

Psychological Safety at Work

By Diana Ballon

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Guarding Minds @ Work is a web-based resource to help employers identify and address areas of risk to their employees' mental health. One of the first such resources, it provides a standardized approach to issues of psychological safety in the workplace. The launch of this resource is planned for Health & Safety Canada 2009, the Industrial Accident Prevention Association (IAPA)'s conference and trade show in Toronto, on April 20–22.

Guarding Minds is the brainchild of Dr. Martin Shain, the director and founder of the Neighbour @ Work Centre. *Network* interviewed Dr. Shain, who brings his legal expertise to the project (he holds a doctorate in law), and Dr. Joti Samra, a clinical psychologist and research scientist in BC at the Consortium for Organizational Mental Healthcare (COMH) at Simon Fraser University's Faculty of Health Sciences. As project leader, Dr. Samra makes good use of her research and clinical experience in workplace mental health issues.

What was the inspiration for this program?

Shain: I've been appalled at the degree to which the protection of mental health in the workplace has, in many ways, been given such a low priority. I've been trying to shine a light on those aspects of work that in law are seen as giving rise to "mental injury." This could be anything from bullying to harassment, discrimination, gross acts of incivility and disrespectfulness, emotional abuse, abuse of power — anything that causes unnecessary or avoidable suffering. Anywhere from 15 to 30 percent of this kind of harm can be avoided — so this is the percentage we'll be targeting.

What kind of material will you be making available to employers?

Shain: The assessment part will provide tools that employers — whether managers, owners of smaller organizations, or HR or occupational health departments of larger ones — can give to their employees to measure when there are risks that they need to pay attention to. For instance, it will include a simple six-question tool, the Stress Satisfaction Index or SSIX, to assess organizational risks to mental health, and a more detailed survey that employees will fill in, giving the organization a "risk report card" to tell them what areas they need to work on. Or, employers could access a self-audit tool to do this assessment on their own.

Samra: There will then be detailed response sheets to help employers address the issues that surface through these assessments. This could be anything from how to cope with leadership problems, to ways to provide psychological supports in the workplace — for instance, through lunch-and-learns, a contract with an EAP [employee assistance program], or including access-to-resource information with their pay stubs.

Why [on your website] do you use the term "psychological safety" to refer to your mandate of promoting or protecting employees' mental health in the workplace?

Shain: By using the term "psychological safety," we are deliberately trying to "locate" the protection of mental health in the same framework as the protection of physical health.

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— Dr. Martin Shain, Neighbour @ Work Centre

By deliberately naming this resource "Guarding" Minds and talking about safety, are you implying that employees are unsafe, or are not protected in the workplace?

Shain: It depends, because some employers guard or protect the psychological safety of their employees better than others. What I can say is that there is no uniform, consistent and comprehensive framework for the protection and preservation of mental health in the workplace. In other words, how managers recruit, select, train and promote employees is often discretionary. And while managers have a disproportionately large role to play in how employee standards are maintained, it is a joint responsibility of everyone, not just managers, to create a psychologically healthy workplace. In many ways, we're talking about the transformation of a culture toward a benchmark of fundamental civility and respectfulness. What it comes down to is emotional intelligence.

So has something changed to make the need to establish standards of psychological safety in Canada more pressing?

Samra: Psychological health [as an issue] has been around for decades, but the notion of psychological safety and protection of psychological health — the notion that workplaces have to care about psychological health — that's new. And it's starting to emerge in case law in Canada, but we don't have any national strategy or standard or legislation or best practice strategies to address it. We're probably about 10 years behind some other countries — most notably the UK, New Zealand and Denmark — who all have some kind of national strategy or standard in place.

Shain: Canadian law is increasingly holding employers and employees accountable to a standard of psychological safety by awarding larger settlements to employees who can now sue their employers for "mental suffering." Before, employees used to simply be able to sue as part of a complaint for unjust dismissal. Now, they can sue or grieve under a separate head of damages that may or may not be part of a suit for unjustly firing someone.

Samra: There is also more willingness on the side of arbitrators not only to compensate the individual, but to look at "systemic remedies" — how the employer can implement broader-based solutions to address whatever is creating a poisonous work environment. As well, legislation has been passed in two provinces, Quebec and Saskatchewan, prohibiting harassment under the *Employment Standards Act*.

Will this be a hard sell — that is, to get employers to buy into the idea of wanting to make their workplaces psychologically safe?

Samra: No, I don't think it's a hard sell at all. There's a real appetite for people to address these kinds of workplace concerns, but there aren't free resources readily available to help them. Guarding Minds @ Work will be something people can use for free [it's in the public domain], and they can basically implement it on their own, which is a real bonus for a lot of organizations.

Presumably, employers' main motivator will be concern about lost productivity?

Samra: I would say that, for most organizations, there are cost implications that end up being the driving force, whether it's claims, absenteeism, extended benefit rates, conflict between employees at work, high turnover, or low productivity. Increasingly, too, the threat of legal action is in itself also an incentive to act.

What makes Guarding Minds @ Work unique?

Samra: We're not simply providing resource materials. We're very intentionally connecting with the Mental Health Commission of Canada with the hope of informing the development of standards to deal with psychological safety — by consulting with international experts, looking at what other countries are doing, and reviewing the case law and scientific literature to see what direction we need to go in.

How will this site be launched?

Samra: At the IAPA conference, we will have computer stations available for people to try it out. The next year will consist of field trials with workplaces across Canada. We'll pick ideally two to four pilot sites and be available as they walk through each step, so we can find out what's working well, what's not, what other supports they might need.

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— Dr. Joti Samra, Consortium for Organizational Mental Healthcare

Who is involved in Guarding Minds @ Work?

Shain: The concept of the project was my brainchild. Over a year ago, I approached Great-West Life Centre for Mental Health in the Workplace, per Mary Ann Baynton, who teamed me up with COMH. Great-West Life Assurance Company has been our funder. There are now four joint owners, myself and three psychologists from Simon Fraser University in BC: Dr. Samra, along with Dr. Merv Gilbert and Dr. Dan Bilsker. Together we have turned the concept into a reality.

Dr. Shain, your Neighbour @ Work Centre is well-established as an organization promoting fairness, civility and respect for the well-being and productivity of the workforce. How does the Neighbour @ Work Centre differ from Guarding Minds @ Work?

Shain: The Neighbour @ Work Centre is my own private business. Guarding Minds @ Work is completely consistent in mission and philosophy with the Neighbour @ Work Centre. The real difference is that rather than hiring consultants to go into the workplace and implement a program [as we do for the Neighbour @ Work program], Guarding Minds @ Work will give organizations the tools to do this themselves.

Can you give me an example of a workplace issue where a worker's psychological safety is at risk?

Shain: The 2003 case of a woman in Smiths Falls, Ontario who sued for mental suffering is a pretty typical case of what can and often does happen when a worker is put under increasingly stressful conditions and the employer does nothing to prevent what are clear warning signs of trouble to come. In this particular case, the woman was the acting assistant manager at a small branch of a bank. She was someone who had always been well-liked by her colleagues and hard-working. She started being moved from one branch to another, to come in evenings and weekends, and to plead for relief. After the stress continued to multiply, she ended up on a disability leave and then a second leave, during the course of which she was fired. Eventually, she sued and was awarded a small amount — about \$15,000 — for mental suffering along with the usual amount for unjust dismissal (16 months' salary plus some other expenses). These days, that amount has catapulted. In BC, in the case of Sulz v. Canada (Attorney General), a female RCMP officer claiming she was harassed by her immediate supervisor was awarded a total of \$950,000 in damages — including \$125,000 for mental injury, and the rest for lost earnings — after she became clinically depressed, with little hope of full recovery.

How do you maintain some kind of psychologically healthy workplace in times of economic hardship?

Shain: The duty [to provide a psychologically safe workplace] becomes even more poignant in difficult times. Sure, we all have to do more with less. No one's arguing with that. But that has to be tempered with a duty to provide reasonable care for the mental health of people who have to carry out the work. The law is not arguing with the part about doing more with less, but to do it in a way that is the least harmful.

When an organization goes through downsizing or a major organizational shift, two things can happen: "participation failure" and "information failure." Managers and others running the organization forget to involve people in decisions (a failure of consultation) and they don't take time to share information with their staff. They become involved in a chain of events that lead to conflict and workplace disruption.

So are you saying that employers have choices about how to cope in times of hardship?

Shain: Exactly. The law speaks to fairness and reasonableness. When you don't involve people, when you keep them out of the loop, they feel unfairly treated [and abused], and they start to think the worst of others around them. It's that feeling of unfairness that creates a toxic brew, and things tend to spiral out of control quite quickly after that. It's not surprising that people end up feeling resentful when they get left out of decision-making. Information failure is not just a product of hard times. It can happen at any point.

A lot of this seems to be about uncertainty and lack of control, or at least perceived lack of control.

Shain: At the end of the day [in difficult times], there may be nothing we can do — but at least there's a sense that we're all in the same boat.

I've often noticed how people who are competent in the workplace tend to get assigned more work. But that's not illegal, right, that certain employees can be forced to do more than their colleagues and end up burnt-out as a result?

Shain: In a lot of ways, that is what the case with the female bank manager was about. She was essentially being asked to do more and more because she was the one you could ask. Her only fault was she didn't say no, though there is certainly evidence that she pulled back. This kind of thing is on the cusp of illegality simply because it's the breeding ground for more harmful activities — relationship issues, people disagreeing more, yelling at one another — the low legal-threshold-type things that can subtly flourish and blossom into fully conflictual situations that, if you tip the balance a bit, you've got harassment or discrimination.

Can the workplace be psychologically safe if the very nature of the work exposes someone to risk; for example, for front-line workers working in emergency departments or under conditions that might make them susceptible to vicarious trauma or compassion fatigue?

Shain: Employers need to direct their attention to modifiable aspects of their work. In certain jobs, people will come in bloody and wounded, certain things are a given, but hopefully the right people are being hired for that kind of work, people with a certain inoculation [resistance] to that kind of trauma.... But there is a lot of discretion in how workplaces are organized or managed. How we relate to each other as a team and how we support each other as a team can make all the difference.

For more information, visit www.guardingmindsatwork.ca.

For information about other mental health awareness in the workplace programs, see "[Corporate Trailblazers](#)" and "[Research Snapshot: Workplace Health Promotion](#)," in this issue of Network.

Diana Ballon is a Toronto writer and editor specializing in mental health issues.