As the labour force becomes increasingly mobile and isolated, so too have employers seen a rise in mental health disorders among employees—including high-performing and younger workers. Cognitive behaviour therapy, in person or online, may provide a path for employers looking to help employees return to health and productivity.
by | Heather Kaufman and Lucy Turowicz
The workplace is changing. Mental health disorders are increasing. The cost of mental health disabilities is rising. In order to keep pace with these changes, it is essential to find alternative methods of mental health treatment that are accessible and cost-effective. One potential treatment that will be discussed in greater detail later in this article is cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT), a type of psychosocial intervention for mental health disorders.

The current labour force is comprised of members of four generations: Baby Boomers, Generation Xers, Millennials and Post-Millennials, the oldest of whom are now of working age. It’s easy to perceive employees of each generation as distinct in their habits, outlook and approach to work, but they all have at least one thing in common: mental health. One in three employees across all four generations that make up the current labour force has a mental health condition.

Mental health concerns are indiscriminate, affecting a wide range of individuals regardless of age, gender or ethnicity. Recent surveys confirm not only that 33% of individuals who are actively at work report that they have a mental health condition or have experienced one in the past but also that 27% report mental health concerns that are potentially related to stress or simply have not yet been diagnosed by a physician.

The Changing Nature of Work

The way we work is in a state of flux. The tools we use to do our work are in a constant state of evolution. Based on the current rate of change, it is expected that every business model in every industry will shift in the coming years and that workplace values, behaviours and expectations will change along with them. As the role of technology in our daily work broadens, emphasis on competencies related to innovation will increase. Traditional pyramid-based reporting structures will morph, and the value of hierarchy will decrease while organizations increase their focus on the value of key groups of employees working in different specialties to achieve common goals. While traditional skills will retain importance, many of them, such as proficiency in typing and word processing, will come to be viewed as requirements rather than assets. Employers will increasingly seek employees based on their human skills, such as their ability to communicate and work collaboratively, rather than their technical skills. In this fast-paced working world, a high degree of adaptability will be essential to workplace success.

Distinct groups of employees will emerge as a result of these changes, and employers are already seeing this occur in the labour force. These groups are distinct, and their mental health needs are distinct.

- **High-performance individual contributors**: innovators, insight creators and intrapreneurs who work within organizations to drive change and spearhead new projects
- **Managers**: network managers, project managers, human resource managers, cyclical managers of multidisciplinary teams
- **Customer connections**: sales, service, social media
- **Short-term contractors**: Also known as gig workers, whose work is project-based and often done for multiple employers, these contractors in the labour market continue to increase in number each year.

These groups of employees differ in what they do, but their work experience is, in many ways, the same and indicative of ongoing workplace trends. For all of these groups, the concept of a traditional work schedule of 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Monday to Friday is a foreign one. They are constantly connected to their work, carrying their phones and laptops everywhere they go and regularly checking e-mails throughout the day and night.

**High-Functioning Depression**

Constant connection to work is often perceived as a desirable trait in employees because the pace of work continues to accelerate at the same time that employee numbers in most organizations remain steady or are slowly decreas-
ing. However, constant connection can have mental health ramifications. And it can also be a sign of an existing mental health disorder. In the coming years, employers will increasingly see individuals in the workplace dealing with high-functioning depression, a mental health disorder whose sufferers do not in any way resemble the cultural tropes for individuals with mental health disorders.

Signs of high-functioning depression include increased perfectionism; extreme drive; increased need for methodical approaches to tasks; relentless criticism; irritability and quickness to anger; constant, low-level sadness; increased isolation; and overreliance on temporary coping strategies such as alcohol, shopping and gambling. Whereas individuals with clinical depression are likely to find themselves struggling to accomplish basic activities of daily living such as getting out of bed, getting dressed and preparing meals, individuals with high-functioning depression may continue to overachieve despite their symptoms and therefore be less likely to seek help. Among high performers, many of whom are the constantly connected employees that organizations rely on and value highly in the workplace, high-functioning depression can go entirely undetected until an individual suffers a breakdown.

While mental health concerns impact a wide range of employees regardless of generation, current trends suggest that younger employees are more likely to cite that they experience financial concerns or isolation. Both financial concerns and isolation put employees at increased risk for mental health disorders. Isolation in particular is now considered to be a risk factor for disease that is on par with obesity and smoking. Currently, surveys show that 61% of employees under 35 years old report feelings of isolation, whereas the number for employees over the age of 35 is much lower, at 35%. We can conclude, therefore, that younger employees present increased risk for mental health concerns, particularly as the workplace becomes more mobile, meaning that many young employees work alone at home or in coffee shops rather than in an office among peers and colleagues.

The University of Michigan has found that social interaction has a positive impact on brain function and subsequent mental acuity. Yet the changing workplace will likely require workers to perform solitary work outside of a traditional office environment in increasing numbers. Therefore, it is essential that organizations ensure employees—particularly those under the age of 35, who are known to feel increasing levels of isolation—are able to access support services to maintain their mental health while still meeting business needs.

**Takeaways**
- As the cost of mental health disorders increases in the workplace, employers are seeking alternative methods of treatment that are accessible and cost-effective.
- One in three employees across every generation in the labour force has reported that they have a mental health condition or have experienced one in the past. An additional 27% report mental health concerns that may not have been diagnosed by a physician.
- Being constantly connected to work through smartphones and laptops is often seen as a valuable trait in employees. But it can have negative impacts on mental health, even among high-performing employees.
- A potential resource for employees dealing with mental health disorders is cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT), a form of psychosocial intervention.
- An online version of CBT can allow for an increased number of employees to access treatment by removing barriers such as work schedules and geographic locations. It also can potentially remove the stigma associated with seeking help since employees can access treatment from the privacy of their own homes.

**CBT Provides a Potential Solution**

Employees with mental health disorders need help. One potential resource is cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT), a type of skill-based psychotherapy in which negative patterns of thought about the self and the world are challenged, with the goal of altering unwanted behaviour patterns. It is the most widely used evidence-based practice aimed at improving mental health, because it is arguably the most effective form of psychosocial intervention for mental health disorders.

But efficacy of treatment is meaningless if employees don’t access the treatment. And although CBT is widely available, there are a variety of reasons why employees who need it may not seek it out. CBT needs to fit into an employee’s life and, in our increasingly connected, fast-paced world, many employees perceive that they are too busy to take the time for themselves,
even if taking that time could improve their overall well-being. Some people who want the support of traditional CBT may not be able to access it due to financial constraints. Although some plans are beginning to increase their coverage, many extended health plans offer $500 or less in coverage for psychological counselling. Even increased coverage cannot resolve all of the barriers to access to CBT. Geographic challenges may mean employees in smaller communities have no providers in their local area. And some employees may simply be reluctant to contact a psychologist out of a sense of shame or fear, given that mental health disorders remain socially stigmatized.

The challenge organizations are therefore faced with is giving employees access to CBT in a way that fits into their lifestyles. In the United Kingdom and Australia, a new form of CBT has risen to prominence in recent years: iCBT, or Internet cognitive behaviour therapy. Although the online form of CBT is relatively new, validated studies have suggested that it offers the same effectiveness of traditional CBT, potentially with some additional benefits.

iCBT can allow an increased number of employees dealing with mental health disorders to access beneficial treatment by removing perceived and real barriers to access. The online delivery method means employees can access iCBT when it fits into their schedules, regardless of their location. It also allows employees to access iCBT in a manner that feels more anonymous, since they are not required to leave home to attend a psychologist’s office, thus adding a layer of anonymity for individuals who may be fearful of being judged if their condition becomes known to others. The online delivery method also can decrease the cost of treatment, rendering it financially accessible to a wider range of people.

In the evolving workplace, iCBT can offer further benefits in that it has proved to be particularly effective for high-performance employees who may be at risk for or presenting with symptoms of high-functioning depression. These individuals are the least likely to seek help because they are able to compensate for their symptoms by remaining very busy—and thus often see themselves as too busy to engage in self-care such as attending in-person CBT sessions. However,

BIOS

Heather Kaufman, M.S.W., is vice president, national partnerships for Morneau Shepell in Toronto, Ontario. She brings more than 25 years of experience in the design and delivery of employee and family assistance program (EFAP) solutions to a diverse portfolio of accounts in the public and private sectors. Joining Shepell in early 2002, Kaufman was responsible for the implementation and ongoing operation of the Organizational Health Solutions program, mediation services, organizational wellness initiatives and workshops. In her current role, she has responsibility for optimizing the growth, development and retention of Shepell’s many strategic partnership channels in North America. Kaufman received her master of social work degree from York University as well as a diploma in addictions studies from McMaster University.

Lucy Turowicz, PMP, is vice president, absence management technology innovations for Morneau Shepell in Toronto, Ontario. She is a certified project management professional (PMP) and PRINCE2 Practitioner, with an emphasis on organizational health planning and a proven record in full-lifecycle implementation of large-scale business processes. With over 18 years of experience in the industry and 15 years of project management experience, Turowicz oversaw many of the large-scale implementations of new client and new technological releases for Morneau Shepell before moving into her vice president role. In this role, she maintains overall accountability for all technology implementations, new product innovations and business intelligence. Turowicz holds her bachelor of arts degree in philosophy from the University of Toronto and received the designation of PMP from the Project Management Institute in 2005.
they are also the individuals who are the most likely to derive significant benefit from iCBT, because the module-based sessions focus on skill development and empowerment, which allow high performers, who place a high value on control, to feel that they have control over their treatment and the milestones they reach as part of it.

**Conclusion**

The impact of widespread mental health concerns on the workplace is undeniable. As the workplace evolves, the costs of disability rise. The reasons for these rising costs are multifactorial, but the decreasing number of human resources, presenteeism and the increasing complexity of mental health disorders all play a role. iCBT can be a way for employers to address these rising costs. Workplaces that offer alternative therapy options like iCBT, which can be cost-effective and show proven results, can help employees return to productive health sooner, thus ultimately reducing the duration and cost of absences for employees who wait for traditional CBT through the public health system—or opt not to access it at all. While iCBT has proved particularly effective for younger generations of employees, it offers proven benefits to employees across all generations who currently make up the labour force.

The philosopher Heraclitus told us that change is the only constant in life and, while his words were spoken in a different time, they are perhaps more true now than ever before, as the pace of change accelerates at a rate that the ancient Greeks could hardly have conceived of— and one that is alarmingly quick for many employees as well. As the world and the workplaces in it change, so must the methods organizations use to support employees in those workplaces— particularly those dealing with mental health disorders— change as well. Innovative therapy methods like iCBT are at the forefront of current advances in mental health treatment, and early adoption has the potential to improve mental health outcomes and make the workplace healthier overall.