



## New tool helps safeguard mental health of employees

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A new evidence-based tool for employers looking to improve mental health and safety in their workplaces was released on April 20 by the Great-West Life Centre for Mental Health in the Workplace.

Guarding Minds @ Work, developed by researchers at the Burnaby, British Columbia-based Simon Fraser University, provides employers with tools to assess the psychological well-being of their workplaces, implement changes to problem areas and evaluate their programs.

“It removes to a certain extent many of the barriers or excuses that employers have had in many cases in terms of dealing with mental health,” says Mike Schwartz, executive director of the centre and senior vice-president of group benefits at The Great-West Life Assurance Company. “It will enable them, for very little cost, to understand [if] they even have a problem, and then where’s the problem, and then how to tackle it.”

Employers who sign up begin by performing an audit and survey of their workplace, which will produce a rating based on 12 research-based psychosocial risk factors, such as organizational culture and clear leadership/expectations. “And then, depending on where you have problems, it gives a list of evidence-based actions that have been shown to have positive impacts on those problem areas,” says Schwartz.

He explains that there are, broadly, two types of workplace psychological issues that employers might face: mental illness and stress. Schwartz points out that research has shown that approximately one in five Canadians will at some point have a diagnosable mental illness. “And one way or another, these people are in the workplace in large numbers,” he says. The rate of workers experiencing stress may be even higher.

Psychological issues, says Schwartz, can affect the workplace directly by increasing absenteeism and benefits costs, but also through what is sometimes called “presenteeism,” where employees show up for work each day, but perform well below their capacity due to stress or other issues.

Schwartz adds that “it also is found that depression and high stress are significant contributors to actual workplace accidents and safety costs.”

Employers who are not convinced by the health or business cases for dealing with



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psychological health and safety in the workplace, however, may be encouraged to get on board by mounting legal requirements to do so.

“The protection of mental health is becoming an equal partner to the protection of physical health as far as the law is concerned,” says Martin Shain, director and founder of the Neighbour at Work Centre in Caledon, Ontario. Shain, who authored a soon-to-be-released review paper on the issue for the Mental Health Commission of Canada, says various provinces are beginning to enshrine in legislation “a general duty to provide a psychologically safe workplace.”

In Quebec, for example, he points to “a much expanded definition” of harassment in that province’s employment standards legislation. In Saskatchewan, on the other hand, psychological health and safety is recognized in oh&s regulations. And, says Shain, labour arbitrators, human rights tribunals and judges in civil lawsuits are all beginning to recognize similar obligations on the part of employers.

“What we’re seeing is about five different torpedoes converging on the same point,” suggests Shain, who also contributed to *Guarding Minds @ Work*.

The tool is free to use for any employer regardless of size, and is not limited to customers of Great-West Life, says Schwartz. It can be accessed at [www.guardingmindsatwork.ca](http://www.guardingmindsatwork.ca).

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