

Connecting the Dots

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Mental health plays a huge role in our overall well-being. Just as good mental health positively affects our physical health, poor mental health takes a toll on our wellbeing. What most people do not know is that mental health issues often show up as physical/physiological symptoms. For senior managers and business operators, building awareness around the relationship between physical symptoms and mental health can have a positive impact on absenteeism, presenteeism, and bottom-line costs.

Undiagnosed mental health issues, including stress, mood and anxiety disorders, and trauma, cause immeasurable suffering. An employee struggling with an undiagnosed mental illness can also negatively impact co-workers' productivity and morale. Canadian businesses shoulder the costs of absenteeism and presenteeism (a situation where an employee is present while struggling with underlying physical, emotional, or mental health-related issues), factors that negatively impact team cohesion and productivity and result in deteriorating employee job satisfaction and morale. Building awareness around the connection between mental health issues and physical symptoms is key to early intervention and improved outcomes, and to fostering a healthy and happy workplace.

Sobering statistics

Statistics on the cost of mental health to Canadian businesses are indeed sobering. The Conference Board of Canada estimates the direct cost of absenteeism in the workplace to be at least \$7.4 billion each year. And a 2010 Mental Health Commission of Canada study estimates that mental health problems and illnesses account for approximately 30 percent of short- and long-term disability claims. Further, they estimate that by the age of 40, 1 in 2 Canadians will have experienced or are living with a mental illness.

How mental health issues manifest as physical symptoms

Mental health issues can show up as physical symptoms in many ways. Depression, chronic stress, and anxiety can manifest as sleep issues, including insomnia and sleep apnea. They can also manifest as muscle tension and soreness, chronic fatigue, or gastrointestinal issues, like stomach pain, loss of appetite, and abdominal distress/digestive irregularity.

Building awareness

Connecting the dots between physical symptoms and potential underlying mental health issues is key to early detection and treatment. For most people experiencing troubling physical symptoms, the first line of treatment is a visit with a primary care physician. Due to the pressing time constraints of primary-care visits, attending physicians rarely have an opportunity to grasp the whole picture of the stressors and other factors at play in a patient's life. And due to a lack of understanding of the possible connection between their symptoms and potential mental health issues, patients do not present their symptoms in the full context of their life situation.

During the research phase of my doctoral thesis, I interviewed hundreds of patients in primary care waiting rooms and examined mental-health diagnoses undetected by physicians. The results were astounding. Over 50 percent of patients with Major Depressive Disorder, 87 percent with Bipolar Disorder, 73 percent with Panic Disorder, and an alarming 97 percent with Social Anxiety (SAD) had struggled with mental-health conditions unidentified by their general practitioner. As

paper records were the norm at the time, we also weighed and measured the thickness of patient medical records. The outcome: the heavier and thicker a patient's file, the more likely that patient was suffering from an undiagnosed mental health issue. Primary care physician visits are too are time limited to uncover the life stories or events that would indicate that a patient is struggling with their mental health, which is manifesting in physical symptoms.

A proactive approach

In both my clinical practice and my platform as a mental health advocate, I stress the importance of awareness of the interconnection between people's problems and their physical symptoms, persistent negative thoughts, and maladaptive behaviors. Using a schematic 'three-legged table,' I guide people through the process of putting their problems on the table, identifying their physical symptoms, negative thoughts, and problematic behaviors, and addressing all three legs of the table (or aspects of their problem), rather than focusing on their physical symptoms alone.

The case for building awareness around the interconnectedness of physical and mental health is clear. A proactive approach to identifying underlying mental health problems

related to physical symptoms results in more timely and effective treatment, and more positive outcomes.

Delivering a timely message of support to your employees

A CAMH poll from July 2020 found that 7 out of 10 Ontarians believe that there will be a '*serious mental health crisis*' as a result of the pandemic. In the months ahead, building awareness about the interconnectedness of physical and mental health will be more important than ever. Post-COVID, as we return to traditional workplace settings, sharing valuable knowledge, awareness, and skills critical to employee wellbeing through corporate wellness initiatives will be key to a successful transition.

In the months ahead, as business owners and senior managers, you will find many opportunities to support wellness initiatives that promote mental health awareness. Communicating the full range of mental health resources in your EAP, actively encouraging employees to take full advantage of these resources when necessary, and raising awareness of the connection between physical and mental health through wellness initiatives will demonstrate a meaningful commitment to creating a workplace that supports and values your employees.

A proactive post-COVID approach to employee wellbeing

Leading businesses recognize employees as their greatest asset, and foster a workplace that supports and prioritizes employee wellbeing. As our new, post-COVID workplaces shift and change and begin to take shape, it will be critical to demonstrate a robust commitment to employee wellbeing. You can be proactive by:

- Communicating the mental health resources in your EAP
- Encouraging employees to access these resources when needed
- Building awareness of the connection between physical symptoms and mental health issues
- Engaging employees in tailor-made wellness initiatives to address specific workplace challenges and needs as they arise

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About the author

Dr. Monica Vermani is a Clinical Psychologist specializing in treating trauma, stress and mood & anxiety disorders, and the founder of Start Living Corporate Wellness. She is a well-known speaker and author on mental health and wellness. Her upcoming book, A Deeper Wellness, is scheduled for publication in 2021.

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Dr. Vermani has recently launched an exciting online self-help program, A Deeper Wellness, delivering powerful mental-health guidance, life skills, and knowledge that employees can access anywhere, anytime. <https://www.adeeperwellness.com/>

