Mental Health Awareness in Safety Programs: A Critical Priority for Workplaces



Mental health is increasingly recognized as a core component of occupational health and safety (OHS) across the world. Integrating mental health into workplace safety programs is no longer optional, it is essential. Psychological well–being directly influences how workers think, react, and perform, particularly in high-risk environments.

The Safety Impact of Poor Mental Health

Mental health challenges can significantly affect workplace safety, especially in sectors such as construction, manufacturing, transportation, and resource industries. Workers experiencing stress, anxiety, depression, or fatigue may struggle with concentration, decision-making, and reaction time – critical factors in preventing incidents.

In manufacturing settings, a momentary lapse in focus can lead to equipment misuse or failure to follow lockout/tagout procedures. On construction sites, impaired judgment can increase the likelihood of falls, struck-by incidents, or improper use of PPE. Fatigue, which is often linked to poor mental health, can mirror the effects of physical exhaustion, slowing response times and increasing error rates.

Beyond immediate safety risks, untreated mental health concerns can contribute to absenteeism, presenteeism (being physically present but disengaged), and higher turnover. These outcomes not only affect productivity but can erode safety culture over time if left unaddressed.

Recognizing the Signs: Supporting Workers and Yourself

One of the most important roles for managers and supervisors is recognizing when someone may be struggling. While mental health challenges are not always visible, there are common behavioural and physical indicators to watch for:

- Increased irritability, mood swings, or withdrawal from colleagues.
- Noticeable fatigue, lack of energy, or reduced productivity.
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions.
- Increased absenteeism or frequent lateness.
- Expressions of hopelessness, anxiety, or feeling overwhelmed.

Supervisors should be trained to approach these situations with empathy and discretion, focusing on observable behaviours rather than assumptions. Simple check-ins, such as asking how a worker is doing or if they need support, can open the door to meaningful conversations that show you see them as a valuable asset both on and off the worksite.

It is equally important for managers and OHS leaders to monitor their own well-being. Leadership roles often carry high levels of responsibility and stress, which can lead to burnout if not managed effectively. Warning signs in oneself may include persistent low mood, irritability, difficulty sleeping, lack of motivation, or a sense of detachment. Acknowledging these signs early and seeking support is essential, not only for personal health but also for maintaining effective leadership.

Building Mental Health into Safety Programs

Creating a psychologically safe workplace requires intentional design and integration into existing safety systems. Mental health should be embedded into policies, training, and daily operations, rather than treated as a separate initiative.

Key elements of an effective mental health safety program include:

- **Policy Development:** Establish clear policies that recognize mental health as part of workplace safety, including procedures for reporting concerns and accessing support.
- **Training and Awareness:** Provide training for supervisors and workers on mental health literacy, stigma reduction, and how to respond to concerns.
- **Access to Resources:** Offer Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), mental health benefits, and connections to external support services.
- **Open Communication:** Foster a culture where workers feel safe discussing

mental health without fear of judgment or reprisal.

- **Workload Management:** Monitor job demands, scheduling, and staffing levels to prevent chronic stress and burnout.

Regular psychological hazard assessments (similar to physical hazard assessments) can help identify stressors such as excessive workloads, lack of role clarity, or poor communication. Addressing these systemic issues is key to long-term improvement.

Overlooked Risks and Diverse Work Environments Overlooked Risks and Diverse Work Environments

While high-risk sectors like construction and manufacturing often receive attention, mental health challenges affect all types of workplaces, including offices, healthcare settings, retail, and remote work environments. In office settings, prolonged screen time, isolation, and high performance expectations can contribute to burnout and anxiety. Remote workers may experience disconnection and difficulty separating work from personal life.

Shift workers and those in customer-facing roles may face unique stressors, including irregular sleep patterns and emotional labour. Additionally, workers in male-dominated industries may be less likely to speak openly about mental health due to stigma, increasing the risk of unaddressed issues.

OHS and HR leaders should ensure that mental health strategies are inclusive and adaptable to different roles, environments, and worker needs. This includes tailoring communication, offering flexible supports, and engaging workers in program development.

Practical Steps for Managers and Worksite Leaders

To effectively support mental health in safety programs, leaders can take several practical actions:

- Conduct regular check-ins with team members, especially during high-stress periods.
- Encourage regular breaks and promote work-life balance.
- Model healthy behaviours, such as taking time off and setting boundaries.
- Provide clear expectations and consistent feedback.
- Ensure workers know how to access mental health resources.

- Address workplace conflicts or concerns promptly and fairly.

Small, consistent actions can have a significant impact on overall workplace culture and employee well-being.

Conclusion

Mental health awareness is a vital extension of workplace safety. By recognizing the connection between psychological well-being and physical safety, Canadian organizations can build stronger, more resilient workforces. For OHS managers, the goal is clear: create environments where workers feel supported, valued, and equipped to perform safely, both physically and mentally.

If you or someone you know is in immediate distress, support is available 24/7. Contact 988 (call or text), Talk Suicide Canada at 1-833-456-4566 or find resources via the CDC if you’re in the US. In an emergency, call 911.