

AS@W...FOR UNIONS

Why should union representatives be concerned with workplace mental health?

- Given their responsibility for the best interests of their membership, union officials are well aware of the importance of the psychological, as well as physical, health of members. They are aware that, regardless of whether the source is home or work, compromised employee mental health can result in undue suffering, lost work time and increased risk of accidents or injuries, which in turn, have economic and productivity implications for all. Stewards and other union representatives share a desire to provide confidential support for distressed workers. **AS@W is an accessible resource that is of practical value to unionized employees who may be encountering a situation involving a member with low mood or depression.**
- A Canadian survey of over 22,000 adults found that 31% of people experienced chronic work stress. This stress was either experienced alone or in combination with a chronic physical condition, a psychiatric disorder or both.
- Research has shown that working women report higher perceived stress levels than men. There are many reasons for this, including the fact that women continue to bear the responsibility for family demands as well as work demands.
- A 2001 study found that approximately three times as many Canadian workers reported high job stress in 2001 (35%) than in 1991 (13%). Stress levels have been found to be associated with compromised physical and mental health, including depression.
- The prevalence of depression (mild to severe) in the Canadian working population has been found to be between 8-14%. This translates into approximately 1 in 10 employees dealing with some form of depression.

What are the most common sources of workplace stress?

- Long hours and heavy workload demand (34%)
- Poor interpersonal relations (15%)
- Exposure to the risk of accident or injury (13%)



AS@W Antidepressant Skills at Work

Dealing with Mood Problems in the Workplace

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T: 778.782.5148 F: 778.782.7768 W: www.carmha.ca



What is the role of unions in workplace mental health?

- Union representatives can support employees in addressing workplace psychosocial hazards that are compromising employee psychological safety and health. Such hazards can include unmanageable workload, unreasonable expectations, lack of necessary equipment or support or harassment or bullying. Successful resolution of such issues in a timely manner while the employee is at work can serve to minimize the likelihood of symptom severity and disability.
- Union representatives can participate in the development of a return-to-work plan and determination of appropriate and equitable accommodations for a member/employee who is returning to work due to depression or similar mental health issues.
- Union representatives are positioned to provide ongoing support for a worker who has returned to work from a mental health related disability in order to minimize relapse or recurrence.

What are some strategies that union representatives can use to help support workplace mental health issues?

- Ensure that employer policies and practices with respect to return-to-work and accommodation are current and effective, particularly as they pertain to employee mental health issues.
- Support employees requiring accommodations in their discussions with the employer and their mental healthcare provider.
- Be familiar with current, evidence-based and practical information and resources that are available to workers who are experiencing a workplace mental health issue.
- Maintain active involvement with the worker and the employer even after they have returned to work to determine if accommodations are being maintained and/or need to be adjusted.
- Support the employee who may have depression or similar mental health concerns in his interactions with his or her coworkers who may not be aware of, or understand, mental health issues. This will be most successful if there are regular education/informational sessions or materials for union members.



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- Ensure appropriate benefits and supports for employee mental health in collective bargaining. Examples include comprehensive accommodation policies and practices, assurances of privacy and confidentiality and benefits that include access to both Employee and Family Assistance programs and the services of regulated mental health providers such as psychologists.

What are some strategies that employers in unionized workplaces can use to help support workplace mental health issues?

- Collaborate with unions on ways to address workplace mental health issues among employees.
- Ensure that there is a policy and plan in place to accommodate employees with workplace mental health issues.
- Ensure that there is a return-to-work policy and plan for employees with workplace mental health issues.
- Provide education, information and resources (such as AS@W) to employees to encourage awareness and early identification of workplace mental health issues.
- Recognize the critical role that the union plays in helping employees address workplace mental health issues.

Who would find AS@W of value?

- New union members who are entering an organization and/or workforce and want to know about available resources and supports.
- Current union members that may be at risk for depression or low mood due to personal risk factors (e.g. having a baby, mental health issues among a loved one) or workplace risk factors (e.g. shift work, taking on a challenging new position).
- Union members who are exhibiting workplace behaviours or performance concerns that may be due to low mood or depression.
- Union officers, OHS committee members, stewards or fellow workers who are seeking tools to help a coworker who may have a mental health concern.



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- Union members who are returning to work after a depression-related absence.
- Union members who have recovered from depression, but want to maintain good self-care in order to prevent or minimize relapse.

How can union representatives use AS@W?

- Provide information about AS@W when orienting new members, along with information about other programs, policies and procedures. Information about AS@W, such as brochures or contact cards, can be included in the orientation materials about programs and benefits that are provided to prospective or new employees.
- Information about AS@W can be provided to a broad member base through wellness or education sessions (e.g., lunch-and-learn sessions). This can serve to increase awareness and knowledge about mental health conditions, and to reduce stigma in the workplace. This can also serve to create and foster an environment where members feel comfortable in seeking support for mental health concerns.
- Union representatives are by no means exempt from mental health issues. Indeed, the responsibility and stress of their office can place them at increased risk. Union representatives need to be attentive to their own psychological well-being and to take action if this is compromised. It is not possible to effectively look after the interests of others if one is neglecting oneself.
- Incidents such as accidents, injuries, interpersonal conflict or grievances may be the visible manifestation of an underlying mental health concern such as depression.** In the course of investigating and dealing with such events, it may be appropriate to inform relevant parties about the availability of AS@W. Similarly, union representatives are in a position to monitor organizational indicators such as benefits utilization or rates of absenteeism, turnover or disability as these may suggest a need to pay particular attention to employee mental health and provide reminders of AS@W.
- Union members may inform union representatives that they are experiencing depression. While it is not their role to conduct assessment or provide treatment services, **union representatives can be of value by informing the union member of AS@W, along with other relevant policies, benefits or programs.**



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- ❑ **AS@W can be used to assist with planning and implementing a successful work return.** This might include working with the manager/supervisor and union member to problem-solve how to deal with potential stressors that may be encountered during the return, determining appropriate accommodations and developing a joint plan to identify and manage possible relapse.

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ABOUT AS@W

How was *Antidepressant Skills at Work* developed?

The guide was developed by British Columbia Mental Health and Addiction Services (BCMHAS), an agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority. The guide and accompanying materials have been authored by **Dr. Dan Bilsker**, **Dr. Merv Gilbert**, and **Dr. Joti Samra** – registered psychologists and scientist-practitioners with expertise in issues relating to workplace mental health. These psychologists are with the Centre for Applied Research in Mental Health and Addiction (CARMHA), Faculty of Health Sciences, Simon Fraser University. The guide was written on the basis of a review of the scientific literature; consultation with employers, unions, mental health providers and employee groups; and adaptation of existing self-care depression programs.

How can the manual be accessed?

The manual is available for viewing and free download at www.carmha.ca/antidepressant-skills/work/ or from www.bcmhas.ca/research. Individuals or organizations are free to print and make multiple copies of the guide, with permission from CARMHA (publications@carmha.ca). Print copies and audio CDs are available at a low cost from our ordering page at www.carmha.ca/ordering.

For further information about AS@W and associated resources and materials, please visit www.carmha.ca/selfcare . This information will be updated on a regular basis.



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