

# **A guide to workplace mental health: we all have a role to play**



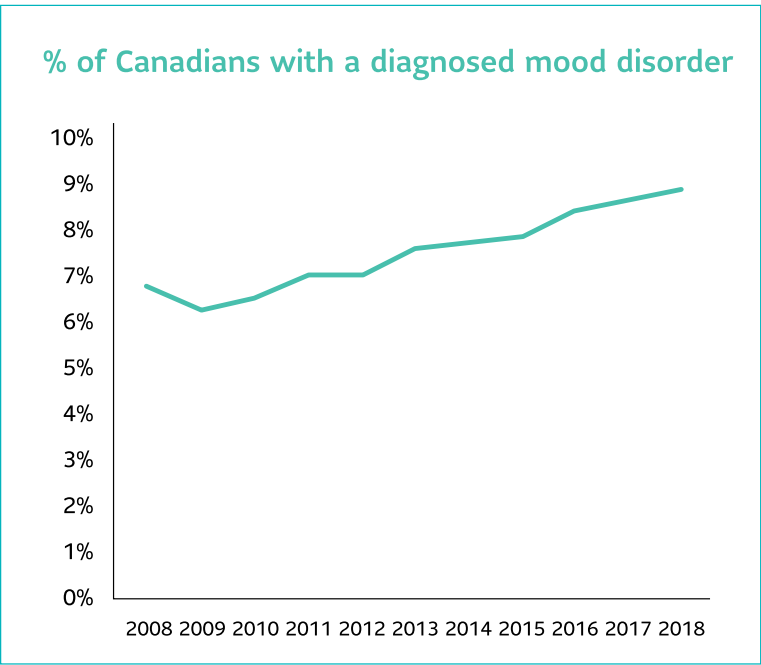
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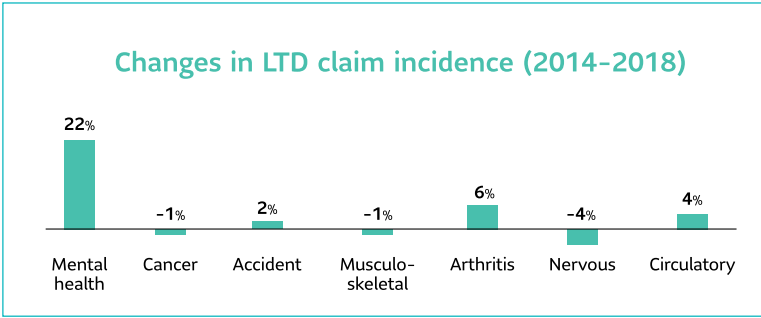
There’s a popular expression: “it takes a village.” While the original context was about raising children, the expression can also apply to how we support working Canadians.

But we need a different type of village. One that nurtures and protects one of the key elements of employee well-being: good mental health. It’s a collective responsibility, shared by employers, consultants/advisors, employees, and providers like us.

**Mental health support – insights from Designed for Health: A focus on mental health disability claims**  
Fifty-nine percent of working Canadians report that they have experienced a mental health issue, up 7 percent from 2017.<sup>1</sup> And more Canadians are reporting a diagnosed mood disorder (such as depression) than ever before.



Workplace disability claims reflects this mental health trend. Mental health disability claims have increased 22% from 2014 to 2018. This is far more than any other disability claim type.



Mental health disability claims are not just the fastest growing – they are also the leading disability claim type. They now represent nearly **one out of three** disability claims. And we anticipate they will continue to grow.





## Shared responsibility for employee mental health

While all stakeholders share the responsibility, creating a mentally healthy workplace starts with a commitment from an organization's leaders. We can help you start this process. We can work with you to develop and refine guidelines for senior executives. They'll play a critical role in introducing industry-leading mental health practices to your organization.

Leaders who promote a psychologically safe workplace can reshape organizational culture. They can support and influence all stakeholders.

### Employers

Organizational leaders play the primary role in promoting a positive mental health environment – and providing support for mental health recovery

### Advisors & Consultants

Developing awareness of a workplace's need for mental health supports – and of tools and strategies that can help

### Group Benefits providers like Sun Life

Providing employers with leading-edge mental health analysis, supports and tools

### Employees

Taking proactive "self-care" mental health measures

## Employer responsibilities

An employer's overarching mental health responsibility is to foster a psychologically safe workplace. This includes developing a culture that is supportive of employee mental health. This includes support for mental health recovery.

The best place to start in meeting this responsibility is to implement the **National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace**. Many Canadian employers are adopting these guidelines to support a positive mental health work environment.

The National Standard is comprehensive and includes thirteen components. Together, they can create a positive mental health environment for employees. These include:



**Buy-in of senior leadership.** Change starts at the top, and leadership buy-in goes beyond budget approval for mental health initiatives. Leadership's involvement in program development, execution and communication is critical for building a mentally healthy workplace culture. Many robust mental health strategies have failed because they lacked support from leadership.



**A strategic and targeted approach based on data insights.** No two organizations are alike – and approaches to mental health should reflect these organizational differences. You can use your organization's unique data to uncover what's driving mental health issues in your workplace. Data on items such as employee health, absence, and disability will shape your approach to mental health.



**Support for individuals struggling with mental health.** As a start, Employee Assistance Programs can be an important early stage support for employees and their families. And group benefits coverage is also instrumental for helping at-risk employees get the help they need. This can include virtual care for mental health – with video access to support by phone, tablet or computer.

Some employers – including Sun Life – are increasing their maximums for psychological treatments. In some cases these maximums are set to \$10,000 or more per year. This removes a key barrier to treatment. Typical coverage maximums may only pay for two or three sessions with a practitioner. While higher maximums represent an increased cost, they could save money by lowering disability leave rates.



**Communication of mental health supports.** Supports are only worthwhile if employees know about them. A sound communications strategy ensures that employees are aware of the tools and resources available. This includes community resources as well.

## Advisors and consultants

Advisors and consultants can play an important role in supporting good workplace mental health. In many cases, they're the bridge between an organization seeking mental health solutions and the providers of those solutions.

- **Industry knowledge:** Advisors and consultants know what workplace mental health solutions are available in the marketplace. We work with them to understand their Clients' needs and challenges. This includes reviewing if their Clients have the right plan design in place. They can share this knowledge with you to help determine strategies that could be effective.
- **Experience:** Advisors and consultants have worked with hundreds of organizations on mental health strategies. And they've seen these strategies in action. Their experience can guide your organization to the strategies that best address your highest needs.
- **Knowledge of your organization:** No two organizations are alike. Your advisor or consultant's knowledge of your organization can help them develop a better roadmap to workplace mental health.

Talking to your advisor or consultant is a great place to start when developing an approach to workplace mental health.





## Sun Life

We're responsible for ensuring you have access to the best solutions to develop and maintain a mentally healthy workplace. These supports can help employees across the mental health continuum.

We offer a variety of solutions to help support you in your workplace strategy. They also help your employees in maintaining good mental health.



### Supports for employees at work – but at risk of mental health issues

- **Data analysis and strategy implementation.** Using data to develop mental health strategies is critical for putting the right programs in place. Sun Life's Organizational Health Consultants use data analysis to provide consulting services and strategies. These can help you build a positive mental health culture. This can lead to reduced absence issues that affect your organization's productivity.

Sun Life Organizational Health services can help with:

- Risk and absence data analysis
- Navigation through the new National Standard for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace
- Organizational policy and best practice reviews.

Based on your organization's data and objectives, our Organizational Health Consultants can help you put prevention strategies in place. They can provide expertise to help target key mental and physical health risks. They can also address specific employee needs through reviewing plan design and developing screening and health promotion programs.

Our Workplace Mental Health Risk assessment aligns with the National Standard. This can be a great starting point for identifying your organization's most pressing mental health support needs. Our Disability Management Self-Assessment can also provide insights across the risk spectrum.



- **Virtual Care Solutions:** Sun Life's virtual care programs are powered by Dialogue. Plan members can easily connect to various services through the Lumino Health Virtual Care mobile app or website. Once connected, they'll get access to health care professionals and providers from the comfort of home.
  - **Lumino Health Virtual Care:** Lumino Health Virtual Care assesses medical issues and mental health concerns. It helps plan members, and their eligible dependents access care virtually. It connects them with health care professionals, including nurses, doctors, mental health specialists, and others.
  - **Stress Management and Well-Being:** Our Stress Management and Well-Being program is a valuable add-on to Lumino Health Virtual Care. This service provides plan members and their eligible dependents with access to resources and specialists focused on mental health.
  - **Employee Assistance Program (EAP):** Plan members and eligible dependents can get support across a broad range of areas for work and life concerns. There's support for mental health, family and relationships, legal services, financial services, work and career counselling. This EAP also includes 24/7 access to internet-based cognitive behavioural therapy (iCBT). iCBT is a series of interactive, self-care toolkits to support top mental health disorders, including anxiety and depression. Providing access to mental health support in a timely, cost-effective, easy way.
- **Manager training:** The National Standard recommends manager mental health training. And for good reason. Managers are in the right place to be "first responders" in helping employees with mental health issues. But many lack the ability to recognize potential signs of trouble.

We offer different manager training options – including free online e-modules. Our Organizational Health Consultants can also customize virtual or in-person training to your organization's needs. The training doesn't direct managers to treat or solve mental health problems. But it does help them spot a potential mental health issue early. This can reduce the chances of it developing into something more serious.

- **Mental Health Navigator:** We've partnered with Teledoc Health's Best Doctors to offer their Mental Health Navigator services to our Extended Health Care (EHC) benefit.

If employees receive a mental health diagnosis, or just don't feel like themselves, a Navigator can help. They can guide them to the most appropriate care for their mental health needs. This includes:

- Gathering the employee's history – including treating physicians, institutions, etc.
- Setting up a video consult with a psychologist or psychiatrist
- Coordinating an expert review of the employee's file.

At the end of the process, the employee receives an expert report and clinical plan. They can share this report with their treating physician.

- **Peer support program:** A formal peer support program in the workplace complements manager mental health training. The National Standard also recommends this program. It involves co-workers with a shared experience of mental health issues connecting in informal and confidential meetings. The benefits for participants range from stronger social networks, to increased self-confidence, to higher rates of continued employment.



## Supports for employees on disability leave for mental health issues

- **Return to work strategies:** Return to work and gradual return to work strategies can be a key part of a lasting recovery. Our Disability Case Managers and Health Management Consultants can guide you through this process. And our Organizational Health Consultants can ensure you have the right policies and procedures in place.
- **Virtual CBT:** With virtual cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) for anxiety and depression, the employee completes their therapy online. The therapy includes self-paced modules. A therapist monitors and consults with them online at regular intervals. Research has shown that online CBT can be just as effective as in-person therapy for mild to moderate anxiety and depression.<sup>2</sup> It can also:
  - be less expensive because of reduced therapist time
  - overcome the challenge of accessing a qualified therapist for those living in rural communities
  - help those who are embarrassed to see a therapist in person.
- **Virtual independent medical exams (IME):** IMEs can help assess an employee on disability claim for mental health. However, assessments often require that employees travel. This can be a stressful experience, as employees are already under a great deal of distress.

We undertook a pilot to evaluate virtual (over video conference) IMEs. The results of our pilot were extremely positive, including:

- A reduction in cancellations
- Assessments completed sooner, with quicker access to treatment and the start of a treatment plan
- Assessments that were higher quality, since employees were more at ease
- Lower costs, with no travel requirement.

We've now embedded virtual IMEs in our disability management tool kit – an industry first.

- **Pharmacogenomics:** We all respond to medications differently. Finding the right drug is sometimes a trial and error process. This is especially true in relation to mental health treatments where the range of potential medications is vast.

Pharmacogenomic testing uses information about an individual's genetic makeup to determine the drugs and doses that can work best. A cheek swab or saliva sample is all it takes. The lab can provide results to the individual's doctor in days.

This testing can reduce or eliminate the trial and error process. The advantages can be significant. These include:

- better health outcomes for employees
- cost savings for the benefits plan, and
- reduced costs related to absence and disability for the employer.

Employers can choose to extend pharmacogenomics beyond disability. We can customize this service as part of an extended health care package.



## Getting started: a path to workplace mental health success

Every organization has different needs when it comes to mental health. But there are some steps that are common for most. These include getting the buy-in of senior leaders. It also includes aligning your actions to recommendations in the National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace.

Here are some action items to consider.

### Short term

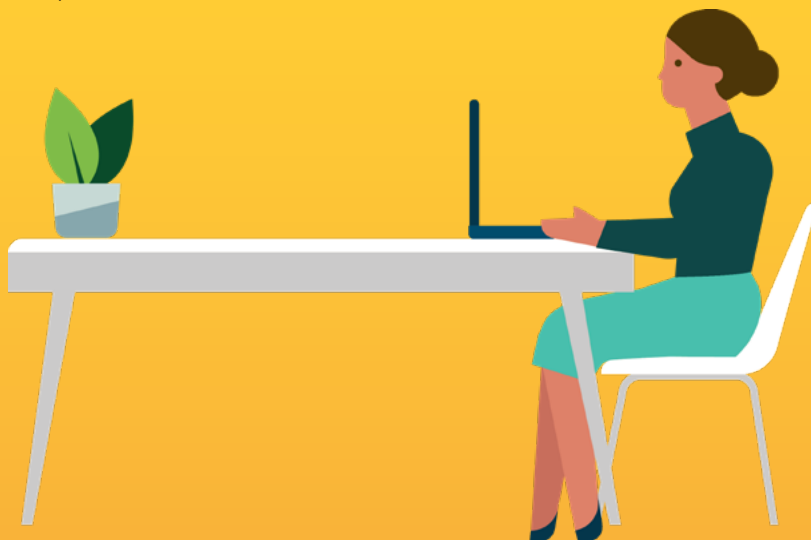
- Download the implementation guide for the National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace. Share it with your HR Leadership Team.
- CAMH's Workplace Mental Health Playbook for Business Leaders is also an excellent resource to share.
- Revisit employee communications. Ensure employees have knowledge of, and access to, existing mental health resources if they need them.

### Short to medium term

- With the National Standards in mind, work with your benefits provider to analyze organizational data.
- Identify any weak links that may contribute to mental health issues within the workplace
- Consider strategies that could strengthen your organization's approach to mental health and support for employees

### Medium to long term

- Take action: implement the strategies that you've identified as most effective for improving mental health outcomes in your workplace.



## Employee responsibilities

Life can be challenging and unpredictable. We can take steps to improve our mental health, just like we do for our physical health. That's where employees have a key role to play.

Prevention at the individual employee level is the foundation for any workplace mental health strategy. So, how can employees use self-care to reduce the chances of a mental health issue? There are several prevention steps to consider. These include:



**Mental health self-care:** Many organizations have existing mental health supports. These include Employee Assistance Programs and group benefits coverage. Employees have a responsibility to know where help is available, and to access that help when needed.

Encourage employees to contribute to a positive mental health environment in the workplace. This includes behaviours such as minimizing office gossip and supporting colleagues returning to work from a disability leave.



**Regular physical health checkups:** Good physical health can support good mental health. Preventing physical health issues can be as simple as booking an annual physical or going to the dentist regularly.



**Positive lifestyle changes:** Many lifestyle strategies can support good mental health. These include:

- regular exercise
- good nutrition
- maintaining social connections through activities or volunteer work
- spending time in nature.

Our Bright Paper on [Healthy Lifestyles and Mental Health](#) provides some great information that can help.



**Drug adherence:** According to the World Health Organization, about 50% of people don't take their prescription medicine as prescribed.<sup>3</sup> When drug adherence is poor, it means someone isn't properly managing their condition. Our Bright Paper on [Drug Adherence](#) suggests strategies that can help employees adhere to their medication schedule.

You can help move the needle on employee self-care through your support of these strategies. Employees often lack information, access or time to take action. The workplace is in a good position to support healthy lifestyles. This support can take many forms, including:

- employee education
- access to resources
- health-promotion initiatives
- community outreach programs that provide volunteer opportunities.



## A free resource for employees: Lumino Health

Sun Life's free, online health resource has a section dedicated to mental health. This includes articles and podcasts as well as information on apps and other products and services that can help. Learn more at [luminohealth.ca/mentalhealth](https://luminohealth.ca/mentalhealth).

## Workplace mental health: we're in it together!

There's a wave of issues related to mental health impacting organizations. And it does indeed take a village to create positive change – no one has to go it alone. Improving workplace mental health is a team effort. All stakeholders – employers, consultants/advisors, employees and your insurance provider – have a role to play.

Talk to us – or your advisor or consultant – about how we can collectively support better mental health in your workplace. You can access information and resources on workplace mental health at [sunlife.ca/workplacementalhealth](https://sunlife.ca/workplacementalhealth).

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<sup>1</sup> 2019 Sun Life Barometer Survey

<sup>2</sup> H.D. Hadjistavropoulos et.al., *Transdiagnostic Internet-delivered cognitive behaviour therapy in Canada: An open trial comparing results of a specialized online clinic and nonspecialized community clinics*, *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*, Volume 42, August 2016, Pages 19-29

<sup>3</sup> *Adherence to long-term therapies, Evidence for Action*, World Health Organization, 2003

## Life's brighter under the sun

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