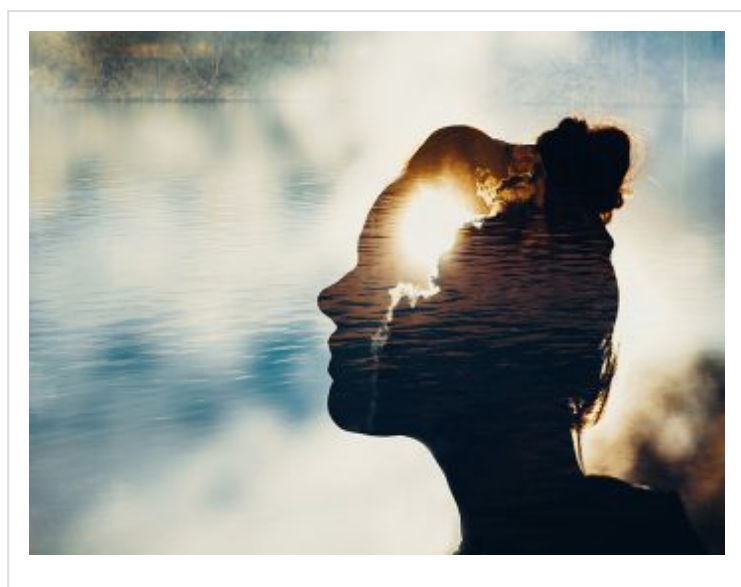




Considering how mental-health support, accommodation is changing

Cassandra Williamson-Hopp | January 31, 2020



Sixty per cent of working Canadians have experienced a mental-health issue, an increase from 52 per cent in 2017, according to Sun Life's [2019 barometer survey](#).

However, the survey also found 60 per cent of working Canadians who are suffering from mental-health issues aren't accessing support through their workplace benefits, said Carmen Bellows, the insurer's senior mental-health consultant, during a session at *Benefits Canada's* 2019 Vancouver Mental Health Summit on Dec. 12.

"This is surprising based on the number of people in this room and the amount of conversations we have about workplace benefits."

Read: [60% of Canadians with mental-health concerns not using workplace support tools](#)

While provincial governments fund certain free therapy and e-therapy programs, 76 per cent of survey respondents aren't using these services. This speaks to the fact that mental health is a provincial responsibility in Canada, which leads to an ongoing fractured state, said Bellows, noting mental-health support and treatment is even further fractured because most services aren't covered under provincial health acts.

"Oftentimes, organizations are trying to cover that chasm with their benefits. Insurance companies are trying to meet those needs, but people don't know where to go."

In addition, language has the ability to stigmatize the experiences of people with mental illness, noted Bellows, because it negatively affects the likelihood that people will seek help. How people speak, present themselves and view others in the workplace is really important, she added, which is evident when looking at reintegrating people into the workforce when they've been off on a mental-health leave.

Bellows also highlighted that today's business landscape is constantly identified with ongoing change, workplace demands, decentralized production and outsourcing, but the impact isn't always clear. When an employee returns to work after a

disability leave, their co-workers or the technology used in the workplace may have changed. “These things affect the health of how individuals are introduced back into those workplaces.”

Read: [Mindful benefits plan design should consider mental health](#)

In May 2019, the World Health Organization added burnout as an occupational phenomenon in its latest version of the International Classification of Disease. “How do we make sure the workplace we’re in isn’t harming the employees we have working for us because our workforce and the people who work with and for us are our most important commodity?” said Bellows.

It’s important to look at the psychological demands of a job when considering workplace impact, she said, noting the significance of designing work that allows individuals to recognize the outcome of their efforts, taps into a variety of skills and enables them to be self-determinant.

If an employee is struggling, taking time off work isn’t treatment because it prescribes increased isolation, said Bellows. “In the same way, if something’s going on in the workplace and we’re avoiding it, we’re part of the problem. Avoidance is not a strategy for intervention. Avoidance allows these things to grow and increases the lack of confidence employees will have in you as a leader.”

When there’s a breakdown in efficiencies, performance or well-being, intervention is key for addressing absence management, said Bellows. It’s necessary to identify what’s wrong in order to reach the right assessment by the right provider at the right time using the right tools. she added. And, if the cause of the issue is unknown, it’s important to seek guidance to identify it.

Read: [Specific solutions required to move the dial on mental-health treatment, costs](#)

Individuals who are trying to get the mental-health support they need are likely seeing a psychologist or clinical counsellor, noted Bellows. However, if they go every week, at \$200 per session, monthly treatment cost could add up to \$800 — and very few employees have this money on-hand while waiting for reimbursement. “We have to make sure we’re looking at our systems of support in a fulsome manner to guarantee they can be accessed in a way that’s meaningful to the individual.”

Good diagnoses and correct treatment are imperative, she said, noting it requires collaboration among family physicians and mental-health professionals. “Then they can move forward into active and consistent skills-based care to improve their overall level of functioning so that they can return to those workplaces that provide meaning and value and connection.

“It’s important to recognize that, as we move forward, there’s more space for innovative solutions. We need to continue to look at ways to meet the needs of individuals in a way that maybe historically, we haven’t.”

Read more from the [2019 Vancouver Mental Health Summit](#).

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