



# **Make the link – healthy lifestyles and mental health**

A powerful and proven path to better health and resilience

Life's brighter under the sun





# The link between lifestyle and mental health

*It's no secret – mental health issues continue to take a tremendous toll on Canadian workplaces.*

Employers have reported that these issues are the leading cause of disability claims in their workplaces<sup>3</sup> – and the economic burden on employers from claims, absences and lost productivity is an eye-popping \$20 billion per year.<sup>4</sup> Canada-wide, mental health issues cost the economy the staggering amount of \$51 billion per year.<sup>5</sup>

These challenges can be daunting to employers. However, addressing mental health in your organization need not be about starting from scratch. Many organizations already have physical health programs in place – and the healthy lifestyles changes that such programs promote can also be very important to supporting the mental health of your employees.

## IMPROVE LIFESTYLE, IMPROVE MENTAL HEALTH

It's well proven that poor mental health can negatively impact our physical health. For example, excess stress has been shown to contribute to chronic physical illness, high blood pressure, hardening of the arteries, obesity and diabetes.<sup>6</sup>

What we need to emphasize more is that the opposite is also true – and that positive lifestyle changes in the physical and social realms have been proven to be strong supports of good mental health.

Traditional therapies such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and drug therapies remain important treatments for mental health issues. But on their own or together they may not always provide a complete solution to mental health problems.

Enter lifestyle into the equation. Certain lifestyle changes have been proven to have a significant and positive impact on mental health, with some studies even showing them to be comparable to traditional therapies in some cases.<sup>7</sup> Making lifestyle changes can even help some people avoid having to go down the path of psychotherapy or drug treatment altogether. When therapy and medications are an essential component of the treatment plan, lifestyle changes can often support overall progress towards achieving good mental health.

With the biggest barriers to lifestyle change for many Canadians being time, money and motivation,<sup>8</sup> the workplace is ideally positioned to kick-start and support healthy lifestyles – whether it's through employee education, access to resources, health-promotion initiatives or community outreach programs that provide volunteer opportunities.

Employees are looking to their employers for help. Eighty percent of respondents to the Sun Life Canadian Health Index Survey believe that employers have a responsibility to help employees manage stress and promote psychological wellbeing.<sup>9</sup> And employers don't have to go at it alone – in fact, employers are looking for their insurers to offer support when it comes to managing employee health and wellbeing.<sup>10</sup> For their part, insurers are also answering with comprehensive preventative health services.



MAKE THE LINK – HEALTHY LIFESTYLES AND MENTAL HEALTH







# Lifestyle factors THAT SUPPORT *mental* *health*



# 1

## Exercise: a healthy body for a healthy mind

While it is established that exercise plays a key factor in supporting physical health, there is also strong research showing that exercise can significantly improve mental health.

A recent review of 30 high-quality research studies that focused on the link between depression and exercise found consistent evidence that physical activity boosts happiness and can prevent future depression. Even very moderate levels of physical activity, such as walking 20-30 minutes a day, can help ward off depression.<sup>11</sup> One study of several thousand people over a 12-year period showed that a high level of physical fitness was associated with a more than 50% reduction in experiencing depression compared to a low level of fitness.<sup>12</sup> And in terms of treatment, there are studies that suggest that exercise can be equally or more effective than medication in some cases.<sup>13</sup>

The benefits of exercise have also been shown to extend well beyond depression. A number of studies demonstrate a positive relationship between exercise and mental health in people with alcohol misuse problems and people with schizophrenia. With conditions like alcohol abuse quite common across the population, it's important to factor in the wider health benefits that exercise can provide.

Actions you can take to help integrate regular exercise into the lives of your employees could include introducing health challenges and physical activity-related fundraisers, such as a walk or run for a cause or simple activities such as promoting stair climbing. These often have the added benefit of social connection and can give employees motivation to get active while at work. Organizing education sessions at work that speak to the benefits of physical activity, and providing tips, information and guidelines for ways to increase activity levels will also help promote exercise as a healthy lifestyle choice.





## CASE STUDY: HEALTH CHALLENGES AT WORK

Offering health challenges is a fun and effective way to promote a wide range of healthy lifestyle changes in the workplace, from diet to exercise to relationships and stress management.

For example, York Region – a large municipality north of Toronto – ran a four-week health challenge to promote healthy eating habits, physical activity and stress reduction in 2014 that had some fantastic results – including higher participation than expected, especially from the 40+ age group, who are the ones at greatest health risk just by age alone. Some key results:



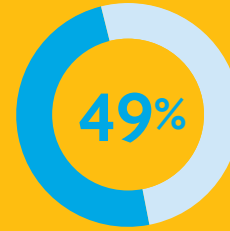
would participate in the challenge again



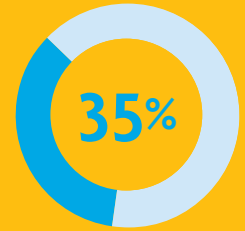
achieved the healthy living goals they set for the challenge



increased their physical activity



improved their nutrition



were able to manage stress better

It's easy to see how employer health challenges can influence physical and mental health outcomes. This is excellent motivation to keep offering challenges and keep giving employees that ever important feeling of accomplishment.

### Employer actions to promote physical activity

- Physical fitness challenges – team or individual focus
- Physical activity-related education sessions
- Stair climbing
- Standing or walking meetings
- Flexible work arrangements to accommodate fitness breaks
- Fundraiser participation
- On-site fitness facilities or subsidized fitness centre memberships
- On-site classes, such as yoga
- Wellness websites / resource portals with fitness information





## Nutrition: a healthy diet for a healthy mind

Eating a healthy diet shares much with exercise in that it's often associated with improved physical health, but not necessarily improved mental health. But like exercise, our diets can also have a significant impact on our mental health.

Studies show consistent associations between diet patterns and anxiety and depression. Some publications suggest that increased incidence of mental health conditions such as depression in recent years may be linked to a gradual shift away from a diet based on whole foods to more processed foods.<sup>14</sup>

In a recent study published in the American Journal of Psychiatry, a diet consisting of processed foods, such as hamburgers, white bread and sugar, was associated with a higher likelihood of depressive and anxiety disorders. Conversely, a diet of vegetables, fruit, lamb, beef, fish and whole grain foods was associated with a 35% lower risk of having a depressive disorder and a 32% lower risk for anxiety disorders.<sup>15</sup>

Many other studies offer similar results – showing that the old adage “you are what you eat” may in fact ring true from a mental health standpoint.





## THE MENTAL HEALTH DIET

A combination of nutrients most commonly associated with good mental health and well-being is the same type of balanced diet that is recommended to reduce the risk of developing chronic disease:



- **Polyunsaturated fatty acids** (particularly omega 3 types found in oily fish and some plants);



- **Minerals such as zinc** (in whole grains, legumes, meat and milk), magnesium (in leafy green vegetables, nuts and some fruit); and



- **Vitamins, such as folate** (in leafy green vegetables and fortified cereals), a range of B vitamins (in whole grain products, yeast and dairy products) and antioxidant vitamins such as C and E (in a wide range of fruits and vegetables).<sup>16</sup>

As an employer, you can encourage healthy eating among employees with actions that are easy to implement and relatively inexpensive. For example, you can offer education sessions on nutrition topics – helping to debunk myths and provide nudges in the right direction – while promoting healthy choices through catering, cafeterias and posters in eating areas. You can also offer employee health challenges that include nutritional components to encourage a healthy diet.

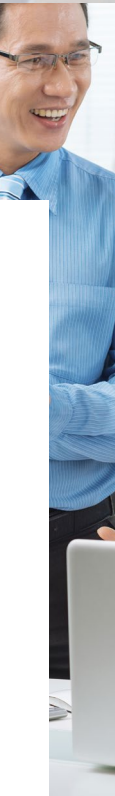
### Employer actions to promote **nutrition**

- Healthy eating challenges – team or individual focus
- Education sessions
- Healthy choices for catering/cafeterias
- Offer healthy foods for break or lunch at catered team meetings
- Healthy choices posters in eating areas
- Wellness websites / resource portals with healthy recipes and nutritional information



# 3

## Relationships: connecting with others for our mental health



Many studies show that our relationships, or lack of relationships, can impact both mental and physical health. There is now compelling evidence that the health risk of social isolation is comparable to the risks of smoking, high blood pressure and obesity.<sup>17</sup>

But on the positive side, rich relationships can also reduce health risks ranging from the common cold to stroke, mortality, and mental health conditions, such as depression and anxiety.<sup>18</sup> Studies show that membership and strong connection with a social group can be effective in alleviating depression and preventing relapse. Good relationships and social health are also associated with enhanced happiness, quality of life, resilience and cognitive capacity.<sup>19</sup>

### LEVERAGE THE MANAGER RELATIONSHIP THROUGH MENTAL HEALTH TRAINING

While we often think of relationships in the context of family and friends outside of work, we sometimes forget the importance of relationships within the workplace.

Managers are ideally situated to be the “first responders” in helping employees who are experiencing mental health issues. They interact with employees on a regular basis, are familiar with employees’ job duties, and understand the workplace and the culture of the organization.

The issue is that many managers lack the ability to recognize potential signs of a mental health issue and steer struggling employees to potential solutions. According to an Ipsos survey, only 33% of managers report having had training to help them recognize and intervene with employees who are showing signs of a mental health problem. And yet, 80% of managers believe it is part of their job to intervene and 63% report that training would help them deal with these situations more effectively.<sup>20</sup>



## THE MEASURABLE BENEFITS OF MANAGER MENTAL HEALTH TRAINING

Researchers at Canada's Saint Mary's University (Dimoff/Kelloway 2013) have demonstrated the potential for mental health training for managers. The study involved training 200 managers at two organizations. Relative to their own pre-training scores as well as compared to a control group, managers that received the training showed significant improvements in several key areas:

- Greater knowledge of mental health problems
- Self-confidence in their ability to recognize, support and provide appropriate resources to an employee experiencing a mental health problem
- More positive attitudes toward employees with mental health problems
- Greater intention to promote mental health in the workplace

What's more, the training was associated with a substantial impact on mental health related disability costs. One year post training, disability costs related to mental health were 20% lower in the organizations studied, with the duration of mental health related disability claims decreasing by 27%, or up to 19 days per claim.

Our recent Bright Paper, *Mental Health in the Workplace: a little training goes a long way*, is a great place to learn more about manager mental health training, and the benefits it can provide. You can find it at [www.sunlife.ca/mentalhealth](http://www.sunlife.ca/mentalhealth).



## THE POWER OF PEER SUPPORT

A powerful program that can complement manager mental health training is a formal peer support program in the workplace. These programs are centred on co-workers with a shared experience of mental health issues connecting in informal and confidential face-to-face interactions.

The benefits for participants range from stronger social networks to increased self-confidence to higher rates of continued employment.<sup>21</sup>

Peer support programs are all about relationships – and peer support itself can be a critical piece of the recovery puzzle for those experiencing mental illness. Some studies have shown that peer support can be as effective as group therapy in treating depression, in some cases.<sup>22</sup>

Offering health challenges is another way to promote healthy relationships by getting employees away from their workstations and interacting with one another. Health challenges that happen in a group setting – with healthy competition between teams working towards a common goal – will help employees build stronger relationships with their peers.

### Employer actions to promote healthy relationships

- Manager mental health training
- Workplace peer support programs
- Health challenges



## Relaxation: training to promote a healthy mind

A recent Sun Life survey of more than 3,000 adults across Canada measured stress in five areas – emotional, financial, personal, professional, and health – to determine which groups are most stressed and most at risk of burnout. By far the highest stressed group was full-time employees.<sup>23</sup>

It is well known that prolonged stress can be linked to psychological illness, which is one of the reasons many organizations are developing programs to help employees manage stress and build resilience.

Two key stress-reduction programs using relaxation techniques – which studies have shown are effective in the prevention and treatment of anxiety and depression – are yoga and mindfulness meditation.

With the example of yoga, there is evidence that it may produce positive effects akin to the effects of anti-anxiety medication. Two studies demonstrated that regular practice of gentle yoga releases GABA – a chemical that plays a central role in suppressing neural activity. Many anti-anxiety medications work by encouraging the release of GABA in the central nervous system.<sup>24</sup>

But the stress management technique that is proving to be well suited to the work world is mindfulness, which can be practiced as a form of meditation that takes very little time but can be highly effective in managing anxiety.

Mindfulness has been described as the awareness that arises through paying attention on purpose in the present moment – non-judgmentally. When we give distracting thoughts too much power, this type of unproductive worry can spiral into discomfort ranging from stress to more severe forms of psychological distress. Studies of mindfulness have shown it to ease psychological stresses like anxiety, depression and even pain in some cases.<sup>25</sup>



## MINDFULNESS TRAINING AT WORK

Many organizations in Canada and the US are introducing support programs for mindfulness, because they know the high stress levels carried by employees and the benefits that mindfulness meditation can provide – and they appreciate the little time it takes to practice it on an ongoing basis.

### Google teaches employees to mindfully “Search Inside Yourself”



Every year, thousands of Google employees take one of 12 courses on mindfulness offered by the company. The most popular class – “Search Inside Yourself” – has a six month waiting list of employees interested in using mindfulness for stress reduction and to develop their emotional intelligence.<sup>26</sup>



As an employer, you can provide support for this practice by working with a professional to provide classes to your employees – whether it’s in-person training or online self-learning modules.

After all, a lack of time is one of the drivers of stress levels, so something that can be done quickly, relatively easily and effectively is a win-win all around.

Offering health challenges can also promote relaxation by incorporating stress-reduction elements, such as deep breathing, meditation, or other related practices.



#### Employer actions to promote relaxation

- Health challenges with a mental health focus – team or individual
- Stress management education / lifestyle change programs
- Mindfulness classes onsite or online
- Onsite yoga classes



## Volunteerism: giving to others enhances mental health

People who volunteer report being happier and often have stronger mental health. A number of studies have shown a link between those who engage in volunteer activities helping others and lower levels of depression, increased life satisfaction and enhanced well-being.<sup>27</sup>

The reasons that volunteers enjoy better mental health are plenty. First, social connections can be good for us. We are hard-wired for face-to-face contact that includes lots of touch, eye contact, and smiles. Such interactions release hormones that help us bond and care for others, and also help us handle stress better.

Second, it's a drug-free way to just feel good, assuming we're doing it because of a desire to give. We all know this intuitively: doing things that make us happy and fulfilled will improve our mental health. Third, volunteering gets us off the couch, which in turn may help us to be stronger and more physically fit. And we already know the link between fitness and improved mental health.

This is great news for employers who want to leverage the benefits of volunteering through a formal community outreach of some kind, as it doesn't take a lot of volunteer hours to make a difference.

### Employer actions to promote volunteerism

- Employer-sponsored volunteer hours
- Group volunteering



# A strategic approach to workplace mental health

While the workplace is well-positioned to act as a support and catalyst for behaviour change and healthier living among employees, your programming is only going to be as effective as your planning – so it is important to take a strategic approach to wellness programming in order to best focus on mental health outcomes. And you don't have to do it alone – group benefits providers often have expertise to support the design and delivery of an effective strategy. Here are four steps that can help make it happen:



**Collect your data.** The data you collect in the planning stage is key knowledge that can inform your mental health and wellness program decisions. By looking at aggregate level data across things like benefits utilization, drug claims and disability data, as well as aggregated employee self-reported information (for example, via a Health Risk Assessment), you can learn a great deal about where your employees need the most help when it comes to their health.



**Assess your needs.** Understand where your organization is presently at in terms of programming and practices – and what your goals are. Perhaps you are looking to meet the National Standard, or to take small steps towards building a business case for wellness. Based on this assessment, you can make strategic decisions on where to focus your time and resources.



**Design an action plan.** Put together an action plan that is informed by your data, strategic analysis and assessment – and that is designed to target the identified health risks and address organizational priorities. Implementing a health promotion program has multiple success factors – things like leadership commitment, incentives and communications – and these should all be included in your strategy.



**Measure your results.** When you measure the results of your wellness program, whether for physical or mental health outcomes – or ideally, both – look at such things as participation rates in programs, engagement scores, and specific lifestyle changes that employees report – as well as productivity and engagement improvements and the cost avoidance you have gained as an organization.

## MEET THE NATIONAL STANDARD FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH AND SAFETY IN THE WORKPLACE

An important benefit of following the strategic framework we just described is that it is closely aligned with the **National Standard for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace**, developed by the Mental Health Commission of Canada. This is a voluntary set of guidelines that many Canadian employers are adopting to implement, document and maintain a psychological health and safety management system, and continually improve its effectiveness.

The Mental Health Commission website has an implementation guide to help support your efforts to create a workplace that fosters mental health. Go to:

[www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/issues/workplace/national-standard](http://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/issues/workplace/national-standard)



## Make the move to a healthier workplace

We often think that lifestyle changes begin and occur at home, but work is a huge part of our lives, and the workplace can play a key role in bringing about change – whether it's through employee education, health and wellness initiatives or volunteer opportunities in the community. And the proven link between lifestyle changes and mental health makes workplace wellness programs that much more important.

Through your organization's wellness and HR programs, you can provide employees with targeted health messages, more convenient access to resources, a supportive environment and employer-sponsored initiatives to help change their behaviour. Often, insurance providers have expertise to support the design and delivery of an effective strategy.

Empower your employees to make positive changes – and reduce the incidence and impact of mental health issues in your workplace. It's about building a culture in which employees are supported to live healthier lifestyles – addressing all aspects of their health, from physical to mental to social.

# ANOTHER **BRIGHT PAPER™** BROUGHT TO YOU BY SUN LIFE

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