

MENTAL HEALTH DANGER ZONE 2021:

PRACTICAL ACTIONS FOR REDUCING EMPLOYEES' RISK OF MENTAL HARM AND PROMOTING MENTAL HEALTH DURING A PANDEMIC

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With the beginning of 2021, many employees are challenged with working and living in a pandemic during a Canadian winter. They're figuring out how to cope with associated uncertainties like maintaining stable employment and financial health during a period of economic downturn.

Employers have their challenges: figuring out how to be financially viable and competitive and to retain a motivated and healthy workforce.

Though 2020 brought many hardships and challenges, there are some silver linings, such as reimagining how work can get done, advancements in technology, easier access to medical professionals, and increased awareness and appreciation for the importance of supporting employees' mental health and to feel socially connected.

However, for the average employee and employer, there are pending challenges that will require attention, energy, and hope to get through 2021. The vaccine is a beacon of hope but even after it has been administered to all Canadians, the full impact of COVID-19 on the Canadian economy and citizens' mental health will not be fully understood. There is a high probability that like all previous natural disasters and the post-war era there will be negative after-effects that should not be minimized by employers. They will be wise to prepare and expect in the coming months and years to be faced with numerous challenges, one major one being employees' mental health. We refer to this period as the Mental Health Danger Zone.

ACTIONS FOR SENIOR LEADERSHIP CONSIDERATION:

Reducing the impact of the Mental Health Danger Zone requires intention — what employers can do to mitigate the risk of employees experiencing mental harm and to promote their mental health.

Employee and family assistance programs, cognitive behavioral therapy solutions, and benefits plans that fund psychologist visits can be helpful for the small percentage of the workforce experiencing mental health concerns and choosing to seek help. However, they do nothing to proactively support all employees to reduce mental harm and promote mental health.

Our approach is focused on prevention. For example, if we know someone may drown, we can reduce their risk by teaching them to swim. If we know the future is going to be riddled with challenges and stress, we can reduce mental illness and addictions in the workplace by supporting cultures, leaders, and employees to obtain the knowledge and skills needed to reduce the number of employees entering the Mental Health Danger Zone.

LEADERSHIP WARNING SIGNS THAT INCREASE THE MENTAL HEALTH DANGER ZONE RISK:

- ✗ Leadership has not mandated the need for an integrated mental health strategy that puts a primary focus on prevention.
- ✗ Leadership has not bought into the business case for investing in employee mental health.
- ✗ Leadership is not paying attention to how the culture addresses mental health's impact on retention and attraction of top talent.
- ✗ Leadership thinks that having a bunch of programs equates to giving employees a 1-800 number to deal with mental health concerns.
- ✗ Leadership fails to articulate that mental health is a dual responsibility and why it is important to provide mental health training for both managers and employees.
- ✗ Most senior executives are not talking about the importance of a mental health strategy and are not involved in implementing one.
- ✗ Many managers and executives believe that mental health is a human resource warm-and-fuzzy thing that has no real impact on business.
- ✗ Not all leaders have been prepared to support employees at risk of being impaired or experiencing a mental health concern.
- ✗ Many leaders do not know what kind of mental health strategy is needed and how to evaluate if a strategy is working year over year. Seldom are leaders aware of factors to measure, such as employee perceptions around psychosocial factors (e.g., work demand), psychosocial hazards (e.g., fatigue, isolation), mental fitness (e.g., resiliency), program and policies' impact, level of stigma, perception of leadership's ability to be psychologically safe, productivity, and incivility.

EMPLOYEES' WARNING SIGNS THAT INCREASE MENTAL HEALTH DANGER ZONE RISK:

- ✗ The average employee shows an increase in sick time.
- ✗ The average employee reports an increase in incivility in the workplace.
- ✗ More employees are feeling disconnected from their teams because they're working remotely and do not feel socially connected.
- ✗ There is an increase in mistakes, missed deadlines, and apathy for quality.
- ✗ There is increased interpersonal conflict such as outbursts of anger, blaming others, defensiveness, distraction, anxiousness, emotional breakdowns, and lack of empathy.
- ✗ The average employee reports increased levels of stress, worry, isolation, loneliness, and at-risk coping (e.g., drinking during work hours).
- ✗ More employees are quitting.
- ✗ The average employee is reporting more challenges in managing work demands.
- ✗ More employees are talking openly about burnout and feeling overwhelmed.
- ✗ The average employee perceives the work culture as uncaring.

TEN ACTIONS LEADERS CAN TAKE IN 2021 TO MITIGATE EMPLOYEES' RISK OF ENTERING THE MENTAL HEALTH DANGER ZONE:

- 1. Demonstrate that every employee matters:** Insist that all employees are regularly engaged by their direct manager in authentic conversations where the employee is encouraged to ask questions and is asked what they need to feel supported.
- 2. Prepare leaders:** Provide leaders training on how they can be psychologically safe leaders so they are clear on how their actions can prevent mental harm and promote mental health. As well, provide the tools to support employees who are experiencing a mental health challenge in the workplace.
- 3. Build the business case for investing in mental health:** Provide senior leaders evidence of the dollars involved (e.g., cost of doing nothing) and the ROI for investing in mental health over the long term, to motivate them to invest in mental health.
- 4. Close value gaps:** Do not assume the organizational values (e.g., respect, ethics, integrity) that are posted on the walls are what is happening in the culture. Engage the workforce in conversation to evaluate what, if any, value gaps exist and to act immediately to close them.
- 5. Audit mental health strategy:** Evaluate whether programs and policies are doing what they are supposed to. If not, engage in continuous improvement.

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6. **Take an evidence-based approach:** Guessing at what programs and policies a workforce needs or what is working is why many organizations are not seeing improvements in their mental health claims. Leverage evidence-based and validated workplace assessment tools that can assist in designing and evaluating your mental health strategy annually to monitor year-over-year impact.
 7. **Encourage storytelling:** Share personal experiences about mental health and support employees to share their stories, to reduce stigma, and to promote help-seeking behavior. Before COVID, one in five employees came to work every day with a mental health concern but nearly 70% never got any support or were aware of what was happening to them.
 8. **Commit to facilitating on-going mental health education:** Regularly educate employees on mental health, including suicide and addictions. Constantly review what programs are offered and how to access them (e.g., during work, after work, anytime), and how to provide feedback on their experience using any mental health program.
 9. **Plug into employees' experience:** Whatever priorities come out of the workplace assessment, such as leadership, work demand, and incivility challenges, leverage tactics to determine in real-time what is working, and not, so micro-adjustments can be made. Consider using a variety of tactics such as three-minute pulse checks that measure behaviors and random sampling of employees' experience using qualitative methods such as focus groups and interviews.
 10. **Accept there is no goal line:** Like physical health, there is never a time to not focus on mental health. Accept that mental health prevention must be a core business item like the electric bill. There will never be a time when the workforce will not require support. This was true before COVID and will be after.

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