

Quantifying depression in workplace

Chamber president makes business case for mental health support

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Revenues, expenses, operating margins and... personal satisfaction?

If it was up to Adam Legge, Calgary companies would count the emotional well-being of employees among their key business indicators.

Calgary's Chamber of Commerce president made the business case for addressing depression in the workplace at a news conference Wednesday.

"Depression is a business issue," said Legge. "The loss of productivity, days of work lost, sick days and long-term disability due to depression affects a large number of Calgary's workforce."

The conference, coinciding with today's National Depression Screening Day, addressed the role of the business community in tackling mental health issues.

Pointing to Canada's dismal productivity rate, Legge argued that businesses cannot afford to ignore the cost of depressed workers.

Estimates put the total annual loss of productivity for an untreated individual suffering from depression at 4,199, with that figure reaching as high as \$8.1 billion across the Canadian workforce, said Legge.

One long-standing obstacle to addressing mental health issues is not the cost, but the stigma associated



Ted Rhodes, Calgary Herald
Adam Legge, president of the Calgary Chamber of Commerce, addresses the issue of depression in the workplace during a conference coinciding with National Depression Screening Day. Legge said businesses can't afford to ignore the costs of lost productivity due to mentally ill workers.

with admitting to having a problem, said Robbie Babins-Wagner, president of Calgary Counselling Centre.

Myriad factors can prevent a person from identifying himself as having a problem, said Babins-Wagner. "Only half of those suffering from depression actually seek help."

Pengrowth Energy's vice-president of human resources added that Calgary's can-do work ethic could be partly to blame for people failing to seek help.

"There's a real strong perception that you should be able to motivate yourself out of depression," said Gillian Basford. "Pull up your socks,

it's not like you broke your leg."

But for those who admit to having a problem and seek help, there's heartening news: "Depression is very treatable," said Babins-Wagner. "The most important thing is getting treatment to those who need it."

Basford added that mental illness is one of the biggest causes of workplace disability claims at her company.

"It's a huge issue," said Basford, who added that businesses indirectly bear the costs of mental illness through missed workdays, workplace disputes and even substance abuse.

Pengrowth's disability statistics

show that over half the claims are for non-physical disability issues, she said.

But for employers willing to invest in mental health supports, the returns can be significant, said Legge.

"We're talking about billions of dollars expended in dealing with... mental health (in Canada) by companies," he said. "If we address them at the front end, by directing people into the treatment and the counselling they need, we could shrink those costs to a fraction."

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