

# HEALTHY WORKER: MENTAL HEALTH



If there is one thing you can count on in the forestry industry, it's that there will be uncertainty. The ups and downs of pricing, weather, forest health, and the politics of resource management are but a few of the constant challenges that forestry workers face. So why is it that some people thrive on this kind of workplace stress, while others find it overwhelming? With depression and anxiety affecting one in ten Canadians, and only one third of those affected by mood disorders seeking help, how the workplace can contribute to – or help prevent - poor mental health is an important topic. Mental illness is linked to poor performance at work, increased risk of errors and incidents, and also increased rates and severity of physical illnesses. Mental health disability is expensive for both the individual and the employer, and it affects every aspect of a person's life. There is no doubt that the challenges of poor mental health is huge, so let's take a look at what we can do in the workplace to help to prevent mental illness and to help those who are struggling.

Mental health is a complex topic and the factors that contribute to how we perceive and respond to threats are still not well understood. Nonetheless, there are a number of factors that have been identified as important to our ability to handle the challenges that life inevitably throws at us. To start off, being able to understand that we are reacting with our emotions rather than logic is very important. We've all had that experience where because we are worried about something at home, we react strongly to something minor that happens at work or on the road. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy is an approach that can help to increase our awareness of those moments when emotions take control and can provide a skill set that allows us to step back and evaluate a situation more clearly before taking action. Improving our understanding of what we are feeling has an added benefit, as it helps to identify where the conflict is actually coming from so that we can take appropriate action to address the problem at its source. Workplace training can help encourage these skills and learning how to put them into daily practice can go a long way towards creating the resiliency that we need to cope in a healthy way when serious problems arise.

Another important aspect of good mental health is to treat ourselves with compassion. This doesn't mean that we get to do what ever we want, or that making mistakes doesn't matter – but it does mean that we realize that we can't always be perfect, and that making a mistake is ok, as long as we learn from it and try to address any wrong-doing. It means being a bit gentle with ourselves, setting realistic goals, and treating ourselves with the same care and kindness that we would extend to someone that we love.

When scientists study people who have experienced trauma, conflict and disappointment, common traits can be identified in those who are resilient and who are able to move forward with their lives in a positive way. One key trait is that no matter how bad the experiences, somewhere, somehow, they see that

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some good exists in the world around them. An example of this kind of hope or optimism is when a terrible tragedy leads to closer relationships with family and friends. It doesn't mean that we don't feel the pain and grief of the tragedy fully, but it does mean that life will go on, and that it can be full and satisfying despite being hard. Workplace mindfulness programs can help to develop these practices and incorporating them into stress management and incident response plans has been shown to be beneficial.

Another key part of dealing with life's difficulties successfully is to feel that we have the capacity to do the work that needs to be done. Part of this comes from whether we have the strength, knowledge and resources required. But even if we don't have these abilities right now, feeling like there is something that we can do to improve the situation makes a difference. Even if it's only a very small step forward, when we see our actions make things a little bit better, the situation is not as difficult. Feeling like our concerns are respected and that we are able to affect the outcome is critical for good mental health, and something that can be implemented in the workplace through participating in respectful employer – employee engagement.

The workplace can be a place where good mental health is nurtured, or it can contribute to poor mental health if relationships are not respectful and inclusive. Often minorities or novices are treated with suspicion that can escalate into bullying or discriminatory practices, but harassment can happen to anyone. Multicultural and diverse workplaces have much to offer and everyone should be aware that what they may not consider to be an offensive race or gender focused joke or stereotype, may in fact be harmful. Workplace bullying and harassment are big enough problems that specific policies to prevent and deal with these types of incidents are mandated by law, and the injurious effects of them on mental and physical health are eligible for compensation. If you are the victim of, or observe bullying, harassment or discrimination, report it to your supervisor or an impartial third party such as WorkSafe BC or your union representative.

These are but a few of the different approaches that are used to help people struggling with trauma, sadness, pain, feelings of insecurity or worthlessness, anger, or being overwhelmed. Insomnia, changes in appetite and the inability to enjoy the things that used to make you happy are additional warning signs. There are also other kinds of mental illness that can make it difficult to maintain healthy relationships and act responsibly and with purpose. But whatever the situation, recognizing when you, or someone close to you is struggling is a good beginning, and something that we can build into the workplace. You aren't alone and taking that step to reach out to someone nearby is worth the risk – whether it is you who are struggling, or you observe it in someone else. Although it can seem like it's hard to find help, your friends, family, neighbors, colleagues and local primary

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care health professionals want to help. All you need to do is let them know you are struggling.

We are fortunate here in British Columbia that there are some good options and resources for professional and confidential help. See the links below for a few suggestions.

## **Facts:**

- One in five Canadians will experience a mental health disorder in their lifetime. More than 10% of Canadians are currently suffering from mental illness.
- Although awareness and acceptance of mental health challenges by Canadians are increasing, there is still significant stigma associated with a diagnosis of a mental disorder. This prevents many people from seeking help.
- Disability costs associated with mental illness are approximately double those of a physical illness.
- In 2012 WorkSafe BC began recognizing certain work-related stressors that contribute to mental health injuries and started accepting specific workplace related mental health claims.

## **What to Expect:**

- Canadians have a 1 in 2 chance of having a mental illness by the time they are 40 years of age.
- People with mental health disorders are twice as likely to develop a substance use problem than the general public.
- Mental health is related to physical health and a predictor of survival from serious diseases.
- Wait times for mental health treatment can be long. Approximately 1/3 of Canadians report that their mental health needs are not being fully met.
- Learning good coping skills and putting them into practice takes time. There's no magic bullet, but the rewards for you and your family are there.
- Approximately 70% of Forestry sector workplace injury mental health claims submitted to WorkSafe BC are accepted.

## **What You Can Do:**

- If you find yourself to be angry, fearful, sad or hopeless reach out. There are people around you who will listen and can help you find the support that you need to feel better.
- Be kind and respectful to yourself and to others. Consider how you would behave if someone you love was feeling or behaving that way, and respond as such.

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- If you find yourself feeling overwhelmed or unable to let go of an emotion, reach out to professional resources. The skills to cope with trauma, uncertainty, fear and pain do not necessarily come naturally. Investing in learning them, and putting them into practice will help you, your family and your work
- Spending time out of doors in nature, and getting some physical exercise are two of the most powerful ways to maintain good mental health. Make sure that you and your family do these things on a regular basis
- Look after your physical health by getting enough sleep and eating well. These are two more things that have been shown to have a strong impact on mental health and which are, to at least a certain degree, within your control.
- You can't control the actions of other people but you can make conscious decisions about how you want to live your life. Choosing health supporting activities over those that contribute to poor health is within your control. One of these is asking for help when you need it.
- Alcohol and other substances are not solutions. They can mask underlying mental health issues, increase their financial, emotional and physical costs, and prevent people from getting the help they need. If you find yourself reaching for substances as a coping mechanism, please reach out to someone for help.
- Turn off social media on a regular basis. Easy access to information can be beneficial, but it can also be overwhelming and create unrealistic expectations.

## **What Employers And Supervisors Can Do:**

- Use staff training events as opportunities to increase awareness about mental health issues and to reduce stigma associated with people asking for help.
- Include a mental health check in as part of team building events or safety talks. It's possible to be respectful of privacy and also make sure that people feel that resources are available and that it is safe to ask for help.
- Consider implementing an Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP) to provide confidential mental health counselling and support.
- Post information about mental health resources in visible areas of your workplace as well as more private locations where people can study the information without being in the public view.
- Peer support is very helpful to those are struggling. Consider providing mental health first aid training to develop these skills in employees and designating peer listeners as a point of entry to professional resources.
- Be aware that employees who are struggling with mental health can have far reaching effects, impacting their entire team.

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- Encourage employees to submit comments and suggestions about sources of workplace stress and let them know that their concerns are being heard and considered even if they are not practical to implement immediately.
- Use employee-employer teams to ensure that employee voices are represented in decision-making – especially when difficult decisions have to be made.
- Make sure that incident response plans include mental health check-ins as well as a process for support if needed.
- Offer professional development opportunities whenever possible. Helping workers to achieve a higher level of skill can reduce workplace stress and enhance job satisfaction.

## **The Special Case of COVID-19:**

- In Canada 2 in 5 people surveyed report a decline in mental health since COVID-19 restrictions began.
- 54% of people who have had to quarantine report decrease in mental health.
- Self-reported anxiety is four times higher than pre-COVID-19 levels (23%), and depression is two times higher (15%).
- Spending time outside was reported as the most effective way to improve mental health by almost 40% of respondents.

## **More Resources:**

Canada Mental Health and Substance Abuse Support Mental Health Wellness Toolkit <https://ca.portal.gs/>

Bounce Back is a free program from the Canadian Mental Health Association for people with anxiety and depression. Learn how to build good coping skills through the on-line program or connect with a coach over the phone <http://www.mindhealthbc.ca/bounceback>

Here to Help is a resource page with two streams, one for people who are experiencing mental health challenges and one for people who are trying to support someone else's mental health. Explore these pages for links to easy to understand information and other resources for more help <https://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/>

BC Mental Health and Substance Abuse Supports <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/mental-health-support-in-bc>



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Free anxiety management program from Anxiety Canada. Based on well-established Cognitive Based Therapy techniques, this free on-line program is available at [https://maps.anxietycanada.com/courses/my-anxiety-plan-map-for-adults/?\\_ga=2.180483492.227397676.1596065208-298224561.1596065208](https://maps.anxietycanada.com/courses/my-anxiety-plan-map-for-adults/?_ga=2.180483492.227397676.1596065208-298224561.1596065208)

WorkSafe BC COVID-19 Mental Health page for COVID-19 related stress, anxiety and depression.

<https://www.worksafebc.com/en/resources/health-safety/books-guides/addressing-mental-health-effects-covid-19-guide-for-workers?lang=en>

WorkSafeBC Bullying and Harassment Information -

<https://www.worksafebc.com/en/health-safety/hazards-exposures/bullying-harassment>

Canadian Safety Council in conjunction with the University of Laval have produced a free kit for preventing workplace related mental health problems <http://www.irsst.qc.ca/media/documents/PubIRSST/R-427-3.pdf?v=2018-11-23>

Heads Up Guys – Health Strategies for Managing and Preventing Depression

<https://headsupguys.org/>

Your family physician or other care provider