THE CATALYST

How to protect your mental health at work

Work is central, but unmanaged stress can tip into burnout.

By: Nicole Chevrier | Posted: October 26, 2023

- How do I tell my work I need time off for mental health?
- How do you tell your boss you're struggling mentally?
- Can you call in sick because of mental health?

Would you feel comfortable answering these questions?

Work is such a big part of our lives. And stress is a part of life. But when workplace stress reaches beyond normal levels and becomes unhealthy, we need to do something about it. Actually, rather than just reacting to the crisis du jour, we need to think about actively protecting our mental health at work every day before crises develop.

Did you know:

- 70% of employees are concerned about workplace stress and psychological safety at work
- Only 23% of workers in Canada would feel comfortable talking to their employer about a psychological health issue

I remember when, many years ago, I was in a work situation where almost everything was stacked against me: a crushing workload, an unsupportive boss, a competitive and toxic environment, and almost impossible chances of delivering on the objectives. At the time, the answer seemed to work harder and log more hours to perform in the role successfully. Big mistake. I was focused on achieving success. I couldn't see that how I chose to deal with the situation would lead me into serious difficulties.

One burnout later, I have learned that as noble as it is to work hard, sometimes you need to make changes or cut your losses and leave. At the time, it would never have occurred to me to talk about workplace stress with my boss. This is quite common. People hesitate to admit that there is an issue for all sorts of reasons, often because we don't want to be deemed unfit for the job. The power of stigma can keep people stuck.

People will often ignore the psychological discomfort they're in, believing that things will improve if they push on. And if there isn't a corporate culture that supports managing and acknowledging mental health issues, workers are less likely to seek appropriate help when they need it.

Let's talk about the work environment for a moment. Are you facing any of these challenges?

- Recurring struggle to maintain a work-life balance
- Heavy workload
- Abrasive relationship with manager
- Discrimination and inequality

- Low degree of control over work
- Job insecurity

Signs of workplace stress

Physical

- Headaches
- Muscle tension
- Rapid heart rate
- Digestion problems
- Restless sleep

Psychological

- Difficulty concentrating
- Low productivity
- Irritability
- Forgetfulness
- Mood swings

Is it stress or burnout?

Burnout can develop when you get into a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress. Burnout at work can cause you to feel emotionally drained and have difficulty functioning in your job as well as in your personal life.

Signs of burnout

Physical

- Major fatigue
- Sleep disruption
- Loss of appetite
- Backaches or headaches

Psychological

- Major decline in motivation and productivity
- Increase in errors
- Feelings of helplessness and/or hopelessness
- Self-doubt

Prioritizing mental health for workers and employers

Workers deserve safe and healthy working environments. Creating those environments starts with the employer, who has an essential role to play in supporting employees with awareness and information about mental health, as well as fostering an environment that encourages open dialogue. This means creating a culture where mental health is valued, and workers feel safe in seeking help. Promoting awareness can help create an accessible and positive workplace and improve staff retention, work performance and productivity.

What workers can do to protect their mental health

- Inform yourself and learn new skills with mental health training
- Recognize the signs and symptoms of overwhelming stress
- Step away from stress and take a mental health day
- Address stress with meditation, mindfulness, or yoga
- Nourish yourself – balanced nutrition can be a mood booster
- Take a walk – set aside time to get outside. Even 15 minutes can help
- Get enough sleep – lack of sleep can have a big impact on productivity at work and on your physical health
- Relationships – build positive relationships with your colleagues and your supervisor. Healthy relationships will facilitate communication and understanding
- Take action on work performance concerns – request a meeting with your manager if you aren't getting enough feedback or if you're only hearing negative feedback
- Seek professional help for stress-related symptoms like high blood pressure, migraines, or insomnia

What employers can do to support a mentally healthy workplace

Protecting and promoting mental health at work is about strengthening capacities to recognize and act on mental health conditions at work, especially for people responsible for the supervision of others.

To protect mental health, the WHO recommends:

- **Manager training for mental health**, which helps managers recognize and respond to emotional distress; builds interpersonal skills like open communication and active listening; and fosters a better understanding of how job stressors affect mental health and can be managed.
- **Training for workers** in mental health literacy and awareness to improve knowledge of mental health and reduce stigma against mental health conditions at work.
- **Interventions for individuals** to build skills to manage stress and reduce mental health symptoms.

What mental health at work looks like

- Employee satisfaction
- High levels of engagement and collaboration
- Productivity
- Trust
- Agility
- Resiliency
- Higher staff retention rates

Remember, while it may seem like creating a mentally healthy workplace is lots of work, the efforts and investments made by both workers and employers have been shown to be well worth it. Mental health at work is good for business.

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An avid writer and photographer. A first-time author, she recently published her first children's book to help children who are experiencing bullying. When she isn't at her desk, Nicole loves to spend her time doing yoga and meditation, ballroom dancing, hiking, and celebrating nature with photography. She is a collector of sunset moments.

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