



The Economic Return on Corporate and Government Investments in the Mental Health of Canadians Most Evident in the Workplace

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The significance of the Great-West Life Centre for Mental Health in the Workplace – and specifically its public purposes – is reflected in these two facts:

- The bulk of mental disorders are concentrated in the labor force – among men and women in their prime working years.
- The principal agents of lost productive capacity in the 21st century workplace are depression, bipolar disorders and anxiety – a cluster of conditions.

These forms of mental illness are not only disabling but lethal. Bipolar sufferers experience a higher rate of death due to suicide and cancer. Depression increases substantially the risk of a sudden fatal heart attack even among those with no history of heart disease.

By 2020, depression and ischemic heart disease will become the leading sources of work years lost in the labor force of the world as a result of disability and premature death. Five years ago, the Roundtable estimated the economic dollar costs of mental disorders at \$33 billion a year.

A new study says that when we include addictions, the cost of mental disorders reaches that level in Ontario alone.

A few years ago, the CEO of Syncrude assessed how much treated and untreated mental disorders were costing his firm. The results were startling: about 11 million barrels of lost oil production valued at \$275 million a year.

In coming to grips with these issues, businesses have long since passed the point where simple awareness-raising gets a passing grade. We are way past that as a marker of progress.

As a result, the Roundtable's Business and Economic Plan for Mental Health and Productivity (www.mentalhealthroundtable.ca) offers employers a range of solutions to a range of problems.

The starting point for any of these solutions is leadership.

On November 14th – at the Roundtable's 2nd US/Canada Forum on Mental Health and Productivity – a new slate of leadership guidelines for CEO and public sector executives will be published.

These guidelines will pivot on this point: that leaders of large organizations must not only promote the open and full discussion, acceptance and understanding of mental illnesses uniquely focused on working men and women, they must demonstrate their own attitude on the matter.

For example, in 2008, we will encourage employers to use the Ontario Mood Disorders Association "Check Up from the Neck Up" to put early depression screening into the workplace for all employees – especially those with other chronic illnesses.

A recent study led by the world-famous Dr Ron Kessler of Harvard Medical School contained documented proof that early and effective screening for depression not only saved employers money but contributed to the bottom-line – that is, profit.

We will encourage CEOs, executives and senior managers themselves to get a "Check-up from the Neck-up" in 2008 – to set the pace. We want to see this unique health measure become the flu shot of the future and unlike the poke of a needle, the process is painless.

The fight against stigma – seen in its truer colors for what it is, discrimination – must be won in the workplace if it is to be won anywhere. A Roundtable (Ipsos-Reid) survey last year found that even open-minded Canadians can become intolerant at work.

Mental illness need not linger in the uncertain shadows of ignorance. The facts, while incomplete (more research is needed) give us a fresh and clear take on the subject.

For one thing, mental illnesses are physical conditions which pose a threat not only to mood, perspective and concentration but to the health of our heart, immune system and thyroid.

Depression, anxiety, bipolar disorders have physical properties which can alter the chemistry and cellular realities of being human. This removes the subject from the realm of character and self-absorption – and from the grip of mythology.

Chronic job stress is delivered by the excessive, relentless, pervasive flooding of hormones through the blood stream from our glands to our brain and can be unhealthy.

Top Ten List
Major Sources of Chronic Job Stress in Today's Workplace

Number 10	The treadmill syndrome. Too much to do all the time
Number 9	Random interruptions
Number 8	Ambiguity, employees not sure what's going on around them
Number 7	Mistrust and vicious office politics
Number 6	Not walking the talk. Mission statement, say hello to actual practice
Number 5	Fictional performance reviews. "You're doing great, you're fired"
Number 4	Lack of discrete, honest face to face feedback day to day
Number 3	Email overload
Number 2	Lack of control over your own job.
Number 1	Withholding material information needed to get the job done

Brain function and genetic expression influence how chronic stress affects us – but we don't know why. The mysteries of brain function and genetic expression are a challenge which unifies the interests of business and science.

We have entered a brain-based economy. One study (McKinsey) says 85% of the new jobs coming on stream in the US demand cerebral skills not manual skills – prompting a steel company CEO to remark: "The minds of my people do the heavy lifting now."

The brain-based economy puts a premium on innovation, a brain function and skill. This is an economy where employee cognition is the ignition of competitive corporate success.

The intensification of work and life is a form of climate change – social climate change – and competes for public recognition with the kind of climate change championed by Al Gore and others.

And like the so-called melting ice cap, mental health in the workplace is a hot topic today and our job is to use that heat to generate the light we need to forge a path to the cure, remission and prevention of mental illness. By doing so in the workplace, we illuminate the return on that investment in sound economic gain.