

Standards for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace

On January 16, 2013, in Toronto, The Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC), the Canadian Standards Association (CSA) and the Bureau de Normalisation du Quebec (BNQ) released ***The National Standard of Canada Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace - Prevention, promotion and guidance to staged implementation.***

If you attended this exciting release, you would have heard the federal Labour Minister Lisa Raitt state: “We are the first in the world to do this....” You may be asking yourself-the first in the world doing what? What are these new voluntary Standards? What do they mean for me? What do they mean for my employer?

What’s in the standard? (*Press Release by the MHCC, January 16, 2013)

*“The Standard provides a systematic approach to develop and sustain a psychologically healthy and safe workplace, including:

- The identification of psychological hazards in the workplace
- The assessment and control of the risks in the workplace associated with hazards that cannot be eliminated (e.g. stressors due to organizational change or reasonable job demands)
- The implementation of practices that support and promote psychological health and safety in the workplace
- The growth of a culture that promotes psychological health and safety in the workplace
- The implementation of measurement and review systems to ensure sustainability”

What’s it mean for me?

“It’s time to start thinking about mental well-being in the same way as we consider physical well-being, and the standard offers the framework needed to help make this happen in the workplace,” stated Mental Health Commission of Canada President and CEO Louise Bradley. It is hoped the new standard will help workplaces eliminate mental illness stigma. Removing stigma would allow workers with mental health problems to speak up about their illness without fear of repercussion.

What does it mean for my employer?

The standard provides employers with the necessary tools to help develop and implement policies and programs to help achieve psychologically healthy workplaces.

Along with the release of the voluntary Standard, the MHCC also provided the following facts:

- **One in five** Canadians will experience a mental health problem or illness this year
- More than **6.7 million** Canadians are living with a mental health problem or illness today
- Currently, **only 25%** of employees believe that their supervisor manages mental health issues effectively

- 500,000 Canadians miss work each day because of a mental illness, costing the Canadian economy millions of dollars every year.
- Mental health problems and illnesses are estimated to account for about 30 per cent of short- and long-term disability claims in Canada every year.
- In 2011, lost productivity due to absenteeism and presenteeism (present but less than fully productive at work) due to mental health problems and illnesses was approximately \$6 billion.

Recently I was asked several questions about this new Standard; here are my responses:

1) What do you think about the Standard?

It is a natural extension of occupational health and safety. Through awareness we have successfully reduced workplace risks to workers physical health. Similarly the voluntary Standard for Psychological Health and Safety helps workplaces to develop and continuously improve psychologically safe and healthy work environments for their employees.

2) Why is one needed?

A psychologically healthy workplace helps keep workers safe, engaged and productive. A framework was required to guide organizations towards this in an effective and efficient manner. The Standard process brought together experts from many sectors and disciplines to develop this framework and now it is available to all Canadian organizations at no cost.

3) What it could mean for a workplace?

- Enhanced cost effectiveness (*decreased sick leave/LTD benefits*)
- Improved risk management (*decrease risk of legal and or regulatory sanctions*)
- Increased organizational recruitment and retention (*being an employer who can demonstrate caring and concern for its employees is paramount in the competition for talent. Work/life balance is something employees are looking for, so having programs that actually demonstrate these qualities is key*)
- Corporate social responsibility (*it is the right thing to do*)

4) What actions might one take to support it now?

Look at what your organization is already doing. You may be surprised to find you are already on your way. Build an action team of champions for the Standard and take the next step. This might include providing your employees with mental health and mental illness awareness, and preparing your management through training with skills and capacities for interpersonal competence in your workplace. At the University of Waterloo, we have already begun offering our employees education about mental health, and we are continuing to develop programs to equip our managers with necessary tools and skills to support this initiative.

5) Why should organizations support it?

Workplace psychological health issues are prevalent, pervasive, and costly. It is not just good for employees, it is good for business.

6) What does it mean for the University of Waterloo?

The University of Waterloo is known as Canada's innovation university, so we are very excited to be an early adopter of the new standards for Psychological Health and Safety. Adopting best practices and encouraging an open and supportive mental health environment will continue to be the approach at Waterloo. These standards will enable a strong foundation for university faculty, staff and students to function at their best and engage fully in their academic pursuits.

Like many organizations, we began this journey years ago with initiatives, such as our annual OHD staff conferences, 'brown bag lunch and learns', and employee seminars. The standard will provide us with a framework to guide further improvement.

Our researchers at the University of Waterloo are tackling some of the biggest problems facing the world such as aging and energy. Our goal at Waterloo is to attract the best and the brightest from around the world to help achieve our research agendas. Offering work/life balance is something perspective employees are looking for so having programs that actually demonstrate these qualities are strategic.

What can I expect in the future?

Waterloo's team of champions will be working together to provide more information about mental health (i.e. education sessions). We will be looking for collaboration and consultation with employees who are willing to work towards implementation practices. This may include identifying best practices, looking at the assessment, and control of any risks in the workplace which are associated with hazards that cannot be eliminated (e.g. stressors due to organizational change or reasonable job demands), designing the implementation of practices that support and promote psychological health and safety in the workplace, creating guidelines that contribute to the continued growth of a culture that promotes psychological health and safety in the workplace, and helping to develop an implementation process of measurement and review systems which will ensure sustainability.