

Effects of pandemic on mental health may mean big changes to the workplace, experts say

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Once life returns to some semblance of pre-pandemic normalcy, Canadians will carry the psychological scars of the COVID-19 experience with them, and the lingering effects could have far reaching implications in the workplace.

Experts are warning that even once Canadians reach the long-anticipated “new normal,” many will still be managing emotional and psychological challenges that were developed over the past year.

The pandemic has affected each of us differently, but there has been a staggering increase in anxiety, depression, substance use and other mental health disorders since it began. A recent study conducted by Mental Health Research Canada found that 25 per cent of Canadians are struggling with anxiety and 17 per cent are dealing with depression as a result of the pandemic, the highest rates to date. A report by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), found that one in five are experiencing high levels of mental distress.

Dr. Donna Ferguson, a clinical psychologist at CAMH, suggests that even after activities that were considered risky during the pandemic are deemed safe again, some may continue to avoid them.

“People might be scared of going out, being amongst people,” she says. “Even when they say it’s safe for people to travel, I think people will still be reluctant, because they worry about the risks involved.”

Furthermore, after more than a year of lockdowns and restrictions, many Canadians are also struggling with fatigue, warns Monika Slovynec D'Angelo, the Conference Board of Canada's director of health.

"Having this prolonged stressor with an unclear end to it has a cumulative effect that undermines their resiliency to respond to the situation, and for those who are prone to anxiety and depression these symptoms would be exacerbated for sure," she says. "Even for individuals who are perfectly healthy – who were in a great state of mental health and physical health – this will have a toll. "

Dr. D'Angelo explains that the level of fatigue Canadians experience will vary based on their mental health history, their home life during the pandemic and whether they work on the front lines of the crisis. "Another factor is how an organization or employer responded to the crisis, and the kind of support they made available, as well as how much flexibility and support they provided in terms of virtual work environments," she adds.

Planning for a potential mental-health crisis requires employers to make appropriate resources available to their staff, but that's only the first step. According to clinical psychologist, author and researcher Dr. Luana Marques, they should also strive to create a workplace environment that destigmatizes mental health, demonstrates empathy and understanding, and offers a high degree of psychological safety.

"Often we think about intervention when something is broken, and I think the workplace presents an opportunity for prevention, instead of intervention," she says. "Adding this narrative of brain health could lead to psychological safety and a culture where we don't have to wait for somebody to be sick, and that will ultimately save companies a lot of money."

Stéphane Grenier, a retired Lieutenant-Colonel and author – as well as the founder and lead innovator for Mental Health Innovations, a workplace mental-health consultancy – believes it's critical for employers to start planning for this potential crisis today.

He likens the situation to soldiers returning from overseas, explaining that some will continue managing long-term physical health conditions after the pandemic, while others will struggle with less visible scars. He warns that returning soldiers often experience a brief honeymoon phase before an "underlying heaviness" sets in, warning that Canadians may have a similar experience after the pandemic.

“The cumulative wear and tear on the human psyche will only be seen several months after the pandemic is over,” Mr. Grenier says. “This is the mental cost of the pandemic. We are saying it’s not during the pandemic when people will need the most help, it’s after, and for the next 10 years.”

He worries there will be less political appetite for dealing with the aftermath of the pandemic, just as there is often more enthusiasm for supporting soldiers while they’re overseas than upon their return. “This is how society is, how governments are. We will turn our attention to the next problem the day everyone is vaccinated, and sadly this is when people will need the most amount of supports.”

Mr. Grenier believes it is incumbent on organizations to prepare for a mental health crisis that could last longer than the pandemic itself.

“Don’t wait until the pandemic is over to start thinking about what to do, because it will be too late,” he says. “After the euphoria [of the pandemic’s end] – a couple of weeks, a couple of months – the mental-health crisis is going to click back into gear, and leaders of organizations who are thinking strategically are thinking about this now.”

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