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

Fitness and healthy eating programs in the workplace

Despite the fact most of us know about all the harm poor eating habits and physical inactivity can do, many people are still not heeding the warnings: statistics Canada reports that "two out of every three adults in Canada are overweight or obese." Cheap and accessible fat, sugar and salt-laden foods, large portion sizes and less active lifestyles together have expanded waistlines and left a lot of us feeling unmotivated, sluggish or unwell. Work is also less physically demanding, with many employees sitting down at a desk for the majority of their day and automation often eliminating the need for hard physical labour.

And while this lifestyle may seem easier, it's hard on the body and can emotionally and physically drag your workforce down. The promotion of health and fitness at work may seem like a luxury, but when most leaders learn the facts—a healthy workforce is more productive, with fewer absences, increased productivity and higher morale—they realize that it's a necessity and, in fact, can be a competitive advantage.

Support for Success

It's easier to succeed at an active and healthy lifestyle when you have the support of family and friends. The workplace is a great place for these partnerships to happen. If a team is going to lunch together or ordering food in, it will be easier for those wanting healthier options to speak up, knowing they have the support of others around them. As a leader, you can encourage teamwork amongst your staff when it comes to fitness and healthy food choices. Why not:

Create a club. Offer activities for your employees to get involved in before work, at lunch, or after the workday. There is no simpler way to exercise over an hour-long lunch break than walking. Lead a new initiative by committing to going yourself. You'll show employees you can "walk the walk," and might even glean some valuable insights about work along the way. If you want to encourage some healthy competition, offer a prize for the person who walks the farthest or takes the most steps that month. If you really want to encourage team spirit, how about an inter-office baseball or soccer league? Invest in some t-shirts, find a location and challenge another branch or team.

Raise the roof on fundraising. Nothing motivates people to action like a worthy cause. Find out what charities are close to the hearts of your employees and encourage your team to get involved. If you really want to get their buy-in, send out a survey and take a vote on which initiative to take part in. Whether you're building houses together, rowing in a dragon boat race, or cheering each other on at a charity basketball tournament, when it's all for a good cause, everybody wins. It'll boost your business' reputation, the health of your team, and the community or charity you are supporting.

Bring in the professionals. Offer classes that help relieve stress or have a registered dietician come in to talk about making healthy food choices. Yoga in the workplace, for example, is becoming more and more common. It doesn't take up a lot of space, it's not loud, requires no equipment and can help staff feel calmer, renewed and more focused when it's over.

Ditch rich food. When you're in hurry or having cravings, it's easiest to grab what is closest. Don't let accessibility to junk food be the reason your staff are choosing a candy bar over a healthier option. Is your lunchroom vending machine weighing your workplace down? Ask your vending machine provider

if there are healthier options on offer or look for a different service that will. Instead of bringing a box of donuts to the next staff meeting, why not put out a bowl of fresh, washed fruit? This small change sends a subtle yet important message and can go a long way in encouraging and promoting healthier choices for your staff.

The benefits package

Turn the tide and make your workplace one that encourages a healthy mind and body. When considering the benefits, the investment is definitely worth the gain. Healthy bodies mean healthy minds and when your staff is emotionally and physically fit, you can experience the following 'side effects:'

An increase in productivity. There is a positive correlation between personal health and productivity. When you're in poor physical health, your body can't function at its full potential. And if you skip meals and aren't getting the nutrition you need because of an unhealthy diet, your mind won't function at its best. But when employees are healthy, eat well and exercise regularly, the reverse is true.

A decrease in stress and illness. When you exercise, your body releases endorphins – natural chemicals that create feelings of happiness. Exercise is even prescribed by doctors as a supplementary treatment for people diagnosed with depression. Those in good health also have stronger immune systems, resulting in fewer illnesses which ultimately leads to fewer sick days caused by stress and illness.

Higher morale. Workplace health and fitness programs actively show workers that the organization cares about their well-being and supports work-life balance. Promoting group or team activities, also encourages employees to forge friendships, work together and celebrate successes, creating an invaluable connection amongst workers and boosting their sense of purpose and involvement at work.

Though it may take some initiative and energy to start up, the rewards of supporting employees in the pursuit of a healthy lifestyle are well worth it. A little creativity, leadership and the desire to have fun can go a long way to getting your people on the path to a healthier, happier lifestyle and, ultimately, a more engaged team.

If you require support to deal with a sensitive employee situation, contact LifeWorks to find out more about the consultation and training services your Employee Assistance Program provides.

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