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Feeling Better Now?

AUTHOR KAREN RICHARDSON

Dr. Sam Ozersky

New web site helps diagnose and manage mental illness in the workplace

PHOTOGRAPHY
STEPHEN WILD



A new online tool may benefit both employers and employees by accurately diagnosing and treating mental illness. Psychiatrists from Harvard University, the University of Toronto, McMaster University and McGill University have created the first medically-based web site which provides an early diagnosis, treatment and management of challenging mental health problems. Called

"FeelingBetterNow.com," the Web site can help employees get the treatment they need sooner, before they claim for short-term disability and long-term disability benefits.

This is an important benefit, considering mental illness alone costs \$30 billion in lost productivity and absenteeism in Canada per year. Roughly 20 out of 1,000 employees per year are on short-term disability and 4 out of 1,000 employees are on long-term disability due to depression alone, said founder Dr. Sam Ozersky, Senior Consulting Psychiatrist with the University Health Networks Hospitals Mood Disorders Clinic in Toronto. Dr. Ozersky presented information on the new tool at the Healthy Workplaces Conference held in Kingston, Ont.

How does the web tool benefit employers and businesses in Canada? Early intervention saves money. "The greatest source of disability in the Canadian labour force continues to be mental health disorders, and the productivity losses are mounting," he said. The economic costs of mental illness (all forms) in Canada today are the equivalent of nearly 14% of corporate Canada's net operating profits according to a published work of the Business and Economic Roundtable on Mental Health.

"If you are off work and you don't get appropriate intervention within six months, chances are dismal of coming back to work," claimed Dr. Ozersky. And while work is not the only cause of stress or a mental disorder, (genetics play a big role),

it certainly can be blamed for about 30-40% of stress.

One strategy managers can use is to determine if employees have a mental health issue is to determine whether they could perform their job if they moved somewhere else. "If so, then it is a problem that has to be solved in the workplace, rather than a mental health disorder," he said.

The idea of the site came about because of the need to "do something about the large economic gaps in mental health diagnosis, management, treatment and ongoing care," said Dr. Ozersky who has been in practice for more than 25 years. "Out of 100 people who have depression, only 50 will get a diagnosis, and only 12 will get proper care. For a disease like cancer, these odds of 1 in 8 wouldn't be acceptable."

How it works

To get started, employers give employees anonymous and confidential access to the website through an access code. False nicknames are used, and employees can visit the site at home. After answering a series of questions, it assesses diagnostic risk, life functions, including productivity, and within 15 minutes employees have a preliminary assessment of their mental health. For those assessed at high risk for a clinical disorder, they are provided with Care and Diagnostic Risk Maps, which explain the particular condition and outline treatments based on best practices by the psychiatric profession.

"FeelingBetterNow" is designed to detect and treat bipolar disorders, depression, post-traumatic stress, panic, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive behaviour and alcohol abuse, among other disorders. It also tracks individual progress to minimize the risk of recurrence. "The site promotes employee loyalty and the feeling that the company cares," he said.

Dr. Ozersky emphasized that "FeelingBetterNow" does not replace the Employee Assistance Programs that are widespread in the workplace, but it is a critical supplement targeting mental illnesses. 