

Best Doctors® REPORT

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Health Awareness: A look ahead

Here's a snapshot of what's on the horizon as we head into the winter months:

- November is Crohn's and Colitis Awareness Month, Osteoporosis Month and Diabetes Month.
- December has World AIDS Day and International Day of Disabled Persons.

A Word from Best Doctors

When it comes to maintaining our health, the focus typically revolves around physical concerns. Getting enough exercise, following a proper diet, avoiding cigarettes and alcohol, getting enough rest and making sure to visit the doctor for regular checkups are things we associate with leading long, productive lives.

Our mental health, which is just as important when it comes to our overall well-being, usually doesn't get the same emphasis—much to our detriment. Illnesses of the mind aren't visible in the way physical ailments are, which can make them harder to detect. Additionally, there is often stigma associated with mental health issues. As a result, mental illnesses are often feared and misunderstood.

This is precisely why we must pay attention to the mental health of our loved ones, our co-workers and ourselves. Mental wellness should also be on employers' radars. They should take the same measures to protect the mental health of employees as they do physical health.

“Mental illness can shorten a person's life expectancy by **10 to 20 years.**”

Understanding mental illness

The World Health Organization defines mental health as a “state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.”

Several factors contribute to our emotional and cognitive well-being, including our relationships with others, financial issues, work environment and individual coping skills. When people experience difficulty in one or more of these areas and become overwhelmed, chronic or acute stress can follow. Potentially, this stress can lead to physical symptoms, such as headaches, heart palpitations or a heart attack, and mental health problems.

Just as physical illnesses manifest themselves in a variety of different ways, mental illnesses also come in many different forms, and include anxiety disorders, depression, eating disorders, schizophrenia and mood disorders. Depending on the specific disorder, the signs and symptoms of mental illness may vary, although most mental illnesses impact emotions, thoughts and behaviours.

Examples of signs and symptoms include:

- Feeling sad or down

- Reduced ability to concentrate or confused thinking
- Excessive fears or worries or extreme feelings of guilt
- Withdrawal from friends and activities
- Significant fatigue, problems sleeping or low energy
- Trouble understanding and relating to people and situations
- Delusions, paranoia or hallucinations
- Alcohol or drug abuse
- Major changes in eating habits
- Excessive anger, hostility or violence

Mental illnesses can be treated, so being able to identify problems—whether in yourself or a loved one—is an important first step. Help is available in many forms, including family physicians, psychologists, counsellors, support groups, local mental health organizations and other community services. It’s also important to speak with trusted friends and family members.



In any given year, **one in five Canadians** experiences a mental health or addiction problem.¹



By the time Canadians reach 40 years of age, **one in two** have or have had a mental illness.¹



In any given week, at least **500,000 employed Canadians** are unable to work due to mental health problems.¹



In Canada, only **20 per cent of children** who need mental health services receive them.²

The costs of mental illness

Mental illness doesn’t only affect the individual sufferer; it affects families, friends and co-workers, while impacting society on a broader level too.

There is a huge economic cost associated with mental illness. In Canada, the economic burden of mental illness is estimated at \$51 billion per year, which includes health care costs, lost productivity and reductions in health-related quality of life.¹ There is also the personal financial impact on individuals suffering from mental health problems, as they are

much less likely to be employed—unemployment rates are as high as 70 to 90 per cent for people with the most severe mental illnesses. And then there is the financial impact on employers: The cost of a disability leave for a mental illness is almost double the cost of a leave due to a physical illness.¹

Aside from the economic burden, mental illness also takes a physical toll on sufferers, who are at higher risk for a wide range of chronic conditions and have a higher mortality rate than the general population. In fact, mental illness can shorten a person’s life expectancy by 10 to 20 years.¹

[1] Centre for Addiction and Mental Health
[2] Canadian Mental Health Association

Mental illness and the workplace



Mental illness impacts both the employee and the workplace. Employees experiencing a mental illness may have a difficult time performing at work, take a lot of time off, withdraw from co-workers and appear less productive. This often leads to a strain on workplace relationships.

A huge obstacle when it comes to the workplace is the fear of discrimination and stigma, which can lead employees to avoid disclosing any issues to their employer or co-workers. Unfortunately, this problem still persists despite widespread advocacy efforts and campaigns to promote greater awareness.

Consider the following:

- 39 per cent of Ontario workers indicate that they would not tell their manager if they were experiencing a mental health problem.¹
- 50 per cent of Canadians would tell friends or co-workers they have a family member with a mental illness, compared to 72 per cent who would discuss a cancer diagnosis and 68 per cent who would talk about a family member diagnosed with diabetes.¹

This begs the question: What can be done in the workplace to help employees feel supported and encourage them to get the help they need?

There's much discussion about the importance of "work/life balance," but for employees experiencing a mental illness, this balance is especially critical. The relationship between stress and mental illness is complex and for some people, stress can exacerbate a mental health problem. Employees who considered

most of their days to be "quite a bit" or "extremely" stressful were over three times more likely to suffer a major depressive episode, compared with those who reported low levels of general stress.³

Employees with a mental illness have the right to request certain accommodations that will enable them to continue working. Accommodations may include flexible work times, so that an employee can be at work during their most productive hours (mornings may be difficult for employees who take medication, for example). Employees should also be very clear about situations that cause stress (for example, long meetings), so that the employer can address these situations to accommodate the employee.

If you're experiencing a mental health issue, it's up to you to decide whether or not to disclose this to your employer. There are risks and benefits that depend on individual circumstances. If you believe a co-worker may be experiencing a mental health problem and you're concerned, the best thing you can do is to offer support.

“Unemployment rates are as high as **70 to 90 per cent** for people with the most severe mental illnesses.”

How Best Doctors can help

Part of the broader fear surrounding mental illness is rooted in our individual fear around illnesses that aren't visible and might seem baffling to us.

The best way to help de-stigmatize mental illness is to try to better understand it. If you or a loved one has questions, Best Doctors may be able to help you find answers and steer you in the right direction. For example, you may have questions about a medication you or a loved one has been prescribed for a mental illness or you may have questions about a diagnosis.

Wider acceptance and a deeper understanding of mental health issues will help alleviate the shame felt by many sufferers. Combined with greater resources and support, this is essential to help ease the burden on individuals and their loved ones.

[3] Stats Canada, 2006

[4] Canadian Cancer Society

Breast cancer awareness: Think pink year-round

Breast cancer is the most common cancer among Canadian women and the second leading cause of death from cancer, claiming the lives of 14 women in Canada each day. In 2015, about 25,000 women were diagnosed with this type of cancer, which accounted for 26 per cent of new cancer cases in women.⁴

Many of us have been touched by breast cancer in some way, and in October, designated as Breast Cancer Awareness Month, we wear the colour pink to remind ourselves and others of the pervasiveness of this disease.

However, breast cancer should be on our collective radar all year. This is especially true



because screening programs can help detect breast cancer before any symptoms even develop. And when breast cancer is found and treated early, the chances of successful treatment are greater.

A word from one of our members



Lily's medical issues began several years ago when she noticed she was perpetually exhausted, despite being a healthy, active person. She visited her family doctor, but left without a diagnosis. She continued to struggle with low energy for three more

months, until she ended up in the emergency room after suffering three falls in a week.

"My heart rate was 20," Lily said. "I was told that if I had gone home I would have died." She was diagnosed with cardiomyopathy, a condition that weakens the heart muscle to the point that it can't deliver enough blood to the body. Her treating physician explained it must have been caused by a viral infection, because her family had no history of heart problems.

Lily was given a pacemaker and prescribed medication, but the side effects of the medication were severe: she was constantly fatigued and had extremely low blood pressure. She also developed a skin condition that her doctor wasn't sure how to treat.

Confused and unsure of who to turn to next, Lily decided to contact Best Doctors. The Best Doctors staff collected her medical records and had them reviewed by a leading cardiovascular surgeon.

The expert determined that she didn't have cardiomyopathy or a viral infection, but diagnosed her with cardiac sarcoidosis, and explained her skin disorder was a manifestation of that.

Lily showed the report to her family doctor and her cardiologist, and they altered her medication based on the expert's recommendations. Her cardiologist has also ordered a PET scan to substantiate the diagnosis at the advisement of the expert.

"From beginning to the end—having the records sent to me, the great personality of the Member Advocate (Registered Nurse) and the thorough Best Doctors report—everything was excellent."



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