



# STRESS & MENTAL HEALTH

A SEX AND GENDER-BASED ANALYSIS

## THE LINK BETWEEN MENTAL HEALTH & WORKPLACE STRESS

- **“Workplace stress** “is determined by work organization, work design and labour relations and occurs when the demands of the job do not match or exceed the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker, or when the knowledge or abilities of an individual worker or group to cope are not matched with the expectations of the organizational culture of an enterprise.”<sup>(1)</sup>
  - [47% of employed Canadians](#) perceive work as the most stressful part of daily life.
- Given that most adults spend a large portion of their lives at work, work related stress can have a strong impact on mental health and other health outcomes. Stress can **lead to physical and mental changes in healthy people and exacerbate illness in the case of those suffering from mental or physical health issues.**<sup>(2,3)</sup>
  - Canadian employees [see workplace stress as the primary cause of their mental health problems or illness](#), with depression and anxiety as the top two issues that emerge.
  - Statistics Canada data reveal that employees who perceived most of their days to be quite a bit or extremely stressful were over **three times more likely to suffer a major depressive episode.**<sup>(2)</sup>
  - Ensuring better workplace psychological health can result [in greater satisfaction, engagement, and productivity; it can also decrease health costs, employee turnover, and lost work time.](#)

## PSYCHOSOCIAL RISK FACTORS IN THE WORKPLACE

- **Psychosocial risk factors** are those “elements that impact employees’ psychological responses to work and work conditions, potentially causing psychological health problems.”<sup>(4)</sup> They include:
  - “the **way work is carried out** (work methods, workload & deadlines)”; and
  - “the **context in which work occurs** including relationships and interactions with managers and supervisors, colleagues and coworkers, and clients or customers” <sup>(4)</sup>.
- High job demands, low job control, low co-worker support and low supervisor support affect the experience of stress-related mental health problems. <sup>(5-10)</sup>

## DIVERSE EXPERIENCES OF WORKPLACE STRESS & MENTAL HEALTH

- **Gender:** There are a number of important gender differences in workplace stress and mental health.
  - [Canadian women report higher levels of work and life stress.](#) Women face a higher risk of burnout. [Psychosocial hazards impact women more frequently](#), and contribute to their experiences of stress and burnout. [These contributors include:](#)
    - the multiple roles women have at home and work,
    - women's gender roles and the social expectations of them,
    - a higher risk of workplace sexual harassment; and
    - gender-based discrimination evident in women's lower wages and higher job expectations.
  - Men seem [less willing to think that stress is having an impact on their health.](#)
    - Men are also [less likely to emphasize the need to manage their stress and show less confidence in psychologists than women.](#)
  - A 2012 [survey](#) by the Great-West Life Centre for Mental Health in the Workplace revealed that men expressed a higher level of concern across all organizational psychological safety risk factors than women.
- **Gender diversity:** LGBTQ+ individuals encounter specific and general risks of [workplace minority stress](#).<sup>1</sup> Such stress can result in [anxiety](#) and other mental health problems.
  - LGBTQ+ people are at higher risk of [suicide](#), [substance abuse](#), and [deliberate self harm](#) (non-suicidal self-injury) than heterosexual people.
- **Indigenous people:** Due to the experiences of colonization and residential schools, Indigenous employees might perceive and experience [some workplace events or conditions such as bullying or chronic stress as a trauma.](#)
  - Indigenous employees experience poorer mental health due to racism, discrimination and bullying as well as a greater work-life imbalance.<sup>(11,12)</sup>
  - [First Nations women](#) report significantly higher rates of depression (18% vs 9%) than women in the general population.
- **Racial minorities:** Racialized workers encounter greater workplace stress as a result of structural racism, inequalities at work and racial discrimination.<sup>(13)</sup>
  - Black workers experience more stressful psychological work environments and as a result have poorer self-rated health.<sup>(14)</sup>
- **Persons with disabilities:** Persons with disabilities are more likely to perceive their job as contributing to their levels of stress as compared to those who do not have disabilities ([62vs 41%](#)). More than a third see their job as having a negative impact on their overall health.

<sup>1</sup> Workplace minority stress refers to "[direct and indirect forms of LGBTI specific discrimination and victimisation, internalised LGBTI identity shame, and stress associated with LGBTI identity concealment](#)".

## PROMISING SGBA+-INFORMED PRACTICES TO HELP ADDRESS WORKPLACE STRESS AND PREVENT MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

### BECOME FAMILIAR WITH RELEVANT LEGISLATION AND OBSERVE RELEVANT LEGISLATION

- National [Occupational Health and Safety Regulations](#) require Canadian employers to take all reasonable actions in establishing and maintaining psychologically healthy and safe workplaces.
  - A comprehensive, voluntary [National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace](#) aims to guide organizations to promote mental health and prevent psychological harm at work.<sup>(15)</sup> Although the Standard does not take an explicit sex/gender lens, it includes a set of voluntary guidelines, tools and resources. Similarly, a [free online toolkit](#) supporting organizations is offered by the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC).

### ESTABLISH SGBA- INFORMED MENTAL HEALTH PROMOTION & STRESS REDUCTION PROGRAMS

- Adopt or adapt **workplace health promotion (WHP) programs** that are **sensitive to gender and other identities**, and help to ensure greater participation and engagement.
  - **Women tend to have higher participation levels in worksite health promotion programs.**<sup>(16,17)</sup> Men's lower participation is partly due to men's beliefs that [WHP activities are feminine in nature and hence, something to avoid](#).
  - A successful Australian program **for male construction workers to prevent suicide**, [Mates in Construction](#), included men's preferences and strengths in its design and delivery.
  - The type of language used in mental health prevention and promotion efforts targeting men **needs to be considered**. To attract more men, the use of terms such as [stress and resilience and fitness](#) are more acceptable: using [the language of sports \(e.g., 'mental fitness'\) rather than 'social isolation' or 'mental illness'](#) can attract men to participate.
- Establish or enrol in **management training on mental health (MH) and stress**. These interventions can be effective in improving managers' knowledge about MH issues and intentions to promote MH at work.<sup>(18,19)</sup>
  - An online Australian training program for managers called [HeadCoach](#) resulted in a significant improvement in managers' use of strategies to prevent and decrease stress among their team members.<sup>(18)</sup>
- Develop **Employment Assistance Programs (EAPs) that meet the needs of employees of different gender, race and culture**.
  - [Employee & Family Assistance Program \(EFAP\), through Manitoba Blue Cross](#), for example, includes Indigenous counsellors and dedicated Indigenous Resource Consultants. It incorporates traditional Aboriginal healing approaches and service provision outside typical counselling settings.
  - Bartram et al. (2020), using Health Canada's EAP as a representative case study, identified targeted outreach to men and other priority populations, and enhanced gender and diversity training for EAP counsellors for action<sup>(20)</sup>

## COVID-19 AND WORKPLACE STRESS & MENTAL HEALTH

- Early research finds that the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated work-related stress. One of the reasons for these elevated levels of stress and anxiety is concern about workplace exposure to the coronavirus. Other work-related factors that can add to stress at this time include: balancing work, personal and family needs; managing an altered workload; and adjusting to a different workspace and work schedule.<sup>(21)</sup>
- A national survey conducted by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) has shown that people with jobs exposing them to a high risk of Covid-19, such as frontline healthcare workers, are more likely to demonstrate high levels of anxiety in comparison to those with lower exposure-risk jobs (32.8 per cent vs. 24.4 per cent respectively).<sup>(22)</sup>
- Even those who do not face direct risk of contracting the virus at work are facing higher levels of stress, anxiety and other mental health issues as a result of employment uncertainty and related financial worries. A survey by the Mental Health Commission of Canada, for instance, has suggested that concerns about finances and job security is a key reason Canadians have felt stressed during the pandemic, second only to their concern about themselves or their family members' contracting Covid-19.<sup>(23)</sup>
- The CAMH national survey showed that, in comparison with other groups, those who lost their job or have been laid off due to Covid-19 have a greater chance of experiencing moderate to severe anxiety levels, and are more likely to report feelings of loneliness.<sup>(22)</sup>
- The Covid-19 pandemic seems to have had a greater impact on women's mental health.
  - Early research suggests that women tend to experience a greater amount of Covid-19-related stress, anxiety and depression than men <sup>(22-24)</sup>. While this gender gap in Covid-19-related mental health could be attributed to women's caring responsibilities <sup>(24)</sup>, other researchers have found that the pandemic's negative impact on women's mental health cannot be entirely explained as a result of gendered roles. <sup>(25)</sup>
- More research is needed to examine Covid-19 impacts on the work, stress and mental health of people of diverse identities.

## VIGNETTE: MENTAL HEALTH AND STRESS IN THE WORKPLACE

Aniibish is an Indigenous woman who works in a Canadian government. Recently she has been finding her manager's expectations to complete time-consuming tasks with too-tight deadlines are becoming too much. These expectations are coupled with some comments from her manager that she thinks are funny but which Aniibish finds denigrating or insulting to her Indigeneity. Her workmates too think she doesn't have a very good sense of humour. She has been trying to ignore the comments and accommodate her manager, and now she is taking work home with her. As a mother of a very active toddler and a teenager, it's difficult for her to work when they are awake. She works late into the night, but feels mentally and physically exhausted, and has started having anxiety attacks at work. She was thinking about asking for help through EAP. However, she is afraid they do not provide culturally sensitive services and that the counsellors are not equipped to deal with the unique and historical experiences of Indigenous peoples.

### Box 1: Important SGBA considerations for managers/supervisors

Applying an SGBA lens to the issue of workplace discrimination faced by an employee is one step towards resolving the situation described in the vignette. It will help you to better understand the issue, address it appropriately, and ensure solutions that are fair.

Based on the vignette and using the evidence you have just read:

- Think about how Aniibish's different identities (*being Indigenous, a woman, and mother*), *intersect and* impact her experience of workplace stress.
  - How do the manager's and co-workers' responses to her different identities shape the way they treat her?
- Think about how workplace culture might contribute to employees' experiences of stress and mental health issues (*e.g., Indigenous woman who works in a racist work environment; department has few stress reduction strategies or help that is culturally sensitive*). Understand how stress is caused; why *employees are affected and can see no solutions*.
  - Impacts on employees can be more profound if the person who experiences stress is not supported by colleagues.
- Think about what the evidence suggests in terms of the impact of sex/gender and other identity factors on workplace stress and in turn on the mental health of the employees.
- Reflect on anything you and your team members might be doing or saying that might be impacting your employee's mental health.

As a manager/supervisor, think about **your employee's life as a part of a larger context** before you and your employee make any plans to address the situation. Consider:

- How the wider context, including societal processes (e.g., cultural norms/traditions) might influence employees' mental health (*e.g., Aniibish's cultural background and experience of historical trauma from residential schools exacerbates the impact of workplace stress she is dealing with*).
- In addition to sex/gender, how other individual factors (e.g., race, age, disability, indigeneity), might impact the experience of stress at work and mental health).

## GLOSSARY

**LGBTQ2+:** an acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Two-Spirit. The + encompasses sexually diverse people who do not identify with the aforementioned labels.

**Mental health** is “a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community”.<sup>(26)</sup>

**Minority stress:** refers to “direct and indirect forms of LGBTI specific discrimination and victimisation, internalised LGBTI identity shame, and stress associated with LGBTI identity concealment”.

**Psychosocial factors:** “elements that impact employees’ psychological responses to work and work conditions, potentially causing psychological health problems”<sup>(4)</sup> They include the way work is carried out and the context in which work occurs.

**Workplace stress:** stress that “occurs when the demands of the job do not match or exceed the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker, or when the knowledge or abilities of an individual worker or group to cope are not matched with the expectations of the organizational culture of an enterprise”.<sup>(1)</sup>

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