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# Health and Wellness in the Workplace



What is an employer's responsibility? Where does it begin and end? What are the implications?

**W**hen it comes to employee health and wellness, what is an employer's responsibility? Where does it begin, and where does it end? What are the implications of an employer's approach to this issue, and what are the potential impacts on an employee, the staff as a whole, and the company's culture and effectiveness?

The above questions are arising more and more frequently these days, and traditional lines also seem to be blurring more and more. There are a number of ways to approach health and wellness and the subject of employer responsibility, but the obvious question is what the employer's legal responsibilities are, and for that we can turn to the legislation.

Many would argue that in addition to

legal responsibilities, employers also have a moral responsibility to at the very least create an environment that does no harm to their staff. Many, myself included, would argue that aside from a moral obligation, it just makes good business sense for employers to be conscious of their employee's wellbeing, given the impact it has on productivity, morale, and efficiency in the workplace. It is in the best interests of employers to be as mindful of their staff's mental health as their physical health, as they are really one in the same.

Of my 50 years in the work force, at least 40 have been spent in the service of others dealing with conflict and illness, and I spent a chunk of that time investigating sudden deaths. Historically, mental health has not been discussed in the same manner as other

illness and health-related matters. It is only very recently, thanks in part to the openness of public figures about their own mental health, that the topic has become more open. Today, mental health and illness has achieved a far more prominent place in public discussion as our world continues to struggle with the impacts of Covid and other stressors, including the present war in the Ukraine.

In an article entitled, *A Global Mass Traumatic Event: Considerations for Critical Incident Stress Debriefing During the COVID-19 Pandemic* published by the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation, NC, the authors discuss the impact of collective and complex post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other related mental health diagnoses. They speak of a feeling of helplessness, especially within the

first responder community, which in these times extends to medical professionals and a plethora of others. The fear and anxiety that they may already experience has been exacerbated by the possibility of being infected by others, not to mention the animosity and abuse they may receive at the hands of others, who see them as the enemy and somehow responsible for the situation.

Incidents of suicide, alcoholism, drug abuse, and mental illness have risen significantly world-wide during this period. There is also evidence that this same pattern has occurred in the past, examples including the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918-1919, as well as with the SARS epidemic of 2003.

For me, the subject is more than academic. My work investigating hundreds of sudden deaths over the years led to my own experiences with PTSD. And when I was open with colleagues, the result was a deluge of responders who wanted to talk about their experiences and the impact of those experiences on not only themselves but their family and friends as well. The degree of impact on the first responder community is significant and growing, and until recently, simply not discussed.

In the past, while PTSD and mental illness has not been exclusive to first responders and the military, the exposure to the general world population has significantly increased over the last two years. Mental health professionals are reporting significant increases in cases, with increases in drug and alcohol abuse and suicide as well.

So, what does this have to do with you as an employer, your staff and workplace?

Over the years, in my practice as a mediator, I have been brought into workplaces due to incidents involving bullying and harassment. Many times these incidents have had an impact on everyone in the workplace. Often, the employer has been remiss in terms of not having any protocols or policies in place with respect to workplace bullying and harassment. And, in not having managed certain situations, the employer actually created a culture that not only allow the behaviour but also disrespect and aggression. In some cases, an employee's mental health was also a key factor in workplace incidents.

Employers should be aware of their staff's mental health for a variety of reasons. Mental health affects performance and attendance.

The better your staff's mental health, the less chance of absences and the better chance of increased performance. An employee's mental health can affect others as well as the culture within the workplace.

It would be remiss if I did not mention that over the years, there have been situations where mentally ill people have assaulted and

even killed fellow employees in the workplace. This is not to suggest that you get rid of people who are suffering mental illnesses, but rather be aware of the signs and signals that someone may be struggling, and in turn may do harm to themselves or others. Ignoring the situation and hoping it will go away never works. We have *continued on page 32* ➔

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a shortage of skilled workers in pretty much every area you can think of, making it even more important to keep people well.

Just as we have become accustomed to living with Covid and its lessening impact due to the percentage of vaccinated people and changes in strains, we now have implications evolving due to what is happening in the Ukraine and the potential for wider war. This is all adding to people's anxiety and stress, pushing some to the breaking point.

## “Ignoring the situation and hoping it will go away never works.”

People are drinking more and displaying riskier behaviors. Suicide and drug overdoses rates have increased exponentially—all according to recent statistics, my former colleagues in first responder communities, and mental health professionals. The global context with which we all have to contend is adding to the burden, resulting in increased incidents of PTSD and impacts on mental health.

I do not point these things out to fear monger or depress you, but rather because all evidence points to things not getting better anytime soon. So as employers and leaders, it falls to us to do whatever is within our control to help support our staff and create a healthy and safe a work environment as we can. The good news is that we are not alone, and there are many organizations and groups that can assist and support employers in their endeavours.

In the corporate world, sizeable companies have a health and safety department, which in turn has access to a

variety of professionals to establish programs and policies to support staff. Things like EAP, or Employee Assistance Programs, can provide confidential services to employees in need. It is incumbent on managers to be sure that staff are not just aware but are encouraged to access the services as required. This involves taking an interest in staff, having open communication with your team, and keeping an eye on behaviours. This is not to say that we invade our staff's privacy, but rather watch for behaviours that are out of the ordinary, listen to concerns expressed by others, and respond to these concerns. It can simply be as simple as asking the person if everything is ok and showing sincere interest and concern.

Organizations like WorkSafeBC have all the materials and resources available to help you set up programs around respectful workplaces. This is not only a requirement—it can be part of how you show your staff that you take their wellbeing serious. Be kind, be understanding, and seek to understand. In the mediation world, we have a saying about conflict: “shift judgement, get curious.” If the individual's behaviour seems out of place, inappropriate etc., do not jump to judgement and action without first getting curious. Do your best to get to the root of the problem. An effective investigator or interviewer makes the subject comfortable and creates an environment where the person is more likely to share, as opposed to being strident and judgemental, which results in the employee immediately shutting down and going on the defensive.

Mental health has always been spoken of in hushed tones. We do not talk about it. As long as we keep it in the background and marginalized, we will not address it. We need

to embrace mental health as a health issue and accept that there should be no distinction between it and physical health—they are intertwined. Alcohol consumption as well as drugs have increased tremendously, and as employers you need to be aware of the impact of that increased consumption. Again, there are programs and groups that can assist.

And while we are at it, be aware of your own mental health and how it may be affecting your decisions and behaviors. Sometimes the greatest leadership is showing your own vulnerability. Remember, even if you are a one-person show, you are not alone. Reach out to others, friends, business associates, and health care professionals. These things can seem insurmountable on your own, but with the right support, they can be overcome.

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### Referenced:

#### International Critical Incident Stress Foundation

*A Global Mass Traumatic Event: Considerations for Critical Incident Stress Debriefing During the COVID-19 Pandemic*

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simplifying the Mazda Machine Gray repair process. Our training classes and other instructional materials are geared to keep paint technicians up to date on industry advances. Structural Blue and Machine Gray videos are two examples of that.”

Further, Beauregard stated that PPG, like its competition, provides a variety of classes to keep technicians informed about today's new colours and technology. PPG programs offer a complete process overview with in-depth, hands-on exercises to ensure that technicians understand techniques for working with today's evolving finishes. Most instruction is done through the company's Business Development Centre in Mississauga, Ontario.

“Our industry sector is undergoing dramatic change in finishes,” said Beauregard. “As OEMs introduce new complex finishes, collision centres

are increasingly challenged to reproduce them. PPG has addressed this concern and provides the training that technicians need to become experts in this area.”

There is no question that as new colours and finishes are introduced, collision centres have to keep up with ever-changing refinish palettes, but knowledgeable shop owners, managers, and painters know that there is an entire automotive paint industry ready to support them. Whether the new colour is a metallic pink pearl, a bronze matte, or a blue quadcoat, there is an instructor out there ready to help a painter refinish the vehicle to OEM standards. To learn about the new colours that may be coming your way and the training options available, talk to your paint company distributor or sales representative and get ready to head for the finish. ■