



Social exclusion, the closure of daycare centers and schools, and job insecurity combined to produce conditions at home and in the workplace that have never been seen before the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has had major effects on Canadian employees' mental health. Expanded roles in the workplace and increased caregiving responsibilities at home have left many overwhelmed. The author explores ways for employers and plan sponsors to offer crucial assistance.

An illustration on a light blue background. On the left, a woman with dark blue hair in a ponytail is on a treadmill. She has a worried expression and sweat drops on her forehead. She is wearing a white tank top and a blue cardigan. On the right, a young boy with dark blue curly hair is holding her hand. He is wearing a yellow t-shirt and red shorts. He has a neutral expression and his other arm is raised. In the background, there is a window with a white frame. The title text is positioned to the right of the woman.

Family Mental Health and the Impact on the Workplace

by | **Judith Plotkin**

Since the early days of the pandemic, there have been increased concerns about employee mental health. Within the first six months of the pandemic, experts predicted a secondary pandemic of mental health issues would follow. Prior to COVID-19, employees were suffering from undertreated mental health issues, and our mental health treatment infrastructure was overburdened. One in five of us will likely have a mental health issue in our lifetime.¹ The pressures, anxiety and isolation that resulted from a global pandemic exacerbated the frequency of mental illness among us as well as the already critical challenges of accessing care. The COVID-19 pandemic triggered a 25% increase in the prevalence of anxiety and depression worldwide.²

Surveys done by the Mayo Clinic show a major increase in the number of adults who report stress, anxiety, depression and insomnia symptoms compared with surveys before the pandemic. In addition, the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto, Canada reports spikes in anxiety, depression and loneliness amongst Canadians.³ People have increased their use of alcohol and drugs, and those with substance use disorders—notably, those addicted to tobacco or opioids—are likely to experience worse outcomes if they contract COVID-19.⁴ The World Health Organization has stated that the four biggest drivers of pandemic mental strain have been fear of becoming ill or infecting others, a sense of being socially excluded/judged, fear of being separated from loved ones/isolation, and fear of losing one's job or not being able to work.⁵

The prevalence of mental illness among the working population is not new or related to COVID-19. For the last decade, alarm bells have sounded for plan administrators and organizational leaders regarding workplace mental health specifically. One data point for workplace concerns has been the prevalence of pharmacological drug claims, with antidepressants and anti-anxiety drugs topping the high-volume lists for most employers. In addition, mental health claims have been a significant cost driver for short-term and long-term disability programs used by employees.

The mental health of employees' children, spouses and parents has affected the workplace as well. Although employers and plan sponsors were already concerned about employee mental health, now family issues such as children's mental illness and family distress are driving employee absence and presenteeism. In addition, more employees are describing symptoms of burnout and exhaustion.

Increased Concern Over Children's Well-Being

A recent survey of 3,000 working parents across the United States “found that six in ten respondents were ‘very’ to ‘extremely’ concerned about their children’s emotional health and development or behavior in the past two years. . . . The survey found that 53% of working parents have missed work at least once per month to deal with their child’s mental health. And 71% of parents said issues with their children’s mental or emotional well-being made the stresses of work much more difficult to cope with.”⁶ Many parents expressed concerns that the loss of in-

person school had negatively impacted their children’s mental health.

The research teams at The Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto surveyed different participants at different time points to get a “holistic understanding of how public health measures, including school closures, have impacted child and youth mental health and well-being. Researchers found a strong association between time spent online learning and depression and anxiety in school-age children (six to 18 years old). The more time students spent online learning, the more symptoms of depression and anxiety they experienced.”⁷ The study found that the additional activities that accompany in-person schooling, including sports, social time, school meals and after-school activities, all contributed significantly to children's emotional well-being. Decreased in-person play and social time meant increased screen time, which correlated with poor mental health—specifically, depression.

For many parents, dealing with their children’s mental health has meant missing work to manage multiple appointments. Others are managing the stress of not being able to find resources to set up appointments and much-needed aid. Many have reported that waiting lists for children’s mental health support are growing rapidly.

The researchers in The Hospital for Sick Children study found that “families who were already vulnerable before the pandemic—for example, those with lower household income and parental education rates—were disproportionately impacted by economic hardship as a result of the pandemic, such as job loss and food insecurity. These families experienced higher levels of both child

and caregiver mental health symptoms and stress. For all families, caregiver mental health and family functioning were impacted by their children's mental health difficulties and vice versa."⁸

Across both Canada and the U.S., the impact of COVID-19-related isolation and subsequent stress and depression have left parents concerned and struggling to find resources and treatment for children.

"Leading medical groups have declared a national emergency in the U.S. for child and adolescent mental health, with parents experiencing heightened stress."⁹ Managing the demands of parenting and work responsibilities has become more difficult. Spouses are more likely to struggle and even experience their own mental health challenges when a child or other family member is unwell.

Spousal Illness Takes a Toll

Understanding how to assist someone living with a mental illness can be overwhelming and exhausting. As parents' fears of the pandemic's impact on their children's mental health have increased, many have reported pressures and concerns about spousal distress and mental illness. Spouses are frequently overwhelmed by their partner being unwell. Since the onset of COVID, employees have often struggled with their mental health, and many have been increasingly concerned about how their spouses are managing. Mental illness can impact a person's personality, temperament and interests, leaving spouses feeling like they married a different person. Mental illness has a high recurrence rate throughout one's life, and spouses often feel anxiety related to their partner's mental health. During the pan-

Takeaways

- Although employers and plan sponsors have been concerned about employee mental health, a rise in presenteeism and absenteeism is now being brought on by problems in the family, children's mental illness, and stress resulting from the inability to make arrangements for appointments and aid.
- Since COVID-19 first appeared, employees have frequently grappled with both their mental health and a growing concern for how their spouses are faring. Employees' struggle to balance work and family life has increased throughout the pandemic because of the pressures on families, including marital stress and an increase in mental illness.
- The consequent increase in responsibilities and role ambiguity blurred the line between work and family, giving many the impression that they were working constantly. Most people did not feel prepared to handle the increased demands of their caregiving responsibilities while adjusting to remote employment; as a result, the rate of burnout has reached a record high.
- Flexibility and understanding let employees feel heard and understood while they deal with the many demands they face. There may not be a one-size-fits-all answer, but adaptability and understanding are crucial. Health inequities and vulnerabilities associated with race, ethnicity, gender and age should be considered in any response.

dem, marital stress and increases in mental illness have further caused surges in employees struggling to manage work and family life. Unaccustomed to spending such intense time together led some couples to experience unprecedented marital tension. CBC Ottawa found that divorce lawyers and financial counselors reported spikes in their business; "COVID-19 is taking a toll on relationships and creating a boom for divorce lawyers, couples therapists and even debt counsellors who are helping newly single clients chart a path forward through the pandemic."¹⁰ At this time, StatsCan data does not indicate an actual peak in divorces; however, updated data will reflect on whether the family court system was able to process divorces at pre-pandemic levels and/or catch up on delayed divorces from 2020.

Blurring of Boundaries Between Work and Family Time

The final element to consider when examining the increase in family

mental health concerns is the blurred boundary between family time and work time. Caregivers for seniors were impacted, with older relatives being more vulnerable and more isolated than others. Caregivers felt enormous pressure to support seniors but, at the same time, the infection rate among seniors was very high. This led to stress from aiding senior relatives, keeping them safe and fulfilling work responsibilities.

Caregiving for children became a 24/7 job as schools closed and parents faced virtual learning. Employees often reported that helping with their children's virtual education was the most stressful part of the pandemic. The resultant increase in accountabilities and role confusion meant boundaries between work and family became blurred, causing many to feel they were working constantly. Most people did not feel equipped to have the demands of their caregiving roles expand while adapting to working remotely.

This has led to a world-record rate of burnout. Research published by the University of Toronto’s Neighbourhood Change and the *Toronto Star* found that families hardest hit by COVID-19 included multiple working adults and families sharing a household. These hard-hit families were not only more likely to experience COVID-19, but they were also more likely to have one or more members in an essential job working outside the home and to include multiple generations.

In a 2021 survey of 1,500 U.S. workers, more than half said they were feeling burned out due to their job demands, and a whopping 4.3 million Americans quit their jobs in December of 2020.¹¹ A Benefits Canada survey found the majority of Canadian employees were at risk of burnout and have prolonged COVID-related anxiety.¹² *Burnout*, as it is defined, is not a medical condition—it’s a manifestation of chronic unmitigated stress.¹³ The World Health Organization describes burnout as a workplace phenomenon characterized by feelings of exhaustion, cynicism and reduced efficacy. The combination of blurred boundaries, worry about the mental health of loved ones, and multiple pressures from work and home can all lead to burnout.

Gender should be considered in any exploration of COVID-19’s impact on families. “While women make up 47% of all workers in Canada, they accounted for 63% of COVID-19–related job losses during the initial lockdown and 58% one year into the pandemic.”¹⁴ Research by Policy Options Canada suggests we were ill-prepared to understand the full gender impact of the pandemic with “80% of front-line health workers being female.”¹⁵ Preexisting health inequities and vulnerabilities associated with race, ethnicity, gender, age and socioeconomic status were critical criteria to be considered in understanding the impact on Canadian families.

Next Steps

What can family members do to support loved ones who are struggling? Our loved ones may feel freer to accept their emotions and move on if they can see that we acknowledge how they’re feeling. Many employees express feelings of frustration, but it’s crucial to embrace empathy and affirmation while resisting the impulse to tell them to “try harder.” Let go of any preestablished timetable or expectations because there is no right or wrong way to manage. Recognize the symptoms, resist the need to personalize them and encourage outside support. It is critical that you receive assistance

BIO

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for yourself even if a loved one won’t get help. You alone can’t fix it. Here are actions employees can take in their communities and for their loved ones.

- Talk about mental health.
- Call for increased aid for teachers and educators.
- To reduce shame/stigma, call for and use safe and respectful language that puts the person first.
- Share your struggles, and champion others.
- Speak out on health inequities, which further stress vulnerable families.
- Get support for yourself; put on your oxygen mask (take care of yourself so you can take care of others).

How Can Employers and Plan Sponsors Help?

Many employees claim that the most essential support they need from an employer is flexibility and understanding. When managers/leaders/employers demonstrate a willingness to understand employees, it increases comfort and psychological safety. Letting employees feel heard and

understood has many positive effects. By allowing their employees some scheduling flexibility, employers can take steps to help employees deal with the many demands they face. Although flexibility can't always be provided, it does help with managing appointments or phone calls that need to be made during business hours. Employers should provide as much and as varied a support system as possible. Parents have different needs and will accept help in different ways. There may not be a one-size-fits-all solution, but adaptability and understanding are frequently crucial. Demographics and cultures must be considered when designing a comprehensive approach. Gender considerations, multi-generational families and single-parent families may face the greatest challenges.

Here are some key takeaway points for employers.

- Help employees know about and understand their benefits.
- Review and update plan design according to the needs of your employee population, ensuring adequate employee and family mental health support.
- Examine new virtual and digital tools for employees and their families.
- Get executive buy-in to prioritize mental health for all.
- Create grass-roots and diverse internal focus groups to guide the process.

- Focus on promotion, communication and prevention—Then do it again.
- Normalize the mental health conversation at work through modelling behaviour, providing resources and checking in with employees. ☺

Endnotes

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