

Recovery-Friendly Workplaces: Practical Recommendations for Employers, Employees and the Occupational Medicine Community

There is no health without mental health. Mental and substance-related disorders are common and frequently co-occur. In Canada, approximately one in five persons experiences a mental disorder in any given year, and with nearly 60% of the world's population engaged in work, these conditions frequently occur in every sector of the workforce. This can result in increased absenteeism, presenteeism, employee turnover, and disproportionately elevated occupational risk in safety-sensitive and decision-critical settings. The vast majority of persons with mental and/or substance-related disorders continue to work, and they spend the majority of waking hours at work. This suggests that the workplace is well-situated to contribute to improving the outcomes for persons with mental and substance-related conditions.

Work is an integral part of human life and aside from providing a means to earn a living, it also brings a sense of purpose and helps shape individual and collective well-being. Decent work is beneficial for mental health, while poor working environments may pose a risk to mental health. For persons with mental and/or substance-related conditions, there are many diverse and effective ways to promote health, i.e. prevention, early detection, and connecting with safe and effective care and treatment options.

Access to medical treatment providers has traditionally been a central component of recovery from mental and substance-related disorders. Yet, there are many additional pathways towards recovery, some of which are unique to the workplace. Each person's recovery path is unique, depending on their portfolio of positive resources or assets to facilitate recovery, or so-called "recovery capital".

Workplaces can optimize recovery capital and improve recovery in workers with mental and substance-related disorders. This is done by establishing recovery-friendly workplaces, in which employers:

1. Recognize and communicate that mental disorders are common and that no-one is immune. It can happen to the best of us.
2. Recognize that recovery is possible and more likely than not. It is achieved by supporting affected workers, optimizing recovery capital, taking steps towards prevention, early detection, facilitating access to care, and offering appropriate accommodations.
3. Adopt policies that facilitate hiring persons in recovery and optimize retention.
4. Provide education for all personnel on mental health literacy and curbing stigma against mental and substance-related disorders.
5. Leverage the unique perspectives, strengths, and skills of people in recovery to inform workplace policies and mentor coworkers.
6. Optimize and frequently communicate the availability of resources and supports.
7. Transparently declare their commitment to the spirit and intent of recovery-friendly workplace practices, both internally and publicly.

The workplace can contribute to the recovery of individuals with mental and substance-related disorders. Creating a recovery-friendly work environment where employees feel safe to seek help for their health conditions significantly decreases cost associated with lost productivity, absenteeism, employee turnover, and unnecessary disability. It decreases stigma and promotes workplace safety. Further, it contributes to workers achieving maximum medical improvement, i.e. getting well and staying well.

To establish a recovery-friendly workplace requires a conscious decision and taking steps towards a cultural shift and to optimize existing mechanisms currently in place and to adopt others not yet in place. For key stakeholders, the health, ethical, and financial imperative derived is for employers, employees, collective bargaining units, policymakers, and the occupational medical community to take all reasonable steps to optimize recovery in workers. All stand to benefit.

To establish a recovery-friendly workplaces where recovery capital is optimized:

- **Employers** should take a long-term view and start by overtly declaring themselves as recovery-friendly. They should form a planning team to lead efforts towards this goal. The team may include employees (in or on the path to recovery, as well as those not suffering from a medical condition), management, health and safety professionals, union representative, disability insurer representatives, and employee assistance programs. The team members' individual and collective experience and wisdom can be harnessed to inform recovery-friendly policies, take steps towards reducing stigma, promote peer-support networks, facilitate prevention and early detection as well as access to care, communicate recovery-friendly successes, take steps to promote related education in the workforce and management, and create a culture that recognizes, normalizes, and values recovery.
- **Employees** are encouraged to embrace and celebrate recovery as a strength in the workplace. They should respectfully advocate for the implementation of policies and procedures that foster a recovery-friendly culture. Employees in recovery, equipped with 'expertise through experience,' can assist in this transition, act as peer recovery representatives, and help with education and training.
- **Occupational Medicine Practitioners** should embrace and support a recovery focus at work. Members of the occupational medicine community should align with, and advocate for recovery-oriented practice and recovery-friendly workplaces. Further, they should assist in developing related education and training opportunities for all stakeholders, both in the workplace and the community.