

The SALVEO Study

Improving mental health in the workplace

SALVEO is one of the largest studies on mental health conducted to date in Canada. It considers individual and organizational factors that contribute to the emergence of three main problems – depression, burnout and psychological distress. A better understanding of these factors can improve prevention in the workplace and answer some key questions:

- What factors contribute to the onset of major mental health disorders?
- What is the impact of factors external to the workplace, as opposed to occupational factors?
- How can employers help control mental health disorders and reduce the human and financial impact in their organization?
- How can you take specific action to deal with workplace specific factors?
- What are the most effective management practices to promote a healthy work environment?

Employers do not control all factors determining mental health

For many Canadians, the workplace stimulates self-development and self-realization. It is an environment that contributes to personal well-being and nurtures healthy self-esteem and work/life balance.

The workplace, however, is often seen as a source of substantial stress; one that contributes to the incidence of mental health disorders, such as psychological distress, depression and burnout. Mental health problems affect nearly a quarter of Canadian workers. Adults at the beginning and at the peak of their careers are the most severely affected by them.

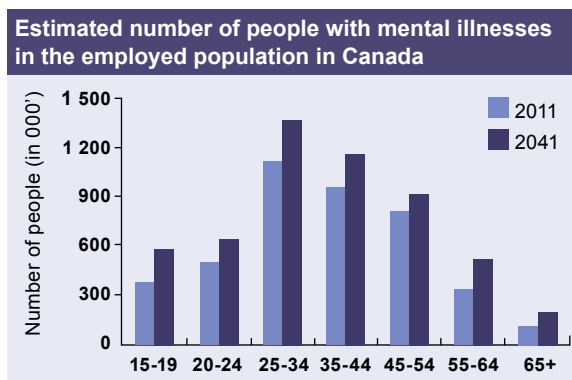
It is standard practice for employers to try and limit the incidence of mental health problems among employees. Preventive measures may include a review of management practices and the implementation of a health and wellness program.

How can we distinguish between the impact of determining factors employers can control (management policies, support program, workload) and the impact of factors beyond their control (family life, personal problems, individual traits)?

The SALVEO Study recently conducted with the support of Standard Life provides some answers. It highlights the importance of distinguishing between the triggering factors specific to certain mental health disorders. When used in conjunction with a precise diagnosis, research findings can help maximize the impact of health and wellness programs on employees' health by focusing efforts and resources that respond to the most urgent problems in the workplace.

A substantial and increasing economic burden

The 2011 report of the Mental Health Commission of Canada, “Making the Case for Investing in Mental Health in Canada”, states that 21.4% of the working population (aged from 20 to 64 years) suffers from a mental health disorder or mental illness. The Commission estimates lost productivity due to absenteeism, presenteeism and staff turnover costs Canadian businesses approximately \$6.3 billion annually. Over the next 30 years, the Commission conservatively forecasts an overall cost to the Canadian economy of \$2.5 trillion.



Source : Investing in Mental Health in Canada

A new enlightening study

The SALVEO Study conducted by professors Alain Marchand and Pierre Durand of the School of Industrial Relations at the Université de Montréal, working in collaboration with researchers at Concordia University and the Université Laval, identifies some of the triggering factors for major mental health disorders. Research findings help determine in a precise manner the role of individual and organizational factors in the incidence of these disorders.

This comprehensive research – the most important to date in Canada – provided an opportunity for researchers to address a series of factors that potentially lead to the development of psychological distress, depression or burnout.

The research will be used to develop new early screening tools for mental health problems in the workplace.

About the SALVEO Study

Funded in part by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research and the Fonds de recherche du Québec – Santé, the SALVEO Study was completed with the support of Standard Life Canada. Standard Life facilitated the selection of participating businesses and organizations through its network of clients and partners. Standard Life employees also participated in the study. Researchers questioned more than 2,100 employees from 63 companies and organizations.

Researchers were interested in validating the assumption that the effects of personal and professional problems cannot be considered separately when evaluating the mental health of individuals. The study addressed a variety of factors, including work organization, family and workplace relations, individual traits, such as self-esteem, and other potential risk factors, such as chronic diseases and alcohol consumption.

Using a questionnaire with nearly 300 questions, the study helped determine and compare some of the factors specific to the incidence of psychological distress, depression or burnout.

The research methodology is significant because survey results from the self-reporting questionnaires were matched with biological indicators, including a measure of the cortisol level. Cortisol is a hormone found in saliva and recognized as an indicator of an individual's level of stress. For the study, samples were taken on two work days and on one rest day from 401 of the 2,162 participating employees. Five individual samples were taken at regular intervals on these days.

The empirical data collected helped validate the relevance of the questionnaires in the identification of the mental health disorders being examined. This had never been done before in the workplace.

Facts and figures

- Two years collecting data
- 2,162 surveyed workers
- 63 different workplaces
- 401 sample subjects for saliva tests
- More than 6,000 saliva samples analyzed
- 65 management practices compared

Psychological distress

- Underlies the incidence of more serious mental health problems
- Anxiety, irritability and some temporary cognitive impairments
- Measure: Score of 3 or more on the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12)

Depression

- A clinically identified illness
- Major loss of interest or enjoyment, periods of major sadness and feelings of hopelessness
- Measure: Score of 20 or more on the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI-21)

Burnout

- Appears slowly and subtly
- Emotional fatigue, depersonalization or cynicism, and loss of effectiveness at work
- Measure: Score of 4 or more on the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBIS-16)

Some factors contribute to the risk, others are part of the solution

The SALVEO Study indicates that mental health disorders, even those associated with the workplace, such as burnout, do not necessarily originate only in the workplace.

Even if psychological distress, depression and burnout are partly linked to the workplace, where their effects (absenteeism and presenteeism) are the most visible, several individual factors are also linked to the incidence of these problems.

In the following tables, the areas in green indicate criteria protecting against the surveyed disorders, the areas in red identify the factors leading to an incidence of disorder and the areas in white reflect survey factors for which researchers could not find any statistically significant effect.

Organizational factors

Factors	Distress	Depression	Burnout
Task design			
Use of skills			
Decision-making authority			
Demands			
Physical demands			
Psychological demands			
Number of working hours			
Irregular work schedule			
Social relationships			
Support of peers			
Support of supervisors			
Abusive supervision			
Aggressive behaviours			
Harassment			
Rewards			
Recognition			
Career opportunities			
Employment insecurity			

Individual factors

Factors	Distress	Depression	Burnout
Living as a couple			
Presence of young children			
Family income			
Marital stress			
Parental stress			
Family/employment conflicts			
Employment/family conflicts			
External support in the workplace			
Being a woman			
Age			
Chronic health problems			
Alcohol consumption			
Tobacco			
Physical activities			
Self-esteem			
Internal control centre			
Childhood-related stressing events			

One of the most significant factors leading to burnout, psychological distress or depression lies in work/life balance. Researchers separately addressed factors relating to the impact of family life on the workplace and those relating to the impact of the workplace on family life. A worker whose family life infringes upon his or her employment, for example, tends to be better protected against burnout. But the opposite occurs when employment infringes on family and personal life. It proved to be a determining factor in all three mental health problems surveyed.

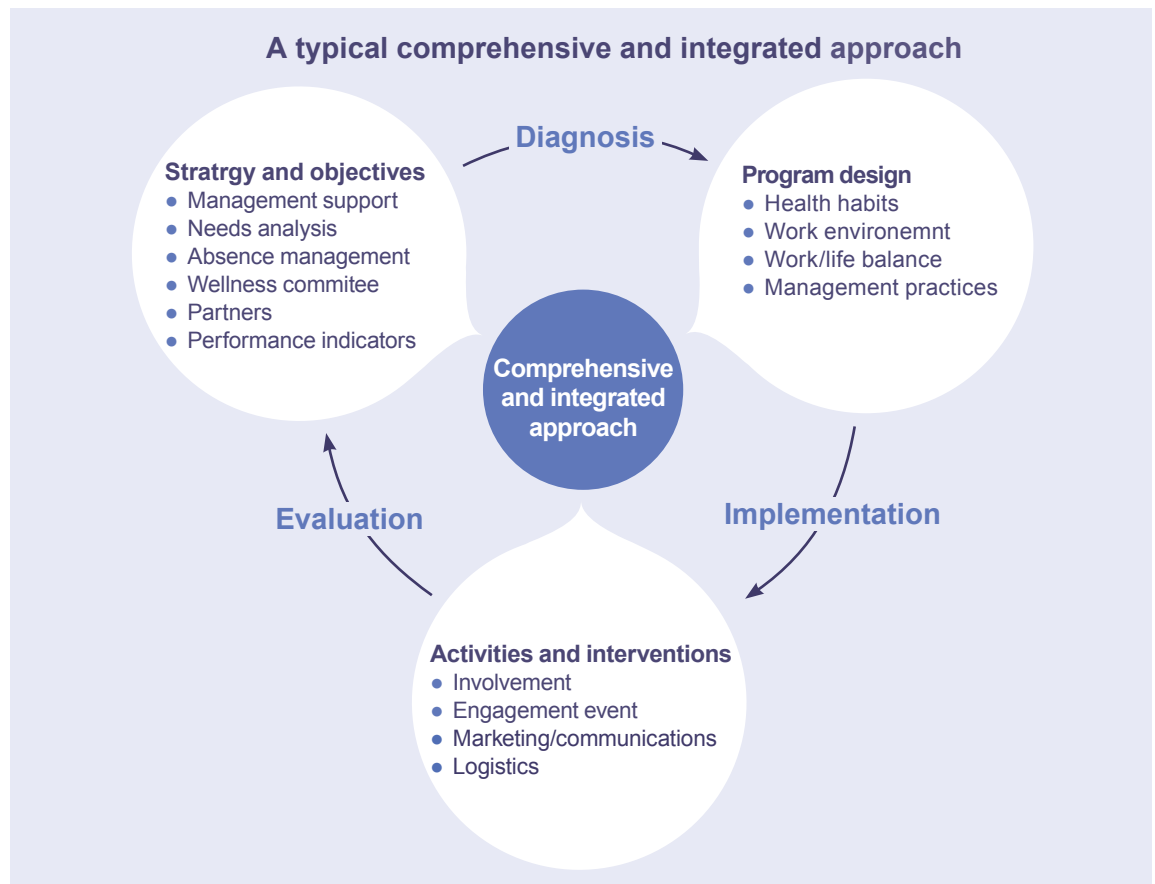
Research findings also indicated that management practices must be targeted to prevent abusive supervision. Significantly, it was identified as a trigger for burnout, depression and psychological distress.

Employers must correctly identify mental health problems specific to their organizations, such as an abnormally high level of depression. By doing so, they can focus preventive actions on the underlying factors that impact the incidence of these problems.

Problem-solving through a comprehensive and integrated approach

Although some factors originate from outside the workplace, organizations can have a positive impact on the psychological health assessment of their employees. They can do this by rolling out preventive measures, such as a health and wellness program. A comprehensive and integrated approach to health and wellness promotes real change through concrete measures. In addition to promoting a healthy work environment, it can have a positive effect on business results by:

- Reducing the incidence of absenteeism, presenteeism and disability
- Contributing to productivity increase
- Helping control the cost of healthcare and group insurance plans
- Attracting and retaining highly qualified employees.



It's unrealistic to think there is a universal recipe for addressing the issue of mental health in the workplace. A successful health and wellness program is based on an approach that is:

- **Comprehensive and integrated.** The program must be an integral part of an organization's culture and account for existing programs, such as those dealing with absence management or employee assistance. Links must be established between all programs.
- **Targeted.** It is critical to determine in a precise manner the physical and psychological problems of employees in order to implement actions that will have optimal impact.
- **Measurable.** It is important to be able to evaluate the effects of quantitative and qualitative actions.

Improving mental health in the workplace: it's possible!

Stress is not new to workers' life. Its effects on the incidence of mental health problems have been well documented.

The research conducted by professors Marchand and Durand and their peers is significant because it uses empirical data to clearly identify factors specifically related to the incidence of mental health disorders. Some factors, for example, have more influence on the incidence of depression; others have more impact on burnout. It is now possible to target specific actions to mitigate or improve the impact of these factors on employees' psychological health.

The biological samplings that are part of the study helped demonstrate the validity of survey questionnaires as a screening tool.

Workplace prevention programs must be based on an analysis of an organization's specific needs. Programs must be supported by a comprehensive and integrated approach that considers both organizational and individual factors.

Standard Life experts can help

Health and wellness experts at Standard Life support companies wishing to develop or improve their health and wellness programs. As a first step, they assess an existing situation through a detailed analysis of health-related problems in the workplace. They use this information to determine the company's specific needs.

The diagnostic step helps target the most prevalent health disorders to develop a tailored program to maximize preventive impact.

Health and wellness experts at Standard Life guide companies at every step in the program implementation process, from developing the strategy and defining objectives to designing a program related to the diagnosis and offering support during implementation.

Standard Life experts work closely with managers to fully understand each company's reality and to help them reach their corporate goals.

Glossary

Absenteeism	Repeated and regular non-attendance of an employee at work.
Beck Depression Inventory (BDI-21)	The BDI is a self-assessment questionnaire developed by American psychiatrist Aaron T. Beck. It is used worldwide to measure the severity of depression among patients and includes 21 multiple-choice questions.
Internal control centre	<p>Also known as the locus of control, this psychological concept was first defined by American psychologist Julian Rotter. He describes it, as “the tendency of people to consider that events affecting them derive from their actions or, on the contrary, depend on external factors beyond their control, e.g., chance, fate, others, institutions or the government.”</p> <p>Individuals who believe that their performance or fate depends mostly on themselves have a so-called internal control centre.</p>
Family-employment conflict	A combination of factors that results from family life infringing on employment (e.g., absenteeism to take care of a sick child).
Employment-family conflict	A combination of factors that results from employment infringing upon family life (e.g. weekend work or reduced vacations).
General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12)	<p>The GHQ is a self-assessment questionnaire initially published in 1970. It is used to identify psychiatric disorders and assess a prevalence of psychological distress in a population.</p> <p>Many versions of the GHQ are currently available. The GHQ-12 was developed specifically for professional environments.</p>
Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI-16)	The MBI is a tool used to assess the consequences of chronic stress, specifically as a potential triggering factor for burnout. The original version of the MBI assesses 22 factors. The questionnaire used in the SALVEO Study assesses 16 factors.
Presenteeism	The physical presence of a non-productive employee at work.

For more information

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