

## HOW CAN I HELP A CO-WORKER?

Different mental illnesses have different symptoms, and people experience the same mental illness in very different ways. Some people may hide their symptoms, and some people may work well despite symptoms. If you've noticed changes and are concerned about a co-worker, it's best to express concern without making assumptions.

If a co-worker is experiencing a mental illness, it's best to let them decide what and how much they tell others in the workplace. However, you can still offer support. Let your co-worker know that you're there to listen without judgement, and make your co-worker feel like they're still part of the team. Here are more tips for supporting a co-worker:

- Ask how you can help—and respect your co-worker's wishes.
- Continue to include your co-worker in the workplace's usual activities.
- Depending on your relationship, you can still keep in touch with a co-worker who takes time off.
- When a co-worker returns to work after time off due to a mental illness, make them feel welcome and appreciated. Saying nothing because you're worried about saying the wrong thing can make your co-worker feel worse.
- Advocate for healthy workplaces. Many wellness strategies are low-cost or no-cost, but they can still improve everyone's well-being and build inclusive spaces. Visit the Canadian Mental Health Association's Mental Health Works resource at [www.mentalhealthworks.ca](http://www.mentalhealthworks.ca) for ideas and strategies.

## DO YOU NEED MORE HELP?

Contact a community organization like the Canadian Mental Health Association to learn more about support and resources in your area.

Founded in 1918, The Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) is a national charity that helps maintain and improve mental health for all Canadians. As the nation-wide leader and champion for mental health, CMHA helps people access the community resources they need to build resilience and support recovery from mental illness.

**Visit the CMHA website at [www.cmha.ca](http://www.cmha.ca) today.**

## MENTAL ILLNESSES IN THE WORKPLACE



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Development of this brochure  
generously supported by



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Work is important to our well-being. In addition to the income it brings, it can be a big part of our identity, how we understand our skills, and a way to contribute to something bigger. However, a mental illness can have a big impact on the way we work.

## WHAT ARE MENTAL ILLNESSES?

Mental illnesses are health problems that affect the way we think about ourselves, relate to others, and interact with the world around us. They affect our thoughts, feelings, abilities and behaviours. Depression and anxiety disorders are the most common mental illnesses.

Mental illnesses are more likely to come up during times of stress or uncertainty, which can be part of many people's jobs. However, life stress outside of work can also affect mental health, which may then affect a person at work.

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It's important to understand that mental illnesses are real illnesses. Like other illnesses, such as diabetes or asthma, most mental illnesses are episodic. That means people have periods when they are well and productive, as well as periods when they are unwell and overall functioning is low.

## HOW DO MENTAL ILLNESSES IMPACT WORKERS AND WORKPLACES?

People who experience a mental illness may doubt their abilities or appear less confident. A person may have a hard time concentrating, learning, and making decisions. Symptoms of a mental illness may feed much bigger thoughts. For example, someone who can't concentrate may then also think that they can't do their job well or worry about losing their job. It's easy to see how these changes affect work performance.

Mental illnesses can also have a big effect on relationships. People who experience a mental illness may withdraw from others, act in unexpected ways, take a lot of time off, or appear less productive than usual. This can strain relationships with supervisors and co-workers.

Mental illnesses cost Canadian employers billions of dollars in absenteeism or sick days, "presenteeism" (coming to work, even when the employee can't work well), disability and other benefits, and lost productivity.



## WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT IT?

The good news is that mental illnesses are treatable. Early recognition of mental health problems, referrals to the right resources (such as Employee and Family Assistance Plans), and adequate treatment can help people get on the path to recovery and go back to their usual work quickly. Employees can and do reach their full potential when they have the right supports in their life, including those at their workplace. Some mental health problems in the workplace can also be prevented when organizations take steps to create mentally healthy workplaces for all employees.

Telling a supervisor or member of your workplace's human resources team about a diagnosis of any health problem is called disclosure. In Canada, the law says that you don't have to tell your employers what is causing a disability. You do need to say that you're experiencing health challenges and you have to describe what you need to work well. Your employer may need information from your health care provider around your abilities and difficulties, but they don't need your diagnosis.

There are risks and benefits to disclosing your experience of a mental illness. If you do disclose, you and your supervisor may figure out strategies that help you stay at work. For example, you may change the way you complete tasks or change the tasks you do. These strategies are also called accommodations. By law, workplaces have to try to look at reasonable accommodations for anyone who experiences a disability, including a mental illness. Disclosing may help other people in your workplace understand any changes or difficulties that they've noticed.

On the other hand, disclosing can lead to stigma or discrimination. Unfortunately, being open about a mental illness can impact a person's position at a workplace or their ability to find a new job. There are laws to prevent this kind of discrimination, but it can still happen. Workplaces have different attitudes and cultures, so everyone will have different experiences. However, it's best to think through all the options before you make a decision.

Decisions around staying at work or taking time off are influenced by many different factors, including the nature and severity of the illness and how the illness affects your abilities to work. Ultimately, the choice should be between you, your care team, and your employer. Some people benefit from time off with a gradual return to work. Others may decide to work fewer hours. Some may stay at their current working hours. Staying connected to work can be helpful during recovery. It can be a place to contribute your skills, build social connections, contribute to something bigger, and earn a paycheck. A job can be part of how you see yourself. Talk with your care team for ideas and strategies that support your work goals.

Remember to take advantage of services through your employee benefits. Employee and Family Assistance Plans and your health plan can help you find and access services in your community.