Vitality

Leading the Way: Supporting Mental Wellness in Your Workplace

Our work environments are continuously changing, driven by improved knowledge of what creates healthy workplaces that support organizational needs and help employees thrive. This is especially true when it comes to how companies invest and support positive mental health and wellness at work. Over time, advancements in our common understanding allow us to shift perspectives and develop better approaches. Mental health and wellness are no longer viewed solely as a personal concern but as a critical aspect of organizational success. In this article, we'll explore the importance of prioritizing mental health in the workplace and adapting strategies accordingly.

The Importance of Supporting Mental Health in the Workplace

Employment and Social Development Canada positions that "employers are responsible for protecting the health and safety of employees" and shares some astounding findings about mental health in the workplace:

- 30% of disability claims are related to mental health problems and mental illness

- 1 in 5 Canadians experience a mental health problem or mental illness each year

- $50 billion per year is the cost of mental health problems and mental illness in Canada[1]

Creating a psychologically healthy and safe workplace is a collective effort that requires commitment and investment in mental health initiatives from top-level executives to every employee. The daily interactions within an organization set the tone for how effectively mental health is perceived, discussed, and prioritized. Recognizing the significant impact leaders have on employees' well-being is crucial. Leaders require full support and guidance to fulfill their roles and contribute effectively. By embracing this responsibility, leaders can effect positive change, fostering a supportive culture and encouraging mental wellness. This culture of support is critical in promoting mental health in the workplace.

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When employees are assured that "it's OK to take risks, express their ideas and concerns, to speak up with questions, and to admit mistakes – all without fear of negative consequences," it demonstrates how mental wellness is being actively cultivated.[2] The organization benefits from "better decision-making…[and] a more diverse range of perspectives being heard and considered." It improves "performance, innovation, creativity, resilience and learning."[3]

Building a Mental Health Strategy

Leadership sets the tone for the entire organization, and actions speak louder than words. Leaders must lead by example and demonstrate a genuine commitment to prioritizing mental health within the organization. Many initiatives already focus on promoting work/life balance, encouraging open communication, and investing in resources and programs to support employees and help them feel valued. However, building a Mental Health Strategy is not solely about individual efforts. Integrating an official strategy into the organization's operations confirms the values and operating procedures that are endorsed company wide.

Mental health and wellness training equips leaders with the knowledge and skills to recognize signs of distress, support employees in need, and promote organization-wide values of being open and understanding as part of a supportive workplace culture. It offers practical tools for identifying and responding to mental health crises, empowering leaders to be proactive and advocate for employee well-being. In short, it's a game-changer that creates critical change and consistency of approaches.

Mental Health First Aid (MHFA)

Mental Health First Aid is support provided to someone who may be experiencing a decline in their mental well-being or a mental health crisis. The MHFA program is active in over 20 countries, and participants who take these courses can recognize and respond confidently to offer help. Opening Minds, a division of the Mental Health Commission of Canada, offers MHFA sessions within organizations to help reduce stigma and promote psychological health and safety. To explore available mental health training programs, visit https://openingminds.org.

National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety

The Mental Health Commission of Canada also developed this framework for promoting mental wellness and preventing workplace psychological harm. Organizations that align with this standard are committed to prioritizing employee mental health and the value of creating a structured approach to implementing effective policies and practices.

Policy development

Structured policies shape organizational culture and practices. Leaders need to work closely with Human Resources and occupational health professionals to assess where shifts and adaptations are required in current policies to support mental wellness better or develop new ones that introduce more psychological safety. This could include introducing flexible work arrangements, offering accommodations for mental health needs, and ensuring that formal procedures guide leaders in addressing workplace stressors and managing conflicts. Policies should be regularly reviewed to stay current, relevant, and effective in meeting the evolving needs of employees.

Cultivating Open Communication

Effective communication is the cornerstone of a mentally healthy workplace. Open dialogue helps to break down barriers so that employees feel comfortable discussing their mental health challenges and seeking support when they need it. Leaders can regularly check in with their employees, offer ways to submit anonymous feedback, and direct people to confidential support and counselling. Another effective way to build psychological safety is establishing employee-led resource groups or peer support programs. These can be effective as they reinforce the investment and belief in mental health and well-being at all organizational levels and emphasize expectations around trust to help reduce stigma. Hearing about the experiences of others can be encouraging and normalize conversations about mental health. Employees will begin to feel more comfortable and not fear judgment or reprisal. It can "reduce stress levels, increase job satisfaction, and boost morale, resulting in a more engaged and motivated workforce."[4]

Regular Assessment and Adjustment

Creating a mentally healthy workplace is an ongoing process that requires regular assessment and adjustment. Leaders must proactively monitor the effectiveness of mental health strategies and policies to ensure the organization's approaches meet employees' evolving needs and steps can be taken to make necessary changes over time. Leaders are often in the best position to identify areas that need improvement because they can solicit employee feedback individually or through surveys and meetings and stay on top of their teams' engagement, absenteeism, and turnover rates. Evaluating how things are working is a proactive and innovative way to identify areas of strength and those needing improvement. When employees share their experiences with how mental health is supported in the workplace, harmful perceptions and barriers can be identified and addressed, and the organization can collect innovative suggestions for improvement. It can be favourable to involve Human Resources in organization-wide surveys, focus groups, town hall meetings, and advisory groups focused on mental health and well-being. This continuous improvement approach can create an environment where employees feel supported, valued, and empowered to thrive.

Supporting Positive Mental Health as a Leader

In addition to recognizing and addressing mental health challenges, leaders must also promote positive mental health and well-being through:

- **Effective Workload Management**
Heavy workloads and unrealistic expectations can damage employees' mental health. Prioritizing effective workload management ensures employees have the resources and support necessary to perform their jobs effectively without sacrificing their well-being. This could involve providing additional training and development opportunities, delegating tasks appropriately, and encouraging healthy work/life balance.

- **Implementing Flexible Working Arrangements**
Working from home, supporting flexible work hours, and endorsing compressed workweek arrangements help employees feel more in control and better manage their workload and personal responsibilities, reducing their stress. Leaders can work with Human Resources to explore accommodations and alternate work arrangements that benefit both employees and the organization while considering factors such as job requirements, team dynamics, and operational needs.

- **Promoting Work/Life Balance**
Leaders need to create a culture where employees feel empowered to prioritize their mental health and take time for self-care. Innovations such as flexible scheduling, paid time off for mental health or even unlimited vacation days allow employees to maintain good mental health, recharge and rejuvenate, reducing the risk of burnout and improving loyalty, overall job satisfaction, and performance.

- **Recognizing Signs of Stress and Burnout**
When leaders notice changes in behaviour or performance, they should act appropriately to provide support and offer resources and assistance as needed. Early intervention helps employees address mental health challenges before they escalate and could take much longer to resolve. Regular check-ins and reviewing workload and challenges can help leaders assess whether employees are distressed or burnt out.

- **Navigating Change**
If there's one constant in today's work environment, it's change. Leaders must help employees navigate change with resilience and adaptability. It means intentionally supporting them through periods of uncertainty and transitions in roles, responsibilities, and expectations. Providing clear and frequent communication and guidance, training and development on new procedures, and approaching change collaboratively and supportively through teamwork helps employees embrace and understand how they fit into the adjustments.

Additional Tools and Resources

There are many valuable resources to explore that can help.

- The Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS) offers a comprehensive document that provides an overview of measures that organizations can take to help promote mental health in the workplace that addresses issues such as burnout, respect, engagement, expectations, influence, culture, protections, and support. https://www.ccohs.ca/mental-health/promoting-mental-health/promoting-mental-health.pdf

- Healthy Minds@Work is another CCOHS program that offers resources and tools promoting mental health in the workplace. From informative articles and webinars to practical toolkits and training programs, leaders have access to knowledge to help them create mentally healthy workplaces and support their employees. https://www.ccohs.ca/healthyminds

- Therapy@Home, a virtual therapy service offered by Homewood Health, provides employees with convenient access to confidential counselling and support where they can connect with licensed therapists and counsellors from the comfort of their own homes. Videoconferencing reduces barriers to seeking help, and employees receive the support they need to address their mental health challenges effectively. https://homewoodhealthcentre.com/for-patients/virtual-therapy/

Supporting mental health needs in our workplaces is essential for organizational success. Leaders have a role in creating psychologically healthy and safe environments, but they must be supported at all levels of the organization. They also need to practice positive mental health strategies themselves, which can be challenging with everything they are accountable for. However, when an organization invests in mental wellness, everyone will feel valued, supported, and able to reach their full potential.
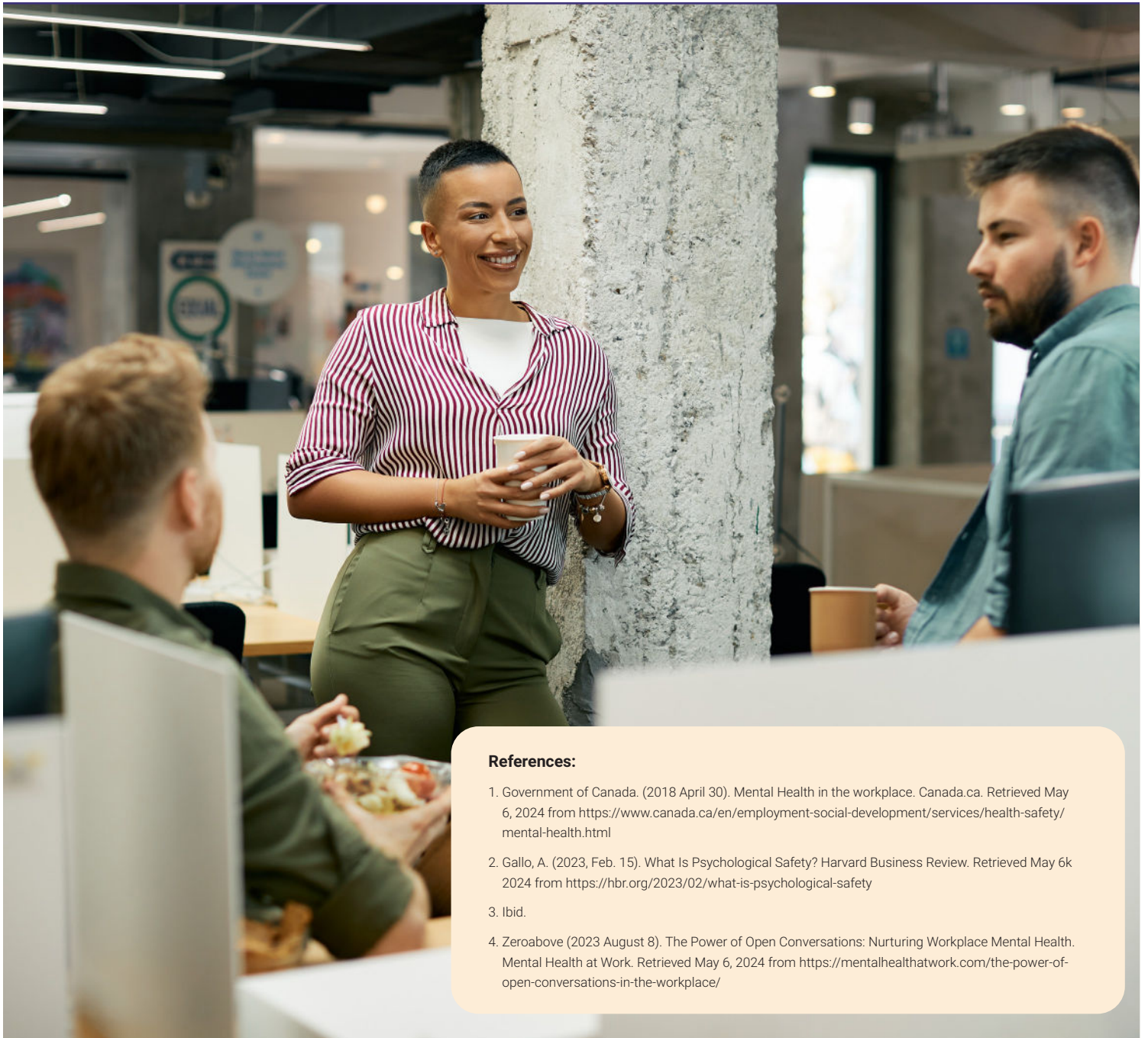
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3. Ibid.

4. Zeroabove (2023 August 8). The Power of Open Conversations: Nurturing Workplace Mental Health. Mental Health at Work. Retrieved May 6, 2024 from https://mentalhealthatwork.com/the-power-of-open-conversations-in-the-workplace/

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