Your Employee and Family Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Mental illness in the workplace: removing stigma

Mental illness in the workplace is a reality for most organizations. After all, research shows that one in five Canadians will experience a mental health disorder at some point in their lives. Though mental illness is widespread, its stigma often prevents people from seeking help or even talking about it with a co-worker, family member, or friend.

What is stigma?

Stigma can be associated with any number of health conditions, especially with mental illness. It is the result of negative perceptions and stereotypes, and reflects a lack of understanding. External stigma often involves negative judgements, opinions, comments and assumptions made by others; internal stigma can occur when the person affected with mental illness internalizes these negative messages.

Removing stigma in the workplace

According to the Mental Health Commission of Canada, only 23 per cent of Canadians are likely to feel comfortable discussing a mental condition with their employers. This number revealed in a 2008 Canadian Medical Association Study suggests that mental health in the workplace is likely underreported and that many employees are suffering silently and not seeking treatment.

Why remove stigma in the workplace? The Mental Health Commission estimates that nearly a quarter of the Canadian workforce is affected by mental health issues that contribute to absenteeism, low productivity, and turnover. Helping employees improve their mental health and well-being at work is beneficial to the employee, the employee's family, the company and society at large.

Steps to remove stigma in the workplace

Educate yourself and your team – The more you know the less powerful stigma becomes. By educating yourself and your team about what mental illness is (and isn't), you can reduce stigma, discrimination, negative stereotypes, and fear in the workplace. Awareness can help to create a culture of empathy and understanding.

Speak up – When you hear someone saying hurtful and/or stigmatizing comments about mental illness or a person with a mental health condition, share some of the information you've learned that may counter those negative perceptions. Remember it is important to use respectful language.

Raise awareness – If your organization does not have a comprehensive health and wellness program, you can help raise awareness by starting one. Create workplace policies and programs that promote physical and mental health, and share helpful resources – articles, blogs, local events, support groups – with your co-workers via email, bulletin boards or a company-wide initiative.

Be a leader – Start with a commitment to removing stigma. Through open and honest communication with your co-workers about the importance of your commitment, you'll play an important role in the battle to end stigma.

Leading the way

BCE, Inc., Canada's largest communications company, is striving to eliminate the stigma of mental illness in the workplace. Its Bell Mental Health Initiative is a $50-million, multi-year charitable program that promotes mental health across Canada. The initiative includes an anti-stigma campaign called, Bell Let's Talk Day.

The Bell Let's Talk Community Fund offers grants of $5,000 to $50,000 to organizations that are committed to improving access to mental health care. In 2012, some Bell Let's Talk grant recipients included: the Boys and Girls Club of East Dartmouth, Mood Disorders Association of BC, Canadian Mental Health Association, AMI-Québec Action on Mental Illness, Arviat Youth Piliriqatigit/Hamlet of Arviat, and Kingston/Greenwood Mental Health Coalition. The Bell Let's Talk Mental Health initiative is dedicated to research, community care and access, workplace best practices and anti-stigma as they relate to mental health for Canadians.

Through its Bell Let's Talk program, BCE is generously helping to reduce stigma in the workplace.

How will your organization chip in? You don't need a large budget to make a difference. Start by educating yourself, speaking up when appropriate, raising awareness, and encouraging others to do the same.

It's possible – and imperative – to counter negative stereotypes with the truth about mental illness.