

## Influence employees' mental fitness by talking about its algorithm

**J**IM Collins, in his book *Good to Great*, implied that for a leader to be successful they need to be able to hear the brutal facts, accept them, and then act on them.

So here's one brutal fact: mental health in the Canadian workforce, based on all the projections, is not expected to get better quickly. In fact, data from the [World Economic Forum](#) indicates that depression and anxiety disorders cost the global economy \$1 trillion every year in lost productivity, and have a terrible impact on people's quality of life.

Talking about mental health and getting senior leaders' buy-in to support employees' mental health and reduce risk for mental harm through creating a psychologically safe workplace are positive steps.

What senior leaders can also do is stand up and talk openly about what they can do as an employer and how employees can positively impact their mental health. Notice I'm not talking about mental illness; I'm talking about mental health. For a senior leader to chat about mental health they first need to be clear on what it is.

Most leaders know that chronic disease costs are increasing and understand the benefits if their workforce could improve its physical health. They know the algorithm for physical health is exercise, diet, rest, hydration and healthy lifestyle choices, but they may not know the algorithm of mental

health.

I believe the algorithm for mental health includes:

- **Physical health** — My first degree was in physical education at Acadia University, back in the 1980s. Even then we were talking about the mind-body connection. A healthy body supports a healthy mind. What we put in our mouth, the amount of sleep we get and the amount of physical activity we engage in can impact our mood. One critical factor for maximizing our mental health is our physical health; the two work hand in hand. In fact, if you review the new [CAMH Playbook](#) you'll see as a core recommendation is the importance of promoting physical health as a key factor for supporting mental health.
- **Mental Fitness** — After spending nearly 30 years in the field of mental health, supporting persons with mental illnesses including addictions, I believe that coping skills and resiliency are not being taught enough in the public education system to prepare our youth for the incredible work challenges they will be facing. A core factor for predicting how well a person will be able to reduce their vulnerability for mental harm and mental health concerns will be influenced by their coping skills and resiliency.

cy. Organizations can play a major role in promoting and supporting employees' resiliency by paying attention to what they're doing that's positively or negatively impacting employees' experience, and closing any expectation gaps that can reduce stress and strain.

- **Social Connections** — Senior leaders are beginning to notice and talk more about mental health. However, there's not enough focus on the role of social connections and the quality of those connections for predicting employee mental health and risk for mental illness. One epidemic that's happening without much attention and is having a major impact on employees' mental health issues, physical health and longevity is their perception around social isolation and loneliness. University of Chicago professor John Cacioppo, in a recent article in *The Atlantic*, suggested that around 28 per cent of the population is experiencing loneliness, and it appears this number has grown by about three to seven per cent over the last 20 years. Inspired by Cacioppo's research. I'm starting to notice a relationship between employees' perceived isolation load and their perceived lone-

liness. For example, the longer a person perceives they're isolated, the greater their risk to perceive they're lonely and experience the powerful negative feelings associated with loneliness. The longer a person experiences loneliness, the greater their risk for using work as an escape, to the point of becoming a work addict and straining their mental health, possibly resulting in mental illness like depression or even a substance use disorder.

Senior leaders can influence their organizations by talking about how mental health is positively impacted, and asking tough questions as to what the employer is doing that's working and having a measurable impact on supporting employees within the above three factors.

Mental illness today represents, on average, 30 per cent of all disability claims and 70 per cent of disability costs. These numbers are not expected to improve unless organizations support employees and understand that mental health is not about a day, a program or a policy. It's fuel that keeps employees going, and for an organization to achieve results it needs employees charged and mentally healthy.