When registered psychologist Andrew Miki, Ph.D., started seeing more teachers enter his private practice, it sparked an idea for an online program that could support members while providing scale and cost efficiencies for organizations.

In 2014, Miki, founder and chief executive officer of Starling Minds in Vancouver, British Columbia, began collaborating with the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation (BCTF) to implement an online cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) program to help teachers better manage stress, anxiety and depression. There are two programs Starling has designed. The first is targeted toward all employees and focuses on prevention using CBT and mental fitness strategies to build resilience. The other is targeted to employees on any form of leave and focuses on returning to work with the stamina and skills to succeed.

BCTF members on disability are enrolled in a guided online return-to-work program where they immediately begin focusing on CBT strategies that will help them return to work. In the mental fitness program, employees are taken through a guided 21-session crash course where they learn principles of mental health and practice strategies to build resilience to stress and prevent future mental health concerns like anxiety or depression. Once the sessions are completed, users transition into a self-guided training program to continue strengthening their mental fitness.

The programs emphasize the need for each person to build his or her own toolbox to manage stress. As one user shares, “I use the strategies for stress reduction and keep practicing them. Starling has helped me to reflect on situations I have dealt with that caused a lot of stress. I don’t beat myself up anymore when things don’t go the way I want.”

**How Is CBT Taught Online?**

Using interactive exercises and educational videos, users are taught CBT strategies to reduce worry, anxiety and sadness. Evidence-based mental health assessments and reflection exercises help users track where they are over time, and a confidential community is available for them to learn from each other and understand that they are not alone. Combined with a toolbox of digital applications that help users recognize, regulate and resolve negative patterns, Starling effectively moves 86% of users up the mental health continuum to healthier states of mental wellness.

“CBT is the leading approach to psychological treatment that scientific research has proved works really well for many mental health concerns, including depression and anxiety,” Miki said. “It’s based on education and training to help people develop their skills to manage their own mental health. CBT helps people to recognize, reduce and resolve problematic patterns to become more resilient to stress.”

Hand in hand with CBT, specifically for people with mental health problems, are the ideas of prevention and mental fitness. “Mental fitness is a newer concept,” Miki said. “As people with depression and anxiety began to show improvement with CBT, an area of wellness and prevention started to emerge. We’re finding that many of the skill sets that people develop to improve their emotional well-being can make them more resilient to stress when they continue using these tools even when they’re healthy. It makes the most sense when you compare it to physical fitness. Essentially, the more mentally
fit you are, the higher you’ll be on the health continuum, which makes you more resilient and less likely to experience mental illness.”

Building the Program

“Miki had worked as a psychologist for hundreds of our teachers,” said Mike Kimmis, BCTF director of income security. “We had a discussion about running CBT group therapies for teachers and began a pilot that went very, very well.”

“Group sessions can be more cost-effective than one-on-one sessions, and people also benefit from the social element of working with peers to improve mental health,” Miki said. “We ran group sessions for a couple of years and measured the results in terms of symptom reduction and increased work functioning. BCTF was excited about the results and wanted to roll out the program to members throughout the province, but we ran into an issue of delivery and scale. That’s when I proposed the idea of an online program that could hopefully replicate the same results we were getting in person.”

“I was a little bit skeptical about not having in-person sessions, but the results have been very good for our members,” Kimmis said.

Miki said starting the online program with BCTF has been a true partnership. “BCTF members helped us create content, create the course structure, and test out program platforms and usability,” he said. “From our beginnings in 2014, our program has grown to be available to 150,000 employees across North America.”

Kimmis noted that the metrics for success have evolved along with the program. The current focus is on improvements in function and mental health based on self-assessment scores.

Improving Accessibility and Usage

The online CBT program, which is paid for by BCTF, is open to all 43,000 BCTF teachers in British Columbia. “It’s also available to their family members, which is something new, and it’s available in French,” Kimmis said.

The disability program is designed for people to use once a day. “The reason we want people to participate about 20 to 30 minutes a day is to supply them with the education and training to start moving in a more positive direction—higher up the mental health continuum and back to work,” Miki said.

The CBT program replicates in-person situations and provides validation. People on disability typically feel scared and vulnerable, so it’s important for them to know they are not alone, Miki shared.

“An important element of an online program is to give people immediate guidance in terms of what they need to learn and what exercises they need to do to start improving their mental health to return to work,” he said.

Miki noted that many users share that learning about the mental health continuum created a new view of mental health. “Instead of looking at yourself as either sick or healthy, this person started to see shades of grey and how everybody moves up and down that continuum over the course of their lives,” Miki said.

“When you start seeing things in an online program that you’d hear during successful in-person treatment, it’s really exciting as a clinician.”

Kimmis also pointed to accessibility as a benefit of online programs. “The ability to see a psychologist outside of major centers in British Columbia is really lacking,” Kimmis said. “This provides a mental health resource that can be accessed anywhere in the province at any time.”

A challenge for any program can be the stigma attached to mental health issues, and Kimmis noted that stigma is still the greatest barrier because it can keep people from learning about mental health and their specific issues.

Miki noted that an online program can provide an advantage in battling the stigma. “Having an online program is a safe place where people can access it in the privacy of their own home; nobody knows they are going into it,” he said. “They can start learning about it and start practicing the exercises to improve.”

Measuring Effectiveness

New components of the program look at individual scores and then tailor the program to members based on their functions or abilities.

“We assess people at the beginning of the program and again toward the end, using scientifically based assessments that are used in psychological research, and we see a direct, encouraging relationship between program use and people’s assessments,” Miki said. “About 78-86% of people improve in at least one of their symptoms.”

The online CBT program is also be-
beginning to see promising data on users becoming more productive at work through difficult times. In a recent survey, 71% of participants said Starling boosted their productivity by roughly 22%. In this same survey, a user shared, “I’ve always found it difficult to open up—This tool makes it easier for me to get help when I need it.”

Communicating the Program

Kimmis said the key to successfully communicating the online program is variety. “We promote the CBT program through member e-mails and in our e-news, and we provide information at major meetings and conferences,” he said. “Miki also gives presentations in different locals and school districts across the province, and that has generated a lot of success.”

More recently, BCTF offered mental health challenges from Starling that have been very successful in getting members to buy into the program and understand how to use it, Kimmis said.

“Mental Health Week occurred in May, and there was a four-week challenge that gave people a skill to build on each week through small activities,” he said. “These challenges provide members with focused points to work on, and it also helps to reengage users who haven’t used the program for a while. It gives them a reminder that maybe it’s time to go back on and refresh what they’ve learned.”

Offering Key Lessons

Kimmis noted the importance of tailoring online programs to the audience. “For teachers, our environment is about learning and training, so CBT is a natural fit to learn about and teach ourselves some strategies for managing mental health,” he said. “It can also be effective in other industries, but look at the people you are serving and try to fit their dynamic.”

Miki pointed to the ability of members to express themselves. “The program allows people to anonymously comment about how they’re doing, what they’re working on or thoughts they’re having,” Miki said. “We’ve noticed that many comments are mimicking what you would hope to hear in treatment. After completing the goal-setting module, many users leave comments about realizing how they were setting unrealistic goals and how they’ve readjusted to set SMART [specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound] goals instead. If someone said that to me during in-person treatment, I would jump all over that and highlight it for the person so they recognize what a huge step forward that is.”

Kimmis also points to the lasting impact the Starling programs have by virtue of ongoing accessibility and potentially eliminating the barriers of where you live and how much you can afford for therapy. The ability of the online CBT program to replicate the success of in-person therapy on a larger scale is an important innovation, he said.

“All of us are looking for new and innovative strategies to address mental health, and this has turned out to be even better than we thought,” Kimmis said. “In just four years, we have thousands of members using this program, and that’s a testament to its success. We’re very proud of the fact that more than 70% of members will log back on to the program more than a year later. It’s not just a strategy where people use the program and they’re done. It’s a resource that will be there for people over their lifetimes, to use when they want and how they want.”

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