

# Mental Health – Introduction Fact Sheets



## WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH?

Mental health is a state of well-being in which a person understands his or her own abilities, 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.

Both physical and mental health are the result of a complex interplay between many individual and environmental factors, including:

- family history of illness and disease/genetics
- lifestyle and health behaviours (e.g., smoking, exercise, substance use)
- levels of personal and workplace stress
- exposure to toxins
- exposure to trauma
- personal life circumstances and history
- access to supports (e.g., timely healthcare, social supports)
- coping skills

When the demands placed on someone exceed their resources and coping abilities, their mental health will be negatively affected. Two examples of common demands are: i) working long hours under difficult circumstances, and ii) caring for a chronically ill relative. Economic hardship, unemployment, underemployment and poverty also have the potential to harm mental health.

## WHAT IS MENTAL ILLNESS?

Mental illness is a recognized, medically diagnosable illness that results in the significant impairment of an individual's cognitive, affective or relational abilities. Mental disorders result from biological, developmental and/or psychosocial factors and can be managed using approaches comparable to those applied to physical disease (i.e., prevention, diagnosis, treatment and rehabilitation).

## WHAT IS PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY AND HEALTH?

The Canadian Oxford Dictionary defines psychological as "of, relating to, affecting, or arising in the mind". The concept of "psychological safety" involves preventing injury to the mental well-being of workers. A psychologically safe and healthy workplace is one that promotes workers' mental well-being and does not harm employee mental health through negligent, reckless or intentional ways. For example, a psychologically safe workplace would be free of excessive fear or chronic anxiety.

## **WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A MENTALLY HEALTHY WORKPLACE AND A PSYCHOLOGICALLY HEALTHY WORKPLACE?**

Nothing – psychologically healthy workplaces and mentally healthy workplaces both describe the same high-functioning, respectful and productive workplace. The term “psychologically healthy workplace” is often used when talking about preventing psychological injuries (e.g., stress-related emotional conditions resulting from real or imagined threats or injuries). The term “mentally healthy workplace” is often used within the context of mental health promotion and is viewed as a strategy used to reduce risk factors for developing mental illness.

## **HOW DO PSYCHOSOCIAL RISK FACTORS IN THE WORKPLACE AFFECT EMPLOYEE HEALTH?**

Workplaces have traditionally looked at workplace health from a strictly occupational health and safety perspective. To have a complete or comprehensive approach, workplaces should also consider measures that may impact the mental health of worker.

There is strong evidence that certain features of the workplace can affect employees' mental and physical health. These factors include demoralization, depressed mood, anxiety, burnout, etc. These factors increase the likelihood that an individual will experience increased stress, which in turn increases the likelihood of developing or worsening a mental disorder.

Psychological health problems can range widely, from mild psychological difficulties such as low mood, sleep difficulties, or excessive worry to severe psychological disorders such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or severe depression. Because milder psychological health problems are far more common in the workplace, they account for a larger percentage of the negative impacts on employees and employers.

Mental distress that has not reached the level of a diagnosable mental disorder can still be a source of considerable suffering. It is possible that workplace factors may increase the likelihood of the occurrence of a mental disorder, make an existing disorder worse, and impede effective treatment and rehabilitation. On the other hand, a supportive work environment can reduce the onset, severity, impact and duration of a mental health disorder.

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