



A Fine Balance

How to Manage Stress Related Illness and Maintain A Productive Workplace

Stress related health issues are currently the leading reason for long-term disability claims, and are becoming more predominant on a daily basis. Longer hours, more complex work, tighter deadlines and a myriad of personal issues thrown into the mix will ensure that stress related illnesses don't go away any time soon. As employers, on our own, we are limited as to how much medical documentation we can obtain that accurately states the plan of care, return to work dates, or accommodations needed to allow an effective return to work. This is very stressful for us as it limits our ability to plan our work.

Stress itself is not a diagnosis, however, stress can lead to significant physical illnesses such as heart attack or emotional and psychological illnesses such as depression. It must be taken seriously. Health Canada estimates the annual cost of just depression and distress at \$14.4 billion: \$6.3 billion in treatment and \$8.1 billion in lost productivity.

While these numbers are staggering, they only measure the number of people who actually miss time at work. Just as serious as absenteeism due to stress may be, is "presenteeism"- workers who show up to work with stress related symptoms anyway and are not nearly as productive as they should be. Presenteeism is estimated to cost Canadian employers \$22 billion a year according to Health Canada.

We all need some stress because it assists us in achieving both work and personal goals. We run into problems though, when we have too much. How an individual responds to a particular stressor will depend on their personality, their perceptions, their past experiences and what's going on in their life. Since everyone's reaction is individual, it creates a significant challenge for employers in managing stress related absences. Taking proactive measures will help you as a business leader remain productive, help your employees who are feeling overwhelmed and the rest of your team because typically when one person is not working to their potential, there are usually spill over effects to others.

Stress related absences take the focus away from business and take a lot of time and energy to handle. However, it is not all bad and when dealt with correctly, it is manageable. Determining legitimacy of claims, managing the process and offering safe return to work are key factors in success. Below are some proactive tips to help to manage this process effectively.

Proactive Stress Support

Provide a Safe and Healthy Workplace - Employers must provide a workplace that is free of risks to health, and safety. With Bill 168 (the amendment to the OH&S Act with respect to violence and harassment in the workplace) employers now have a greater responsibility to provide a workplace that is free of physical and mental or psychological hazards.

Create Policy - Review your short-term disability policies to determine what the test is for entitlement and what amount should be paid. Along with that develop and implement an attendance management program or policy that explains to employees what their obligations are when they are off sick and the consequences of not following that policy.



Ensure Employees Know About Options For Personal Time Off - Create policy to allow for personal days off within your company. This gives employees the flexibility they need to manage their personal and business life. Although it may seem like you are giving more, employees will take the time needed to deal with personal matters and in most cases return to work refreshed and thankful. Job protected leaves are now legislated in most jurisdictions including personal emergency leave and family medical leave.

Manage Performance Effectively - Keeping tuned in with your employees can provide management with early warning signs of stress related illness and the ability to address it before it becomes an absence related illness. Keep your leadership team informed of resources available to them to support employees. Also, employees who raise issues of stress must be treated with dignity and respect and given appropriate support.

Communicate Support Networks- Ensure all employees are aware of any Employee Assistance Programs offered by the company and other services that may be available from regional health authorities or community organizations.

Provide A Positive Work Environment - Whether your office is extremely busy, an employee is having a difficult time personally or both, create a work environment where your team feels the desire to come to work. Find ways to celebrate and have fun!

Show gratitude - Ensure you thank and give positive recognition often. It's amazing what a personal thank you card or public recognition can do for the emotions!

When an absence occurs:

Manage Stress-Related Absence- Where employers identify that absences are due to stress, ensure management is aware of the appropriate follow up procedures. Since stress related absences can be tricky at the best of times, having policies in place provides an employer with some support to verify the absence and determine possible length and any return to work restrictions. If you have any concerns, you can ask an employee to see an external medical practitioner relevant to their illness. While you will never receive diagnosis (unless your employee volunteers that information), you should be able to receive the information you require to support the required absence and determine return to work timeframe and accommodation needed.

Maintain Contact - As part of your absence policy, ensure management is in regular contact with employees and that employees are provided with opportunities to raise issues constructively. Follow up is needed to ensure that the employee is being attended to and is on a medical course of treatment that will allow them to return to work safely. All communication with your employee and others during the absence must be consistent with a continuing employment relationship and indicate an expectation that the employee will be returning to work. Be sure to document these communications.

Offer Reasonable Accommodation and Plan for a Safe and Early Return to Work - Remember that you are obliged to accommodate disabled (physical or emotional) employees who are unable to perform their regular duties by placing them in other positions that they are capable of performing.

Stress related absences can be complex so it's important to pre plan effectively and seek advice from those specializing in disability management when moving through the process.