ABSTRACT: Factors and strategies to help occupational health nurses assist in addressing co-worker concerns and reactions for return-to-work cases where the returning employee has experienced mental health issues.

RETURN-TO-WORK
Addressing co-worker reactions when mental health is a factor

The author credits the Great-West Life Centre for Mental Health in the Workplace and Mental Health Works as the primary sources for this article. The Great-West Life Centre for Mental Health in the Workplace is dedicated to helping turn knowledge of mental health issues into cost-effective action plans for employers in Canada. Mental Health Works, an initiative of the Canadian Mental Health Association (Ontario), helps organizations to manage their duty to accommodate employees experiencing mental disabilities such as depression or anxiety in the workplace.

Any return to work should involve some level of planning and support. When mental health is a factor, the process can become more complex. Even with the concept of privacy and confidentiality, it is usual for others in the workplace to be at least partially aware of the reason for absence. If it is related to a mental illness, such as depression or anxiety, people tend to react to the myths and stereotypes of the illness with discomfort or fear.

While the employer may largely be focused on their responsibilities to accommodate the employee’s return to work, the process is much more complicated when co-workers have strong reactions to the employee who is returning. This is especially true where conflict or performance problems were an issue prior to leave.

Co-workers may be experiencing fear, anxiety or frustration if they had been involved in conflict with the employee or if their workload has been impacted by the absence or return-to-work accommodation. Even if these fears are unfounded, they still have the potential to negatively impact both the co-worker and the employee who is returning. Additionally, depending on the circumstances, co-workers may feel uncertain about how
to approach their colleague about his or her illness. If the returning employee is experiencing shame, embarrassment or fear, these feelings can make interactions with co-workers even more difficult.

While employers are becoming aware of their increasing responsibility under the law\(^1\) to protect employees against mental injury – a term referring to significant, preventable emotional distress caused by another – many lack the expertise to intervene effectively. Occupational health nurses may have the necessary expertise, but may also have limited influence or resources to act.

What follows are some of the approaches that research and practice have shown can be useful in a range of situations. You are invited to view these as a variety of possible tools and strategies from which to choose according to your role, situation, expertise and influence within the organization. Some strategies you may wish to suggest to others, such as human resources professionals. Some you may find are best when you coach or support others, such as frontline supervisors, in carrying them out. And others you will find valuable for incorporating into your existing approach.

The intention is to help address co-workers’ reactions to an employee who is experiencing mental health concerns in order to prevent mental injury and to improve workplace mental health overall.

**Assessing the situation**

The workplace’s ability to address co-worker misunderstanding, preconceived judgments or fears can be important to the employee’s successful return to work. Moreover, addressing and resolving conflict between co-workers can improve the overall health of an organization.

The three main strategies for addressing the impact of co-worker reactions are:

1) Improve awareness and understanding of mental health issues
2) Resolve conflict and address fears or concerns

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\(^1\) Shain Report on Stress at Work / Mental Injury and the Law – available from [www.mentalhealthcommission.ca](http://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca)
3) Assist employees with mental health issues to get effective support and treatment

1) Improve awareness and understanding of mental health issues

A first step might be working with management to establish workplace mental health as a priority for your organization. For assistance with this, the Mental Health Commission of Canada provides *A Leadership Framework for Advancing Workplace Mental Health*, which you can find at [www.mhccleadership.ca](http://www.mhccleadership.ca).

This resource can be useful to you in building a business case to invest resources in supporting the mental health of workers as well as educating all employees about mental health issues. Stigma and lack of awareness often prevent early identification and effective treatment and can be detrimental to a successful and sustainable return to work for employees who have experienced mental illnesses such as depression or anxiety.

Following are some strategies to help raise awareness and understanding of workplace mental health:

- **Encourage the use of Guarding Minds @ Work to broaden your team’s understanding of psychosocial safety.** This comprehensive resource includes an employee survey that was developed by research experts. It is available at no cost to help measure and address psychosocial risks in your workplace. Guarding Minds @ Work will help identify those areas that may be putting people at risk of psychological harm, and even more importantly, provide strategies to reduce this risk.

- **Include mental health in organizational health and wellness promotion.** The Canadian Mental Health Association used a slogan "No health without mental health" to indicate the connection between good mental health and physical well-being. Research has shown the connection between mental health and productivity. Resources to assist you can be found in the *Creating Healthier Workplaces* section on the Centre for Mental Health website.

- **Provide educational opportunities for all staff.** Many organizations offer increased
or enhanced mental health awareness and healthy workplace activities during Mental Health Week (in May) or Canada’s Healthy Workplace Month (in October), however educational opportunities for staff can be integrated into regular employee health and wellness programming at any time of year. There are many resources available in communities or online across Canada:

- Mental Health Works [www.mentalhealthworks.ca](http://www.mentalhealthworks.ca)
- Centre for Addiction and Mental Health [www.camh.net](http://www.camh.net)
- Canadian Mental Health Association [www.cmha.ca](http://www.cmha.ca)
- Mood Disorders Association of Ontario [www.mooddisorders.on.ca](http://www.mooddisorders.on.ca)
- The Schizophrenia Society of Ontario [www.schizophrenia.on.ca](http://www.schizophrenia.on.ca)
- Beyondblue: the national depression initiative [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)
- Depression Center [www.depressioncenter.net](http://www.depressioncenter.net)
- The Panic Center [www.paniccenter.net](http://www.paniccenter.net)

2) Resolve conflict and address fears or concerns

Addressing fear

- It is important to assess the validity of the fears. In many cases, fears are unfounded or exaggerated, but the impact on co-workers can still be serious and should not be ignored. This can be addressed through education and awareness and a plan to ensure safety.

Whether an employee has mental health issues or not, violent, threatening or harassing behaviour should never be acceptable in the workplace. Research shows that people with mental health issues are no more likely to be violent than the general population, and are significantly more likely to be victims of violence.²

- Ensure staff are aware of the protocol for advising management should any employee exhibit aggressive or other anti-social behaviour. Management should have a protocol to respond when reports are made. Examples of violence response plans can be accessed on the Centre’s website. Staff should be reassured that their

² From Canadian Mental Health Association [www.cmha.ca](http://www.cmha.ca)
safety is important and is being protected.

- If there is some degree of validity to the fears, consider safeguards or processes to alleviate or minimize the risks. As noted above, clarify that all employees have a right to a safe work environment and that there are processes in place to help ensure their safety.

**Addressing other co-worker issues**

The following briefly describes strategies for addressing some of the most complex issues related to co-workers’ responses to an employee’s return to work after a mental illness. Additional reading and resources can be found on the Centre for Mental Health website at [www.gwicentreformentalhealth.com](http://www.gwicentreformentalhealth.com).

√ **If the issue is conflict** between co-workers and the employee, it is important to find out what would be reasonably necessary for the co-workers to move forward toward a healthier work relationship. There is a significant difference between deciding who is right or wrong and finding a way forward. The former often leads to people defending their positions and the latter allows each party to ‘save face’ while finding a way to leave the past hurts behind and change behaviour going forward.

√ **If the challenge is working relationships**, Mental Health Works, an initiative of the Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario recommends the following strategies be incorporated into the accommodation plan.

These strategies should be adapted, where appropriate, for both the returning employee and co-workers:

- Define what constitutes good working relationships
- Teach all employees effective communication skills
- Have regular meetings to review and address issues
- Ask for open and honest feedback in a prompt manner
- Develop clear expectations and the clear consequences for not meeting them including those related to professional behaviour
√ **If the challenge is the workplace culture.** It may be that the co-workers do not have a specific problem with the returning employee, but if the workplace environment is generally one of chronic stress, tension, chaos or anxiety, you may want to recommend a broader approach to recognizing and addressing organizational or systemic issues such as Guarding Minds @ Work which was referred to earlier in this article.

√ **If the employee’s return to work will involve accommodation that affects co-workers,** it is reasonable to include them in the discussion of the work-related tasks, e.g. if co-workers will have to take on some of the returning employee’s duties, you may wish to involve them in how they can share these duties among team members.

√ **If the issue is performance,** understand how the performance issues affected the co-workers. Consider solutions that may address these concerns. Resentment from having to take on or correct a co-worker’s work can create resentment that may be more harmful than the task itself may have been for the employee. Consider the reaction of co-workers when developing accommodation plans that will affect them. In some cases, the returning employee can provide you with insight to anticipated co-worker reaction as well as alternatives that will be better received. If it is not brought up in the conversation it can potentially result in unexpected negative consequences.

Ultimately, co-workers and the returning employee must understand that they have a duty to be professional in their working relationships and to refrain from harassment and discrimination in the workplace. Allowing these forms of behaviour for any reason has the potential of harming the mental health of those subjected to it at work. Sometimes there is a tendency to "medicalize" performance or behaviour issues. This often happens because there is a lack of skill in identifying or resolving conflict. Look for ways to support workers in resolving issues promptly, seeking assistance from outside resources where necessary.
Unfortunately, some workplaces use confidentiality as an excuse to avoid addressing these concerns. While it is necessary to respect the confidentiality of an employee’s personal medical information, this does not preclude addressing, in an appropriate manner, co-worker reactions and concerns about their colleague who is away or returning to work. This can help to reduce the risk of relapse for the employee who has experienced mental illness while it improves the workplace culture.

3) Assist employees with mental health issues to get effective support and treatment

As an occupational health professional, you will likely be aware of the returning employee’s diagnosis. You may be in the best position to consider all the issues that may affect his or her successful return to work, while complying with the organization’s duty to accommodate. In some return-to-work cases occupational health nurses have:

√ Linked the employee to self-assessment tools when the employee was unaware of their current mental health condition.

√ Advocated for the employee to access effective treatment.

√ Questioned the treating physician about the lack of improvement of condition and suggested a change in medication or referrals for complementary treatment. This may seem like overstepping boundaries, but mental illness sometimes affect a person’s ability to advocate or question for themselves. If he or she sees the lack of improvement as a personal failure, they are less likely to speak to the physician about a change in treatment plan. As someone who is familiar with both the patient and the condition, you are in a unique position to help bridge the gap between the patient’s experience and the physician’s awareness.

√ Provided the employee with information about resources available through the organization, from the benefits provider, and/or through community service providers.
Recommended Working Through It™, a video series where real people share their experiences of working through times of mental health pressures at work, off work and returning to work. This is an excellent resource for you to offer both returning employees and co-workers requiring more information about mental health issues. The section *Who can help me at work* provides video segments that touch on how the occupational health nurses bring value to the recovery and return-to-work process for employees struggling with mental health issues. The section also provides handouts that you can share with employees to help them manage their work relationships. Working Through It is available free of charge on the Centre for Mental Health website at: [www.gwlcentreformentalhealth.com/english/wti/](http://www.gwlcentreformentalhealth.com/english/wti/)

Many occupational health professionals have too much to do and too little time or resources to do it. This article is not meant to add to your stress at work, but rather to let you know that many resources are now available in the public domain that can assist you. From convincing management to address workplace mental health concerns to working with an employee experiencing a mental illness, there are valuable tools for you to access. Your unique experience, skills, knowledge and position allow you to be instrumental in improving and addressing these issues.

**Next article**

The next article in this series will look at how the occupational health nurse can coach the supervisor throughout the return-to-work and accommodation process.

*Mary Ann Baynton of Mary Ann Baynton & Associates Consulting, is the Program Director for the Great-West Life Centre for Mental Health in the Workplace, a public resource funded by The Great-West Life Assurance Company. She is also a Consultant for Mental Health Works, an award-winning initiative of the Canadian Association of Mental Health that provides training and consulting to employers. Mary Ann’s expertise is in the field of workplace mental health and includes individual return-to-work consulting, management consulting, training and awareness initiatives, as well as assessment and implementation of workplace strategies to improve mental health, morale and motivation.*
References

Great-West Life Centre for Mental Health in the Workplace: www.gwlcentreformentalhealth.com
Working Through It: www.gwlcentreformentalhealth.com/english/wti
Guarding Minds @ Work: www.guardingmindsatwork.ca
Mental Health Works: www.mentalhealthworks.ca