Mental Health First Aid

According to research presented by the Mental Health Commission of Canada, more than 6.7 million Canadians currently have a mental health problem and one in five Canadians will experience a mental health problem or illness this year.

At any given time, most Canadians are functioning successfully in their workplaces. One in five Canadians with mental health problems may even be working alongside co-workers, reporting to supervisors or even managing staff, most of whom are unfamiliar with their mental health status. And generally, this is how it should be. Each Canadian has the right to maintain the privacy of their personal health status in the workplace.

There are times, however, when the ability to recognize a mental health problem in another person can be as important as the ability to recognize when someone is choking. While many organizations provide their employees with an opportunity to be trained in medical first aid and CPR few currently recognize the importance of providing mental health first aid training.

Is Your Workplace Adequately Prepared to Help an Employee?

In a 2011 Conference Board of Canada survey, reported in the HR Insider article 'Managers lack training on how to manage mental health Illness', 44% of responding managers indicated they lacked training on how to recognize or address mental health issues in the workplace. The Mental Health Commission of Canada reports that only 25% of employees believe their supervisor manages mental health issues effectively.

Recently I wrote the article, 'How Well Are You Mitigating Risk In The Workplace?' In it I discussed the impact of a failure to manage stress in the workplace. A failure to manage both stress and mental health challenges in your workplace can impact productivity, employee morale and performance, result in more errors and lead to increased financial and human resources costs.

When I talk to supervisors and managers about mental health first aid, some argue that it is not their job to address mental health and that it should be left to Human Resources or Health and Safety Managers. I often hear the response "I did not sign up to be a social worker, a therapist or a shrink'. However, it is very often supervisors and managers who are in the best place to recognize the early signs and symptoms of mental health issues in the workplace and even catch them before they impact the workplace.

Opportunities for early intervention can be available in the workplace, even before an individual experiencing mental health struggles reaches out to a mental health professional for help. Supervisors and managers do not need to be social workers or therapists to act. If they are better trained to recognize the early signs of mental health they can quickly facilitate interventions and referrals.

The beauty of current mental health first aid training is that it recognizes the role and limitations of workplace intervention and does not ask that those trained become social workers or counselors anymore then those taking CPR are expected to become nurses or doctors. The role of mental health first aid is to provide opportunity for early intervention to mitigate costs down the road.

What does Mental First Aid training offer?

Mental Health First Aid will help equip your organization to:

- Recognize and understand the symptoms of mental health problems including those related to issues of substance abuse
- Lay the groundwork to prevent mental health problems from developing into a more serious state
- Promote the recovery of good mental health by helping understand how to accommodate employees in distress and recovering from a crisis
- Increase productivity and reduce absenteeism and overall pressure on benefits

Potential benefits to your organization from Mental Health First Aid Training

Evidence has shown that individuals who complete the 12-hour basic course gain the following benefits:

1. Significantly greater skills in effectively identifying of the most common mental health illnesses
2. Decreased social distance from people with mental health illness, which can provide additional benefits to individuals with mental health illnesses
3. Increased confidence in providing help to others
4. Demonstrated increase in generally helpful actions in the workplace

If anyone close to you has struggled with mental health problems, you are aware of how much their quality of life can be diminished. When we recognize and provide support to an individual with a mental health problem, we can impact the quality of that person’s life. When we do this at work we can improve that individual’s performance in the workplace, which, in turn, benefits the organization.

If you are interested in learning more about mental health first aid training please contact me at robin@megahealth.ca or visit www.megahealth.ca