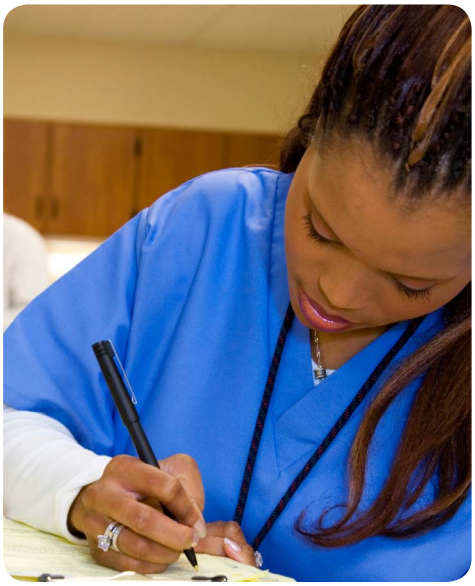
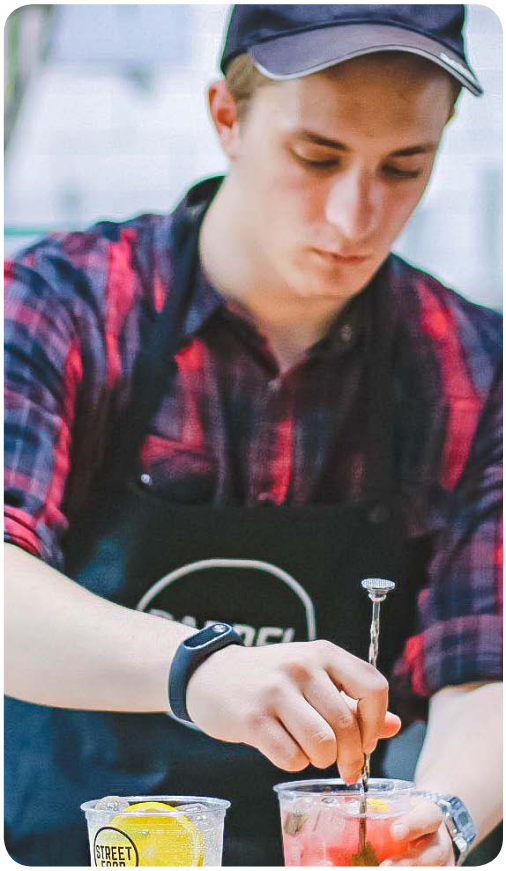
An evidence-informed guide to supporting people with depression in the workplace





Institute for Work & Health
Research Excellence Advancing Employee Health

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About this guide

Depression is a mental health condition. According to the Canadian Standard Association (CSA)'s Standard Z1003, Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace, mental health is a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.

While depression in the workplace is an extensive burden for all involved, information gaps related to implementation may prevent employers from making investments to reduce its impact. To help address these gaps, we have drawn upon the **best research evidence** and integrated it with both **practitioner expertise** and **stakeholder values and preferences**. This helps bridge the **research-to-practice and research-to-policy gaps** that currently exist for depression-related disability management programs.

Who should use this guide?

The guide was designed to be used by anyone in the workplace who supports workers with depression to cope with their depression symptoms while working, or to return to work following an episode of depression. Users may include: individuals with depression, managers, co-workers, human resources (HR) staff, union representatives and worker representatives. The content of this guide is applicable to the entire workplace regardless of sector or role.

What is the content in this guide based on?

This guide is based on an evidence-based approach to informed decision-making. At the Institute for Work & Health (IWH), we consider three sources of evidence that contribute to informed decision-making:

1. the best available research evidence;
2. practitioner (e.g. clinician) expertise; and
3. stakeholder (e.g. worker) experiences, including their values, expectations and preferences.

This guide is based on a synthesis of data collected from each of these three sources.

More specifically, this guide is informed by the results of several IWH systematic literature reviews on effective workplace approaches to support return-to-work, stay-at-work and recovery for workers experiencing depression in the workplace.

It also draws from the results of an online survey, participant interviews and focus groups that collected data on practitioner expertise and stakeholder experiences with managing depression in the workplace. These experiences were collected from Canadian workers, worker representatives, supervisors/managers, human resources staff and occupational health and safety (OHS) practitioners based primarily in British Columbia and Ontario.

How to use this guide

This guide consists of three main sections: workplace culture, workplace processes, and workplace and non-workplace resources. Each covers different aspects of supporting individuals with depression in the workplace, and offers actionable messages for a range of workplace audiences.

We have used audience icons (see right) next to actionable messages to highlight the audience(s) for which messages are most relevant. However, please use any information that you consider relevant to your situation.

LEGEND

= Worker

= Manager

= Co-Worker

= Union/Worker Reps

= Human Resources

Throughout the guide, you will also find implementation tips (see example, right). These point to important pieces of advice to consider when addressing mental health in the workplace. They are often practical and easy to implement.

HR

Implementation tip: Make sure to think through what programs you may already have in place to raise awareness, and whether they resonate in the context of your workplace.

Each of the three main sections includes case studies that illustrate practical and easy-to-implement actions that you can consider adapting to your own situation.

As this guide is meant to inspire action, we have included pages near the end of the guide on which you can add your own notes about workplace policies and/or resources available in your community.

Workplace culture

Mental health awareness and psychological risk factors

A common theme emerging from all sources of evidence for this guide is the importance of various workplace factors and their impact on the mental health of workers.

Awareness of mental health in the workplace can empower workers to speak up and ask for help as needed. In contrast, negative workplace factors may worsen workers' experiences of depression. Stigma is another pervasive issue that may affect depression in the workplace.

Please refer to the Canadian Standard Association (CSA)'s Standard Z1003, Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace for more information: http://shop.csa.ca/en/canada/occupational-health-and-safety-management/cancsa-z1003-13bnq-9700-8032013/invt/z10032013)

The following content was developed for voluntary use. Ensure you are aware of standards, legislation and regulations in your jurisdiction.

- Remain aware that workplace risk factors such as high stress, high demand coupled with low control, conflict, poor scheduling or staffing policies may cause or worsen depression symptoms.

- Be mindful that workplace-related exposure to trauma, such as witnessing death, violence or other trauma, may also negatively affect mental health if no ongoing support and resources for coping are available or offered.

- Speak to your workplace about what supports/services may be available to help mitigate the effects of workplace-related risk factors or workplace-related exposure to trauma.

- Check your workplace's policies regarding staffing, scheduling and more to understand and note what is available to you.

- Have genuine and caring conversations with your workers so that they feel comfortable approaching you if workplace factors are affecting their mental health.

- Be mindful of how you discuss mental wellness and mental health conditions, and ensure you are not contributing to a culture of stigma around depression. Your actions set examples for others working with you.

- If your workplace is one in which workers are at a higher risk of being exposed to trauma (e.g. witnessing deaths, violence, drug abuse, etc.), ensure systems are in place to debrief and support your team as needed.

- Ensure efforts to increase awareness about depression and other mental health conditions are genuine. They will have great impact if they are.

- Implementation tip: Make sure to think through what programs you may already have in place to raise awareness, and whether they resonate in the context of your workplace.

- Remember that stigma can be difficult to address, but there is power in communication and in having open discussions about mental health and wellness.

Case Study: A supportive manager

Sharmeen works as a security guard in the psychiatric ward of a large hospital. In her work, Sharmeen has had to restrain violent patients. She has also witnessed several opioid overdose deaths.

Sharmeen's manager, Ben, has formalized a debriefing process in which all members of his team gather for a short meeting at the end of the week to discuss incidents and share their insights from these experiences.

At the end of each meeting, Ben emphasizes the importance of mental wellness and repeats the message that the workplace is committed to supporting his team as needed following exposures to trauma.

Ben also makes sure to be available for additional one-on-one discussions if any member of the team would prefer to talk privately.

Sharmeen has a history of depression, which Ben is aware of, so she sometimes takes him up on his offer of a one-on-one chat. In those chats, Sharmeen sometimes talks through a particularly difficult situation, or works with Ben to identify resources to help her process traumatic experiences.

Thanks to Ben's efforts to make mental health a priority for his workers, Sharmeen is never afraid to ask for help or support when she needs it.

Genuine and caring communication

Genuine and caring communication leads to workers feeling listened to, heard and supported by the workplace. This type of communication includes active and reflective listening, as well as expressing empathy and support, and it happens throughout a worker's time at the workplace.

Worker

- You don't need to disclose specifics in order for your manager to engage in genuine and caring communication with you. For example, you might request a meeting with your manager to discuss how the workplace can best support you in fulfilling your job duties while you attend to your health needs, and use the meeting to plan for flexible scheduling around medical appointments.

Worker

- Implementation tip: If you're concerned about privacy, focusing on what you need to stay at work and do your job is a good way to frame conversations.

Union Manager

- Establish relationships in which genuine and caring communication is the norm. This type of communication can make a positive difference for workers experiencing depression.

Manager

- If you have concerns about your ability to communicate effectively, ask your HR department about the resources and training that may be available to help you feel more comfortable in having difficult conversations.

Manager

- Implementation tip: Do not wait until a worker is taking time off work or returning to work to express genuine care for their well-being in the workplace.

Union Manager

- Implementation tip: It takes courage to engage in genuine and caring communication in the workplace. Make sure you are receiving the support you need to do so, either via your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or through training programs.

HR

- Ensure managers are well equipped to have difficult conversations while balancing privacy concerns. Managers who are concerned about protecting workers' privacy may be deterred from offering support and engaging in caring communication.

HR

- Implementation tip: Empathy training and workshops may be helpful for your workers.

Case Study: A motivating conversation

Ting's manager, Charlene, had been noticing that Ting was not herself lately. She seemed withdrawn and distracted, and was not taking part in team meetings.

Charlene approached Ting, and told her she had noticed these behaviours. She asked Ting if there was anything she could do to help Ting if she needed it.

Ting had always been a private person, but she appreciated Charlene's concern. She was surprised to learn that her change in behaviour had been noticed by others. She told Charlene she was going through some personal issues, and that she had not known it was affecting her work until now. She thanked Charlene for her concern.

Although Ting did not wish to receive any further support from her workplace, the conversation motivated her to seek out treatment for her depression.

Mental health training

Training can help foster a positive workplace culture around mental health. It can also better equip the workplace to support workers experiencing depression. Many options are available when it comes to selecting a training program, and we encourage you to research and note these options. Factors to consider when selecting the best training program for your workplace are content, delivery method and applicability to your workplace.

- Training can help foster a positive workplace culture around mental health, as well as help reduce stigma around depression. If you are aware of training programs in your community, it may be helpful to bring them to the attention of your managers or HR department.

- Training may be available to help you identify workers who may be exhibiting signs of depression, as well as help you have conversations with them. Consider spending some time finding and staying aware of such training opportunities.

- Training programs can address a wide range of topics, including mental health awareness, stigma, identification of depression, supporting workers with depression, having difficult conversations and more. As a starting point for selecting a training program, consider which topic areas will benefit your workplace most.

- When choosing a training program, consider the training method and format that will best suit your workplace.

Union Manager HR

- Implementation tip: If your workplace structure is not conducive to hosting in-person workshops, online webinars or modules may be a favourable option.

Union Manager HR

- Beyond offering training, reinforcing and facilitating the uptake of training content is important to the success of training efforts. Make sure that training content is relevant and applicable to your workplace's unique needs.

Case Study: A training program that fits

Gilles, the HR manager for a group of early childhood educators, had been thinking for a while about offering mental health awareness training to his workers.

Gilles was aware of a few factors that could limit the success of the training. For example, his workers were scattered across different sites in the city and, as a result, were not able to participate in in-person workshops during working hours. Additionally, much of his workers' administrative time was dedicated to documentation and paperwork, so he was worried about adding yet another demand on their time.

However, Gilles felt strongly about offering training on this topic, and he persisted in researching options.

Eventually, he found an online training program consisting of a series of interactive modules, which could be completed by workers during their regular administrative hours over the course of a few weeks as time allowed.

Gilles also made sure to check that the content of the training was relevant to the early childhood education context, and that his workers would feel represented by the training examples.

Workplace processes

Identification and early intervention

Depression is an episodic condition. Symptoms can come and go, and they are not always easy to identify. The workplace can play an important role in helping workers identify their depression and access early support.

Worker

- If you have a history of depression and the quality of your work is decreasing, or if you are having performance-related issues and a hard time focusing at work, this could indicate you are approaching or currently in an episode of depression.

Worker

- Seeking help early is recommended, especially in light of long wait times to see specialists. Start accessing supports and joining wait lists as soon as you notice signs of depression.

Manager

- Performance issues can be linked to depression. Keep this in mind when approaching workers about their performance, and always offer support.

Union Manager

- Implementation tip: You don't need to mention the words 'depression' or 'mental health.' Simply stating that you are there to support the worker if they need help is a good start.

Co-worker Union Manager

- Behaviour changes such as being withdrawn, participating in team activities less often and/or having difficulties focusing may indicate that a worker is experiencing depression.

- Implementation tip: If someone at work doesn't seem like their usual self, checking in with them and asking if they need support may be helpful.

- Strive to remain aware and informed of supports, services and resources available in your workplace and in your community. That way, if a worker approaches you about their depression, you will have the information to help them access support as early as possible.

Case Study: A supportive co-worker

Rob is the charge nurse for a team of seven nurses. He loves his job, but the stress of his responsibilities, coupled with the experience of losing patients and witnessing the effects of their illnesses, sometimes taxed his mental wellness, especially since he has a history of depression.

Andrei, a member of Rob's team of nurses, started noticing that Rob had become a little quiet lately, and that he wasn't checking in with the team as often as he used to. Although Rob was his supervisor and the one who usually reached out to offer debriefing and support, Andrei wondered whether it would be okay for him to approach Rob and ask if everything was okay.

Andrei toyed with the idea for a little while, and ended up deciding it couldn't hurt as long as he didn't come across as prying. One day, after a particularly trying shift, he approached Rob and mentioned the recent loss of a patient, which had been particularly upsetting for the team.

Andrei used this to segue into further conversation with Rob, letting him know that the team appreciated his support, and that they were there for him in return.

Rob thanked Andrei for his thoughtfulness. The conversation made Rob realize just how depleted he had been feeling over the past few weeks, and Andrei's gentle offer of support motivated Rob to invest in his mental health more intentionally. He decided to start clearing some time for a walk outside during the day, during which time he could also listen to his favorite heavy metal bands—two of his foolproof coping mechanisms.

Planning and facilitating return-to-work

If a worker has to leave work for health-related issues, it is important to actively plan and facilitate their return-to-work (RTW) process. This involves a structured yet flexible process, with clearly defined roles and responsibilities for everyone involved. The RTW process is more likely to be successful if genuine and caring communication is already the norm when the worker goes off work, and if this type of communication continues while they are off work—including caring, respectful check-ins and messages of support.

- An individualized, gradual RTW plan may aid in a successful return. Consider accommodation needs and job duties, and think creatively about how to help resolve conflicting demands.

- Ongoing communication with the workplace is crucial to a successful RTW plan.

- The RTW process may not be linear. Identifying changing circumstances and discussing these with your workplace to find new solutions as required is important to support continued recovery and performance at work.

- Co-workers may wonder why a person is off work, or have questions about a gradual RTW or any modified duties. Because you need to respect the worker's privacy, consider how you can inform co-workers of any accommodations, modified hours or modified duties, without going into detail as to why these are needed.

- If a co-worker is returning to work after being off for a period of time, you don't need to know the reasons for the absence in order to welcome the person back. Simply saying "welcome back" with a smile may help.

- Consider holding a pre-RTW meeting to develop and outline a return-to-work plan that everyone is comfortable with. This meeting may involve the worker, direct manager/supervisor, HR staff, and any other involved parties (e.g. worker or union representative, disability case manager).

- Ongoing communication is crucial to a successful RTW plan. During the pre-RTW meeting, make sure to outline steps for follow up on the RTW process. Collaboratively decide on the frequency for check-ins well into the future, and determine who will be responsible for initiating these check-ins.

- Individualized, gradual RTW plans are reported to be more successful than inflexible ones. Consider the worker's unique needs and job duties, and think creatively about how best to negotiate any conflicting demands.

- A successful RTW plan is adaptable to the worker's changing needs over time. Do not consider a RTW plan to be 'finalized.' Stay open to adapting the plan as needed as time goes on.

Case Study: The RTW planning meeting

Ruth went off work eight months ago. When she left, she told her supervisor, Maria, and the HR manager, Francis, that she needed time off due to her depression, confirmed in a note from her doctor.

While Ruth was off work, her supervisor Maria called her once a month. Maria asked how she was feeling and if there was anything the workplace could do to help. Maria also assured Ruth that her job would be waiting for her when she was ready to return.

Recently, Ruth had been feeling better, and thinking she might be ready to go back to work. She wasn't sure, but she wanted to try. She lets Maria know.

Maria organizes a pre-RTW meeting to be attended by Ruth, Francis from HR, and herself. The agenda, which she shares with all attendees prior to the meeting, includes creating a RTW plan based on Ruth's needs and her doctor's recommendations, outlining a process for follow-up over the next six months, and outlining roles and responsibilities for all involved.

Maria also has an idea: to pair Ruth with another worker, Jeanne, who had successfully returned to work years ago after experiencing severe post-partum depression. Jeanne had previously expressed interest in mentoring other workers with mental health conditions. Maria plans to propose this idea to Ruth during her next phone call. If Ruth is amenable to it, Jeanne will be invited to the last 10 minutes of the pre-RTW meeting to start welcoming Ruth back to work.

Workplace and non-workplace resources

Employee Assistance Programs

Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), sometimes called Employee & Family Assistance Programs (EFAPs), are usually fully paid for by the employer. They are designed to serve workers as a well-being resource, supporting them through everyday issues and concerns. EAP services are usually available to the worker, as well as the worker's spouse and/or dependants, if applicable.

Worker

- EAP counselling services, often limited to six or eight sessions, may be helpful. You may consider accessing these services if you are on a wait list to see a psychologist or psychiatrist.

Worker

- EAPs and their services are confidential. They will not share your information with workplaces.

Manager

- EAPs are not only useful for workers. Your workplace EAP may also offer mental health training and advice for managers.

Manager HR

- Offering a high-quality EAP that includes free counselling services to your workers can be beneficial, especially for those on a wait list to see a specialist.

Manager HR

- Implementation tip: Regular reminders about the EAP and its services can be helpful for workers who may have forgotten about them.

- Make sure all workers are aware of your workplace's EAP and the services it offers

- Implementation tip: Employees may be concerned about their privacy if they use an EAP. Make sure to be clear that EAP services are confidential.

Case Study: The EAP reminder

Ravi was recently diagnosed with depression by his family doctor, who prescribed medication and referred Ravi to a psychiatrist. Ravi hoped to continue working, but the medication wasn't working and he was worried that his depression symptoms would get worse during the three-month wait to see a psychiatrist. He feared this would force him to go off work.

Ravi had been told about his workplace's EAP during his orientation five years ago when he first joined the company. However, the EAP as a potential resource did not cross his mind after his diagnosis. He had so many things to worry about.

Luckily, Nora, the HR manager, was diligent in regularly reminding workers about the EAP and its services through emails, articles in the workplace newsletter, and notices posted on bulletin boards throughout the workplace.

One such notice on the lunch room bulletin board caught Ravi's eye. He contacted the EAP and was able to get six free counselling sessions. This gave him some relief while he remained on the wait list until it was his turn to see the psychiatrist.

Non-workplace resources

Non-workplace resources include any supports, services or programs offered independently from the workplace. These include those offered by rehabilitation professionals, physicians/mental health providers, family members, community organizations, etc.

Worker

- Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), especially if work-focused, can help you remain at work or return to work when experiencing depression.

Worker

- The wait lists to see specialists such as psychologists and psychiatrists may be long.

Worker

- Implementation tip: While you wait, consider attending drop-in programs or community support groups, or using your workplace EAP's counselling services.

Union Manager HR

- Be aware of the resources available in your community so that you let workers know about potential support options, if needed.

Union Manager HR

- Be patient with workers who do not seem to be making progress because they may be on a long wait list. Accessing specialized services may take up to a year or longer in some areas.

HR

- Implementation tip: It may be helpful to send out information to all workers regarding available supports in your community.

- Seeing a specialist can be expensive. Consider your workplace's health benefits program and whether its mental health allowance is proportionate to the cost of treatment, and whether the services are grouped together in a way that allows for flexibility of use.

- The shortage of specialists may lead to workers being scheduled for appointments during working hours. Consider flexible scheduling or creative accommodations to allow workers to attend appointments.

Case Study: A flexible work schedule

Julian was diagnosed with depression in his teen years, and he knew what worked for him in terms of treatment: a monthly therapy session and medication.

One winter, he started experiencing a particularly severe episode of depression and realized he needed to modify his treatment accordingly. He asked to see his psychologist weekly rather than monthly.

Julian approached his HR manager, Aasim, and asked if he could not be scheduled to work shifts on Tuesday mornings for the next few months. He explained that he had a recurring health-related appointment every week during that time.

While it took some coordination with other team members, Aasim was able to ensure that Julian's Tuesday morning shifts would be covered. Thanks to the workplace's generous allowance for psychologist visits, Julian was able to adjust his treatments and stay at work while attending to his depression symptoms.

Notes: Workplace policies

Please use this space to note relevant workplace policies that may affect the experience of depression in your workplace. These may include policies around staffing, scheduling, leave options, RTW processes and more.

Notes: Workplace and community resources

Please use this space to note resources both in your workplace and in your surrounding community that are available to help workers with depression. These may include training programs, community mental health programs, EAPs, support groups and more.

Acknowledgements

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