

Present and Unaccounted For

The cost, challenges and strategies for combatting presenteeism in the workplace

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“What gets measured, gets managed.” This famous quote, widely attributed to author and management consultant Peter Drucker, speaks volumes of the challenge Canadian companies grappling with a problem that is virtually impossible to measure — employee presenteeism.

Workplace presenteeism is essentially an invisible form of absenteeism. Why? Because an employee who shows up for work while burnt out, overstressed, or unwell, and unable to perform their daily tasks, is there but not there. They *present* as present, and their ‘absence’ goes unmeasured. What presenteeism is not is intentional under-performance or avoidance of responsibilities and commitments.

There are hard numbers and data that bring into sharp focus the annual cost of absenteeism to the Canadian economy. While it is disruptive and costly, and negatively impacts organizations in myriad ways, from team cohesion, productivity, and corporate bottom lines, absenteeism is something that can be seen, measured, understood, and dealt with.

Connecting absenteeism, presenteeism with mental health and stress

It is impossible to talk about absenteeism and presenteeism without talking about mental health and stress. Almost half of Canadians consider work to be the most stressful aspect of their life. According to 2016 Health Commission Canada statistics, the cost of psychological health problems to the Canadian economy is \$20 billion. Both absenteeism and presenteeism — when an employee shows up but their state of mind negatively affects the quality and quantity of their work, to the point where they are not producing, and/or negatively impacting the productivity of others — are common coping mechanisms for people who are stressed in the workplace.

Just how pervasive is presenteeism? According to the September 2021 LifeWorks Mental Health Index, more than half of Canadian employees report showing up for work feeling physically or psychologically unwell at least one day a week. Further, in today’s COVID-impacted workplaces, burnout and stress are at an all-time high.

Gallup, in their *State of the Global Workplace: 2021 Report* found that while Canadian workers are among the most engaged in the world, they also reported the highest levels of daily stress in the world in 2020, with 57% percent of US and Canadian workers describing their level of day-to-day stress as high.

The stressors of remote work, uncertainty and anxiety around health and safety, and job and economic stability are a few of the unique contributing factors at play due to the present global pandemic.

While the cost of presenteeism is impossible to measure, many experts claim that its toll on the economy is exponentially greater than absenteeism.

The facts speak for themselves

The question is not whether to tackle presenteeism, but how to do so. According to the Mental Health Commission of Canada and the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, one in five Canadians experience a psychological illness every year,

and fewer than one-quarter of Canadians feel comfortable talking with their employer about a mental health issue they are experiencing.

Rising to the challenge

Most Canadians will spend a full third of their lives on the job. As a clinical psychologist, I am keenly aware of the tremendous toll of prolonged, chronic stress and untreated mental health conditions. And as the founder of a corporate wellness organization, I have seen first-hand the positive effects of creating a workplace culture that invests in and is committed to employee wellness and mental health.

Creating positive change

As we continue to navigate the unprecedented challenges of the pandemic on our companies and employees, the value of building a culture of caring and support is more important than ever, whether your organization employs 30 or 30,000.

Group supports, like workshops or lunch & learns the offer psycho-education on subjects like stress-management, connecting physical symptoms with undiagnosed mental health issues, like chronic stress and fatigue, can provide insights and tools for employees managing stress, juggling work and family

tasks and responsibilities, and struggling with burnout, can provide employees with the tools they need to maintain optimal mental and physical health.

Initiatives aimed at helping individuals, like offering flexible hours and one-on-one mental health supports, like accessibility to a mental health expert employees and their families can turn to for advice and support when they need it, and offering monthly access to an on-site clinician, will demonstrate and reassure employees that they are supported and valued. And creating clear, concise and specific messaging around mental health resources in your company EAP — and ensuring that mental health offerings in your EAP meet employee needs — provides a powerful defense against both presenteeism and absenteeism.

Workplace wellness initiatives tailored to the needs of employees work in three ways. They provide valuable coping strategies for individuals who are suffering and need to refocus. They empower individuals to take control of their wellbeing, and they help build a workplace culture of caring and support that helps attract, engage and retain a company's greatest asset — its employees.



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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, columnist and advocate in the field of mental health and wellness. Her upcoming book, A Deeper Wellness, will be available for pre-sales in February, 2022, and her in-depth online self-help program, A Deeper Wellness, offers powerful mental health guidance, life skills, knowledge and healing, anywhere, anytime. <https://www.adeeperwellness.com/> <https://www.drmonicavermani.com/>

