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Health

Survey a 'call for action'

Co-operative effort needed to address depression and anxiety in working woman: CMHA

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A national survey showing one in five working women experience clinical depression or anxiety is a "real call for action," says Geoff Chaulk, executive director of the Newfoundland and Labrador division of the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA).

Chaulk said Thursday that governments, the private sector and the voluntary sector should form partnerships to look at ways of dealing with some of the issues that cause employees to feel they can't be as productive as they'd like to be in the workforce or achieve what they might like to in their careers.

The survey report estimates that 19 per cent of working women in Atlantic Canada experience anxiety and depression, the same rate arrived at for Ontario and Alberta.

In the Prairies, it's estimated at 21 per cent, while 23 per cent of working women in Quebec and British Columbia are said to have anxiety and depression.

The national rate is 20 per cent.

"We know, in terms of the cost, that mental illness can economically run into the billions of dollars, so I think it's a real call for action in terms of how do we whittle away at the stigma and help people come forward," said Chaulk.

"We know that the women in the survey were so right in terms that there is recovery, there is good treatment, but we need early opportunities to address the problems - the right assessment, the right treatment and good support in our lives, which includes our workplace."

The survey, *Depression and Anxiety Among Canadian Women in the Workplace*, was conducted by Leger Marketing for Wyeth Canada, in association with the CMHA and Our Sister's Place, a support network for women struggling with mood disorders.

Telephone interviews were conducted with 1,508 working women over the age of 18 across Canada who were experiencing depression and/or anxiety.

The number of women screened for depression and anxiety totalled 7,260.

Of the women surveyed, 73 per cent said their depression and anxiety limited them at work.

While 81 per cent sought help from a family doctor, the survey concluded that insufficient resources at work - such as the absence or lack of awareness of employee assistance programs - acts as a barrier to getting help, feeling better and being more productive at work.

Seventy-one per cent of respondents with depression and anxiety had children, but according to the survey, they rated their mood-related symptoms as greater barriers to workplace success than either pregnancy or child rearing.

Only half of the women interviewed said they knew that their workplace offered an employee assistance program, while 20 per cent said they took advantage of these programs.

One in four women (25 per cent) said they had symptoms so severe that they sometimes hid in their workspace or bathrooms to avoid colleagues.

The respondents rated a boss or employer as the least likely person with whom they would discuss their feelings or symptoms, and 87 per cent said they were most likely to talk with friends.

Eighty-five per cent said they were most likely to talk with family, while only 55 per cent confided in their colleagues.

"When I looked at this report, even as someone who has been in this field all of my career, I was really quite struck by the magnitude, the 20 per cent of women experiencing these problems in the workplace and the fact that there's still the difficulties that people face in terms of reaching out and being reluctant to even talking to your boss," said Chaulk.

"What does that still say to us about stigma? Whereas if you had diabetes or heart disease, I think there would be much less by way of concern in terms of letting your employer know what your health problems are."

Chaulk said he has received calls from employers on this topic and has conducted sessions with various groups regarding the prevalence of mental illness and its signs and symptoms.

He hasn't had any requests for sessions for women only.

As for what's causing stress for women in the workplace, Chaulk said it's likely a combination of factors.

A couple of years ago, he said, Statistics Canada did a report on working women and the work they have to do at home after work.

While society has changed, there's still not an equitable division of labour, he said.

"The approach that the Canadian Mental Health Association takes is that people need to strive for maintenance of their mental health as they work on their physical health and on maintaining good physical health," said Chaulk.

"A lot of that comes down to that idea of balance in terms of the work, the responsibilities that you take on - and how do you ensure that you make time for yourself, that you deal with things that you have control over and let go of those things that you don't have control over so as not to be in a constant state of feeling overwhelmed?"

People who are experiencing symptoms of depression or anxiety should seek support, he said.

In the survey, women talked about reaching out to family, friends and co-workers, which may be a good sign that some of the stigma surrounding mental-health issues is eroding, Chaulk said.

Education is also important, he added, in order to understand what the signs and symptoms really mean, in terms of dealing with stress and trying to practice healthy living, such as eating right, exercising and getting adequate sleep.

"We know stress, untreated, can lead to other problems," he said, "physical and mental health problems."

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