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Mental Health vs. Mental Illness – What’s the difference?

Many people use the terms “mental health” and “mental illness” interchangeably, when really, they mean different things.

Mental **health** is defined as the state of our psychological and emotional well-being. It is a necessary resource for living a healthy life and a main factor in overall health. It influences how we think and feel about ourselves and others, how we interpret events, and deal with the normal stresses of life. It affects our capacity to learn, communicate, and form, sustain, or end relationships. Just as we all have physical health, we all have mental health, too.

Good mental health allows you to feel, think, and act in ways that help you enjoy life and effectively cope with its challenges. It includes having a sense of purpose and self, as well as strong relationships and connections. Your mental health can be positively or negatively influenced by factors such as life experiences, relationships with others, work environment, physical health, and community. Maintaining good mental health can help reduce the risk of developing mental health issues or illnesses.

Mental illness describes the reduced ability for a person to function effectively over a prolonged period due to factors such as significant levels of **stress**, changes in thinking, mood, or behaviour, feelings of isolation, loneliness, or sadness, and the feeling of being disconnected from people and activities. Mental illness is not the same as feeling temporarily distressed because of normal reactions to difficult situations. Most of us can regain control of our lives after a difficult situation, even if we are experiencing poor mental health. People with mental illness feel distress regularly and may not be able to cope with the simplest aspects of everyday life.

While poor mental health can contribute to mental illness, it is important to understand that mental health and mental illness are not the same thing. Mental health is not simply the absence of a diagnosed mental illness and living with a mental illness does not mean you can not have good mental health. One in five people in Canada will experience a mental health issue or illness in any given year. But five in five of us have mental health.

Statistics

- In 2020, depression became the leading cause of disability worldwide.
- 500,000 people are unable to work in any given week because of a mental health distress.
- 1 in 3 Canadians (33.3%) will be affected by a mental illness during their lifetime.
- 70% of disability costs are attributed to mental illness.
- About 4,000 Canadians per year die by suicide—an average of almost 11 suicides a day.

What is psychological safety?

Psychological safety is defined as the absence of **harm** and/or threat of harm to mental well-being that an employee might experience.

Psychologically healthy and safe workplaces and organizational culture – How are they related?

A psychologically healthy and safe workplace is one that promotes workers’ psychological well-being and actively works to prevent harm to employee psychological health including in negligent, reckless, or intentional ways. This type of workplace ensures that the basic needs of employees are considered and enhanced. These needs as it relates to the workplace include:

- Physical and psychological safety.
- Skill engagement and healthy challenge.
- Freedom to express views and contribute meaningfully to work activities.
- Reward and recognition for contributions.
- Opportunity for growth and development.
- Mutual respect from management and coworkers.
- Ample support and resources to do the job.

A psychologically unhealthy and unsafe workplace is one that lacks several or all these elements and is sustained due to unrealistic or unclear expectations, poor communication and leadership styles, lack of respect and understanding, unresolved safety concerns, insufficient breaks or time-off, and lack of recognition and opportunity for contribution or professional growth.

Organizational culture describes a pattern of basic assumptions invented, discovered, or developed by a given group that are a mix of values, beliefs, meanings, and expectations that group members hold in common and use as behavioral and problem-solving cues. The goal is to have a workplace where:

- All people are held accountable for their actions.
- All people show sincere respect for others' ideas, values, and beliefs.
- Difficult situations are addressed effectively and appropriately.
- Workers feel they are part of a community at work.
- Workers and management trust one another.

A positive organizational culture could improve teamwork and morale, increase attendance, productivity, and efficiency, and enhance retention and competency of the workforce. A negative organizational culture could increase **absenteeism** and **presenteeism**, encourage unhealthy habits and attitudes, and create a higher risk of mental and physical problems, incidents, and accidents.

Organizational culture directly influences the level of psychological health and safety in the workplace – thus, prioritizing and working towards a positive organizational culture is key in creating and maintaining a psychologically healthy and safe workplace – and vice versa.

Legal Obligations

The *Occupational Health and Safety Act* of Nova Scotia outlines the legislative rights of employees and precautions and duties of all **workplace** parties. It is important to recognize that “health and safety” applies to both the physical and psychological elements of the terms. This understanding can help us reframe how we apply the legislation.

Based on this understanding, reconsider the following:

- All workplace parties share the responsibility for the health and safety of persons at or near the workplace. 
- Where five or more persons are regularly employed, the employer must develop a written occupational health and safety policy in consultation with the appropriate workplace parties. 
- Where twenty or more persons are **regularly employed**, the employer must develop and maintain a written [occupational health and safety program](#) in consultation with the appropriate workplace parties that is best adapted to the circumstances of the organization for the purpose of the implementing the policy. 

Every **employer** must: 

- Ensure the safety of those at or near the workplace.
- Provide information and training necessary to protect the health or safety of employees.
- Ensure employees are aware of any health or safety hazards at the workplace.
- Carry out business in a way that does not endanger the health or safety of employees.
- Consult and cooperate with the joint occupational health and safety committee or representative.
- Establish an occupational health and safety policy and program where one is required.

Every **employee**, while at work, must: 

- Cooperate with the employer and fellow employees to take every reasonable precaution to protect the health and safety of themselves and others at or near the workplace.
- Consult and cooperate with the joint occupational health and safety committee or safety representative.
- Report unsafe acts and conditions at the workplace

CSA Z1003-13 “Psychological health and safety in the workplace – prevention, promotion, and guidance to staged implementation”

Does your workplace health and safety program address mental health and psychological safety? Which existing elements of your program could be strengthened by considering these aspects? Have you ever wondered what gaps should be addressed to help increase the level of psychological safety in your workplace?

CSA standard Z1003-13 is a free, voluntary standard commissioned by the Mental Health Commission of Canada. The standard provides guidance for implementation and continuous improvement of a successful psychological health and safety management system. It is complete with sample documents to help you through the process.

Access the [CSA standard](#) today to help guide change in the workplace.

Employee Assistance Programs

An EAP, or Employee Assistance Program, is a confidential, short term, counselling service for employees with personal difficulties that affect their work performance. These difficulties, however, do not have to be caused by workplace issues. Employee Assistance Programs are designed to help people understand or overcome their difficulties regardless of whether the source is work or otherwise.

The range of areas typically managed by an EAP provider include:

- Personal difficulties.
- Job stress.
- Relationship difficulties.
- Eldercare, childcare, parenting difficulties.
- Harassment.
- Substance abuse.
- Separation and loss.
- Balancing work and family.
- Financial.
- Legal.
- Family violence.

If you are an employee, you can ask your HR representative if an EAP is available.

If you are an employer wondering how to provide an EAP to workers, you can visit this [Fact Sheet](#).

Get the app on your mobile device



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