can use this information to target specific workplace actions to mitigate or improve the impact of these factors on their employees' psychological health.

*Insider* **Source**

'[Improving workplace mental health](),' Standard Life, April 2014

[box]**Definitions of Mental Disorders:**

**Psychological Distress:** Underlies the incidence of more serious mental health problems; marked by anxiety, irritability and some temporary cognitive impairments

**Depression:** A clinically-identified illness; includes major loss of interest or enjoyment, periods of major sadness and feelings of hopelessness

**Burnout:** Appears slowly; marked by emotional fatigue, depersonalization or cynicism and loss of effectiveness at work[/box]