

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health urges executives to act on widespread mental illness at work

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Canada's leading centre for addiction and mental-health issues is calling on business executives for the first time to address widespread mental illness in the workplace.

On Thursday, the Toronto-based Centre for Addiction and Mental Health will unveil an awareness campaign aimed at corporate leaders that includes a playbook to help them support employees with mental-health issues.

Despite a rising awareness across the general population, mental illness still creates a \$51-billion economic burden in Canada every year, according to CAMH. Companies pay much of that amount through costs such as sick leave, disability expenses and the effects of "presenteeism" – continuing to work while ill, but not performing at the maximum level.

The centre's research also shows that the cost of personal leaves due to mental illness are about double the cost of leaves due to physical illness. Yet only one-third of Canadians believe their organization's leaders are addressing workplace mental health.

To help fix this, CAMH is aiming its campaign at top business executives, with the hope that workplace mental health will become a leadership priority. The new playbook lays out steps to start tackling the problem. These fixes include creating an organization-wide mental-health strategy, mandatory mental-health training for leaders and back-to-work programs for employees who are recovering from mental illness.

CAMH also wants executives to realize that they must take it upon themselves to be vocal at company gatherings such as town halls, including sharing personal experiences. "Mental health in the workplace continues to be deeply stigmatized," said Deborah Gillis, the chief executive of CAMH Foundation. "We need leaders to be normalizers-in-chief. By talking about it, they are breaking down stigma."

Ms. Gillis also stressed that leaders must be educated so they can spot an employee who may be suffering. "Many of the behaviours that you might associate with a business context – being under pressure, working really hard, working late hours – that may actually signal [mental illness]."

Bank of Montreal has partnered with CAMH to spread the message, and was the lead sponsor for the research that went into the playbook.

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“In order for CEOs and boards to believe that they’re going to have enduring short-, medium- and long-term success, the first and most important thing is the health of their leaders and their employees,” said Cameron Fowler, BMO’s president of North American personal and commercial banking, who is also on the board of the CAMH Foundation. Research shows that by the age of 40, half of Canadians have, or have had, a mental illness – which range from severe anxiety to depression to multiple types of disorders.

“I just don’t think there’s a way to avoid this any longer,” Mr. Fowler said. “CEOs need to own this. ... Go on record [and] take accountability that this is going to be fixed in their organizations.”

Some of CAMH’s recommendations, such as an organization-wide mental-health strategy, are quite broad. Some companies are starting from scratch, and need to set up a strong foundation and ways to measure progress.

However, the centre also spells out concrete actions it hopes will create change. Chief among them: “Set the tone from the top,” the playbook notes. “As with any effort to change organizational culture, having the CEO visibly championing an initiative – and holding the leadership team accountable – is critical.”

CAMH also stresses that the return to work after a leave for mental illness is a crucial time. “Returning to work should not signal the end of mental health support from the organization,” the playbook notes. Tips include modifying an employees’ hours in the early days so they can readjust, and ensuring that access to mental-health treatment continues.

For all the guidance provided, BMO’s Mr. Fowler stressed that little will change if business leaders’ attempts to address the issue are half-hearted. For those who question the benefits of taking action, he stressed the link between a company’s employees and its profits.

“A long-term mental-health strategy needs to be completely linked to your business strategy. It’s that big. It’s that important,” he said. “All corporate strategies are delivered by humans, and humans need to be healthy in order to lead and win.”