



Workplace stress.

Credit: *Doug Shanks*

HEALTH: Working through the bad times

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As the global economy continues its downward spiral, attendant job losses and hiring freezes mean that workplaces are becoming increasingly volatile spaces. A 2008 survey by the American Psychological Association suggests eight out of 10 people consider the current economic situation a “major stressor,” and the Canada Safety Council reports that mental-health claims are the fastest-growing category of disability costs in Canada. Nevertheless, workplace mental illness and its negative economic impact continues to be a taboo subject at many places of employment. Local mental-health advocates want to turn that around.

“Good economy, bad economy, good business environment, bad business environment — we have to be good employers, no matter if the economy is good or bad,” says Lloyd Craig, president and CEO of Coast Capital Savings. “Mental illness in the medical system is still under-resourced, and too few people are being diagnosed.”

Craig has emerged as a leader in addressing workplace mental health for the past seven years, following the depression-related suicide of his university-aged son in 2001. “In the developed world, for people between the ages of 15 and 44, depression is the number-one burden of disease,” Craig says. “At Coast Capital Savings, our number-one drug cost is anti-depressants.”

Craig rates the introduction of a mental-health survey among Coast Capital employees in 2006 as one of his company’s greatest accomplishments. Survey results were shared among staff members,

who then discussed them at company workshops. “People were shocked at the extent of people feeling depressed and even suicidal in the workplace,” he recalls. “It’s the first time we got people together to talk about it, and it really was a wonderful experience. It really introduced us to being open about it. If you’re open about it, it eliminates the stigma.”

Craig now regularly gives public lectures on breaking stigmas that can muffle discussion about mental illness, and his company sponsors Vancouver’s annual Bottom Line Conference on workplace mental health, which took place earlier this month. Craig was also named the National Champion of Mental Health for the private sector by Canadian Alliance on Mental Illness and Mental Health in October 2008.

“It’s important to understand that the whole person comes to work every day... If someone has a kidney problem, you can talk about that over coffee. Let’s talk about depression over coffee,” Craig says. “It’s tough [economic] times. Companies cut here, companies cut there. If companies are looking for places to cut, mental health [should be] the last place to cut.”

Dr. Joti Samra, a clinical psychologist and an adjunct professor and scientist for the Consortium for Organizational Mental Healthcare at Simon Fraser University, notes that the companies that fare well in difficult times are those that pay attention to workplace mental-health issues. Among other related publications, Dr. Samra co-authored a manual for dealing with workplace depression in 2007.

“Work is a very important part of life for most of us; we often spend more hours at work than with family or friends,” says Dr. Samra. “As such, work becomes an important vehicle for education and promotion of mental health. Unfortunately, the recession has impacted a number of cutbacks in areas that are seen as ‘extra’: travel, training, and, unfortunately, mental-health issues... [But] not only is addressing mental-health issues of employees the right thing to do, it makes good business sense. Not addressing these issues impacts productivity in a negative way.”

Margaret Tebbutt manages the Mental Health Works program for the Canadian Mental Health Association’s B.C. division, and regularly delivers business presentations on mental-health awareness in the workplace. Tebbutt uses her personal experiences with depression and anxiety disorder in her presentations, which she hopes will educate employees and employers on the importance of recognizing and dealing with the prevalence of mental illness at work.

“In times of economic downturn, all of us are going to be experiencing distress, worries, concerns. For some of us, that could induce stomach problems, headaches. For some of us, it can induce anxiety disorders or depression,” Tebbutt says. “We know that one in five — and some people now say one in four of us — is likely to experience a mental illness, most likely mild to moderate anxiety disorder or mild to moderate depression.”

Tebbutt’s workplace presentations are offered to businesses of all sizes, and she hopes increased public awareness of mental-health issues will make for healthier, more productive workplaces, especially considering the economic challenges we’re faced with now.

More information on workplace mental illness and Tebbutt’s presentations is available at MentalHealthWorks.ca

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