

Employment Issues for those Living with Mental Illness

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There are many issues particular to employment of those who live with, or experience, mental illness. Please note that this is not a comprehensive listing or formal study but rather an outline to provide a sense for this area.

1. Mental Illness not Homogenous: It should be noted that mental illness comes in many forms, with many different types of diseases and disorders that vary in severity and also vary from person to person. Therefore, the following statements do not pertain to all individuals who live with or have experienced a mental illness. A person's ability to perform well in the work place certainly varies according to many factors, one of which is the nature and severity of the mental illness.

2. Mental Health vs. Mental Illness: It is also important to recognize that mental illness and mental health are not one and the same. There are people with mental illness who, with supports and treatment, live in a good state of mental health. There are also people without a diagnosed mental illness who would not be considered to be in a good state of mental health. It must be said that good mental health is not equivalent to the absence of mental illness. In some definitions, it can be said that a person is in good mental health if they have "the ability to thrive." Both the presence of mental illness and a lack of good mental health are factors in one's ability to perform in a given position.

3. Very Substantial Number of People: With one in five Canadians experiencing a diagnosed mental illness in their lifetimes, this has a huge impact on our society, including the workforce.

4. Cost to Employers: Between 75 and 79 per cent of short and long term disability claims relate to mental illness in Canada. The cost to the Canadian Economy due to mental illness in the workplace is estimated at \$33 billion. The fastest growing category of disability to Canadian employers is depression. This makes this a very serious issue to employers and more measures need to be taken to support those in the workplace experiencing mental illness.

5. Working with Serious Mental Illness: The percentage of people with serious mental illness who are unemployed is between 70 to 90 per cent but the percentage of those with serious mental illness who want to work is 80 per cent. Great potential exists to close this gap for the good of the individuals and the employers.

6. Part time work: For many people with serious mental illness, the stress of working full time is too much of a burden. It may work in the short term but be counter productive over a longer time. Yet, they may be very effective employees if able to work part time. Full time work should not be viewed as optimal for all employees.

7. **AISH:** Programs like AISH need to be more progressive in encouraging individuals with mental illness to earn more income than at present without losing AISH support. While improving in this regard in recent years, it still remains a concern and reduces the incentive to seek employment for those able to work on a less than full time basis.

8. **Privacy of Information:** There still remain circumstances where a person who has been part of a police call to deal with a mental health incident has that on record and it then shows up in employment record checks. Some improvements have been made in this recently but it remains a barrier to the person seeking employment for many positions. It may also influence the person or their family from seeking treatment for fear of such future implications.

9. **Employer and Employee Education:** Commonly held misconceptions based on a lack of knowledge about mental illness often cause employers and fellow employees to not know how to deal with a person who has been identified to have suffered from a mental illness. This not only impacts a decision on whether to hire a person but also has a very detrimental effect on supporting that person through treatment or rough periods as well as after returning to work after having had an episode of mental illness. Good programs are now available to assist employers in this regard.

10. **Stigma:** Perhaps the greatest barriers to effectively employing people with mental illness are stigma and discrimination. This impacts a person's willingness to disclose a mental illness, and therefore often not seek treatment or support. This results in conditions not being treated in a timely fashion thereby reducing the level of recovery and increasing the time required to recover. Stigma also often impacts an employer's willingness to hire somebody with a known mental illness, regardless of that person's ability to contribute. Efforts are being made nationwide to reduce stigma but there is a huge way to go before it becomes the same as dealing with a person's physical ailments.

11. **Health Benefits:** While AHS covers psychiatric services, which means people can get access to medication; there is often little availability for therapy from psychiatrists. Benefit plans need to cover private counseling, eg with psychologists, in order to provide effective treatment for many people living with mental illness.

12. **Mental Health Pervasive:** Effective management of issues relating to mental health require extensive cross-ministerial planning and cooperation as only about 30 per cent of the mental health portfolio is actually in health, as effective treatment and supports involve much more than prescribing medication. Other areas impacting effective employment of people with mental illness include: housing, justice, transportation, social and community supports, information/privacy, and communications.