

Mental Wellness in the Workplace

A Playbook for SMEs

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused Ontarians to experience a prolonged period of uncertainty and change. Households, schools, childcare centres, and businesses have had to adjust. While the vast majority of small businessesⁱ believed investing in mental health was important in 2020, few firms were taking action. This paradox is termed the “mental health action gap.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In 2020, **88%** of small businesses believed spending on employee health and wellbeing was a good investment. However, only **49%** of small businesses said they had a strategy.ⁱⁱⁱ

What is causing this gap? Mental health can be an intimidating and challenging topic for employers to address. Yet, undiagnosed, and unrecognized mental health issues raise human capital, business, and financial consequences for employers. As the pandemic brought mental wellness to the forefront, the Ontario Chamber of Commerce (OCC) partnered with Sun Life to develop this *Playbook for SMEs*.

Given the limited resources available to most small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and the disproportionate impact the pandemic had on these employers,^{iv} we identify practical tips and a range of tools, including free resources, small businesses can leverage to address the mental health action gap, help employees reach their full potential, and reap the benefits associated with a psychologically healthy and safe workplace.

- i The OCC’s Business Confidence Survey (BCS) defined a small business as an organization with one to 99 employees.
- ii In 2016, the OCC’s BCS was conducted between October 25 and November 30, 2016, with 733 respondents across Ontario. While 78% of small businesses agreed investing in employee health and wellbeing was a good investment, only 35% of respondents reported having a formal strategy.
- iii The 2021 BCS was conducted between October 8 and November 3, 2020, with 873 respondents across the province.
- iv These challenges include reduced revenue, poor liquidity, disrupted supply chains, inflexible fixed costs, increased need for technology, and navigating emergency government supports. For more information, see Catrina Kronfii. 2020. *Small Business, Big Impact*. Ontario Chamber of Commerce: <https://occ.ca/wp-content/uploads/SME-Report-June22.pdf>.



Re-Cap of What We Heard From Businesses and Experts

In May 2021, the OCC and Sun Life hosted two virtual roundtable consultations. This section summarizes some of the key learnings that emerged for SMEs from these consultations.

Leaders play an important role in supporting employees' mental health. Most Canadians are reluctant to admit they are experiencing a mental illness due to fears of being judged. When leaders are honest about their experiences, it helps reduce the stigma and inspires employees to seek support.

Workplace culture and non-stigmatizing language are critical. Culture encompasses an organization's values and beliefs. A negative workplace culture can cause negative health outcomes and poor productivity. A health-focused culture improves employee wellbeing and leads to higher job satisfaction and retention. The use of safe, respectful, and inclusive language is key to a psychologically healthy and safe workplace.

Communication and two-way dialogue are key during times of uncertainty. Uncertainty about how long the pandemic will continue can cause anxiety. Employers should listen with empathy and acknowledge the situation may be causing unease. Communicating organizational plans can quell concerns.

Mental health and equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) strategies should be interconnected. For individuals facing discrimination in daily life, like LGBTQ2S+ and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color employees, the workplace can be a source of stress and poor mental health. Employers must embed EDI in every part of their workplace mental health strategy.

There is no one-size-fits all solution and collaboration is needed. Where possible, SMEs should offer a variety of supports that span the continuum of mental health – from prevention to early intervention to recovery – so employees can choose what works for them and their families. New strategies and supports should be produced in consultation with employees to ensure they are relevant.

Good mental wellness benefits pay off. This includes more engaged employees; reduced absenteeism, presenteeism, and drug and disability claims; and better productivity and health outcomes. These benefits can also attract talent as workers increasingly seek employers who take mental health seriously.

Mental health resources exist, but greater awareness is needed. Few Canadians are making use of free government resources and those available through their employer. Since a lack of awareness is a key barrier, a communications strategy is needed to increase uptake.

Practical Steps to Help Employers Address the Mental Health Action Gap

As outlined below, supporting employees' mental health centres on five elements. The following table provides suggestions SMEs can adapt to their unique workplace, resources to help you get started, and commemorative dates to promote mental wellness throughout the year.

1. Develop a comprehensive mental health strategy

- ❑ **Develop a mental health strategy** that is linked to your EDI strategy.
- ❑ **Measure baseline workforce mental health** through qualitative (e.g., regular pulse checks and surveys) and quantitative measures (e.g., absenteeism, presenteeism, short- and long-term disability, etc.).
- ❑ **Set specific performance targets based on baseline data** and the unique needs of your organization and employees.
- ❑ **Monitor progress** to assess whether intended outcomes were achieved and what steps are needed to improve psychological health and safety.
- ❑ [Template](#) and [tips](#) to prepare an effective mental health strategy
- ❑ [Tips](#) for setting performance measures

2. Build a psychologically healthy and safe workplace culture

- ❑ **Invest in mental health training** to ensure leaders can recognize distress and support employees.
- ❑ **Pay attention to the quality of social connections** and consider team building options (that adhere to public health guidelines) to foster camaraderie.
- ❑ **Encourage employees to practice self-care** that includes daily relaxation to decrease stress and healthy habits (e.g., adequate sleep, exercise, etc.).
- ❑ **Consider small gestures of appreciation** (e.g., a gift card or simple “thank you”), which can impact someone’s day.
- ❑ **Consider building a mental health committee** or peer support program.
- ❑ [Training videos](#) for managers
- ❑ Mental health first aid [training](#)
- ❑ [Guide](#) to building a mental health committee

3. Communicate widely, regularly, and effectively

- ☐ **Encourage leaders to model open and authentic communication about their mental health challenges** – to reduce stigma and encourage employees to seek support.
- ☐ **Create spaces for conversation between leaders and employees** to share how they feel, check-in with one another, and build a sense of community.
- ☐ **Repeat key messages throughout the year** to create lasting cultural change and using various formats (e.g., team meetings, posters, etc.)

- ☐ [Glossary](#) to help employers discuss mental health and [tips](#) to discuss performance and mental health
- ☐ [Information](#) on stigmatizing versus inclusive language
- ☐ [Tips](#) for communicating organizational health plans

4. Ensure adequate resources and supports for employees and their families

- ☐ **Ensure supports are varied, visible, and accessible** – in-person and virtually.
- ☐ **Invest in leaders' wellbeing** so they can provide support to employees.
- ☐ **Support employees along the full continuum of mental health** – from prevention to early intervention to recovery.
- ☐ **Review your company's health plan with your benefits administrator** to examine what supports you currently provide and what could be added.
- ☐ **Develop a plan to support employees returning to work after a mental health-related absence** (e.g., communicate expectations, provide continued mental health supports, etc.).
- ☐ **Promote Employee (and Family) Assistance Programs and free government resources** to improve awareness.

- ☐ [Understanding](#) the duty to accommodate, a [guide](#) for employers, and [examples of accommodations](#) to support employees
- ☐ Free government resources include [BounceBack](#), [MindBeacon](#), [WellCan](#), and [Wellness Together Canada](#)

5. Prepare for hybrid work (if applicable)

- ☐ **Consider what steps need to be taken for a hybrid work environment** (e.g., providing employees with workspace items, etc.).
- ☐ **Plan for early and regular check-ins** to provide employees with clarity on expectations and plans, thereby alleviating anxiety.

- ☐ [Toolkit](#) to help employers with return to in-person work

Commemorative Dates

Bell Let's Talk Day	January 28
Psychology Month	February
Pink Shirt Day	Last Wednesday in February
Mental Health Awareness Week	First full week of May
Self-Care Day	July 24
World Suicide Prevention Day	September 10
Healthy Workplace Month	October
Mental Health Awareness Month	October
National Disability Employment Awareness Month	October
Mental Illness Awareness Week	October 2 to 8
World Mental Health Day	October 10

For additional information and resources, read our [*Mental Wellness in the Workplace: A Playbook for Employers.*](#)

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