

Is workplace depression taking its toll on your office?

Workshop highlights a problem that costs the economy billions

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Depression in the workplace is a growing phenomena that, according to some estimates, costs the Canadian economy more than \$30 billion a year.

That's the word from occupational health psychologist Merv Gilbert, who will conduct a workshop on the subject at an upcoming health conference at the University of B.C.

"According to a Health Canada study, [workplace depression] costs the Canadian economy about \$14.4 billion," said Gilbert in an interview, referring to a 2000 report. "And that includes direct costs to the health care system, disability payment costs [for companies], benefits costs. But it's a guesstimate, because a lot of the data is hard to track. If anything, it's a conservative estimate."



CREDIT: Ian Smith, Vancouver Sun
Occupational health psychologist Merv Gilbert.

Gilbert said the estimate didn't include the costs associated with "presenteeism," a term used to describe the loss of productivity for companies due to employees' physical or mental health conditions.

Since then, he said, costs to the economy have risen significantly. He cited a later report by the Canadian Mental Health Association that estimates direct and indirect costs of depression costs the Canadian economy about \$30 billion a year.

"If someone is less productive because of a mental health issue, it's hard to attach a dollar figure to that," he said. "This [study] tries to address that, but it's still somewhat a guesstimate. But the implications for the workplace are getting bigger and bigger. I think [costs due to depression] are rising. All the trends are pointing upwards."

Gilbert said depression is now the second leading cause of workplace disability. "In many sectors, [depression costs] are already starting to surpass heart disease or back injuries," he added.

According to a news release, the Business Health -- Employee Health Conference, which will take place at the University of B.C. from July 7-9, will tell companies how investing in employees gives them a competitive edge. The conference will feature panels on creating healthy workplaces, increasing productivity, and disability prevention and management.

It will include speakers from industry, unions, academia and government to discuss everything from real-life examples of healthy workplaces to how labour and management can work together to curb absenteeism and reduce the costs of disability-related problems.

The main message at the conference is that a healthy workforce leads to a healthy bottom line, while a major theme is the growing prevalence of depression as a workplace disability -- and how organizations are not equipped to manage it.

Panelists will inform CEOs, senior executives, trade unions, occupational physicians, mental-health clinicians, human resources professionals and other conference participants on the latest methods to address such issues as: Workplace productivity and innovation, disability prevention, disability management programs, and workplace wellness.

Topics will include early recognition of mental health, addictions and substance abuse in the workplace; managing disability claims around mental-health issues; managing absenteeism; and how partnerships between labour and management can work together to curb costs stemming from absenteeism.

As well, case studies will be presented on health and safety programs created by employers such as VanCity or Vancouver International Airport Authority, which, according to the release, takes a holistic approach with employees by ensuring their career aspirations and other needs are met and even gives gift certificates to employees who demonstrate healthy lifestyles such as regular exercise.

The release noted that absenteeism not only costs Canadian organizations billions of dollars each year, but the cost of absenteeism has increased by 50 per cent in the last decade. It noted that direct and indirect costs combined -- including costs for replacement workers and lost productivity -- account for 17 per cent of a total payroll.

Gilbert said there are many reasons why workplace depression is rising, including the fact that today's workplace is more "psychological" than physical because the economy is now based more on brainwork than physical labour. But he believes the workplace hasn't adapted to the change and that's causing stress and mental-health issues like never before.

He said, for example, that technology plays a large role in workplace stress, citing e-mail and cellphones that keep employees "connected" around the clock, making it much harder to separate work from family life. "There are huge issues in work-life balance. And we have a lot of information overload and there's pressure on all of us."

He said that while work can be very good for a person's mental health, a "toxic" work environment -- which includes too much conflict, bullying and a lack of recognition by superiors -- has the opposite effect.

Where there are an excessive number of stress leaves, companies need to look at "the organizational environment, morale, the degree of engagement," he added.

"Psychologically healthy workplaces have lower rates of absenteeism, conflict, grievances, accidents and a more stable workforce. They also become the employer of choice."

He said it's not helpful for companies to take the attitude that employees should "suck it up and get over it."

"Nor is the rhetoric that it's all the employer's fault. [A solution] requires a collaborative approach."

Marc White, executive director of the Vancouver-based Canadian Institute for the Relief of Pain and Disability, which is the conference host, said in an interview that programs that promote employee health also help a company's financial growth.

"We know that mental health issues have become a leading cause of disability in Canadian workplaces. Many employers don't know the best approach to managing these workers. [But] there are successful strategies that can prevent these problems."

For more information, go to www.cirpd.org and click on the conference banner.

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MENTAL HEALTH FACTS

- Depression will rank second only to heart disease as the leading cause of disability worldwide by the year 2020.
- Disability represents anywhere from four per cent to 12 per cent of payroll costs in Canada; mental health claims (especially depression) have overtaken cardiovascular disease as the fastest-growing category of disability costs in Canada.
- Stress, burnout and physical or mental health problems are the main issues limiting productivity in Canada, Canadian CEOs say.
- In 1998, Health Canada conservatively estimated that the economic burden of mental health problems was \$14.4 billion a year. More recent calculations, which include indirect costs, suggest that upwards of \$30 billion is lost to the Canadian economy annually due to mental health and addiction problems.
- Excessive stress has been linked to infectious disease and cardiovascular problems, higher incidence of back pain, repetitive strain injuries, colorectal cancer.
- Stress on the job can double the risk of heart attack.
- Employees at three major American companies who displayed chronic symptoms of depression were twice as likely to miss work due to health reasons, and seven times as likely to report missed workdays at the time of the follow-up survey.
- Employees who are diagnosed with depression and take appropriate medication will save their employer an average 11 days a year in prevented absenteeism.
- Fifty seven per cent of graduating business students around the world rate maintaining a balance between work and personal life as their primary career goal and a key to choosing their first employer. Most believe a career and personal goals can be developed in tandem, and say a working schedule that allows them to see family and friends on a predictable basis is key to work-life balance.
- Husky Injection Molding Systems of Bolton, Ontario estimates it has saved \$8 million in reduced absenteeism, higher productivity, and better use of resources, from a \$4-million investment in employee well-being and a healthy workplace environment.

Source: Mental Health Works,

an initiative of the Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario

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