

THE PERFORMERS

✕ CANADA'S INFLUENTIAL THOUGHT LEADERS ✕

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MARIE-HÉLÈNE PELLETIER

MBA, PhD, RPsych

Director Workplace Mental Health, Group Benefits, Sun Life Financial



WHAT ARE YOU READING?

My personal reading tends to be French novels. Right now I'm reading Mãn by Kim Thúy. Another one I like is The Elegance of the Hedgehog by Muriel Barbery.



WHAT DO YOU DO TO UNWIND AFTER A BUSY DAY?

I actually try to be mindful of this throughout the whole day. After exercising in the morning, I make sure I connect with people during the day. Sometimes this is just a quick chat at the water cooler, but over a three-month period I make sure to have a few lunches with colleagues and friends. Evening is family time.



WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE PLACE FOR A BUSINESS LUNCH?

Miku in Vancouver. It incorporates French and Italian cuisine into Japanese dishes. It's a high-energy atmosphere with a highly respected workplace culture.

What led you to focus your practice as a psychologist on workplace mental health?

In my early days of practice I was part of an employee family assistance program. About 90% of the people who came to me would never have consulted a psychologist in private practice. They came because it was a service offered and coordinated by their employer. I realized this was a wonderful opportunity for employees, and it alerted me to the tremendous reach available through the workplace. Not only to connect with many individuals, but also to apply the principles of psychological health in the workplace, where adults spend so much of their time. We can bring tangible results for both the employee and the employer. This is very fertile territory.

Just how serious is mental health in the workplace?

As the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health states, 500,000 Canadians are absent from work every day due to mental health issues. According to the Mental Health Commission of Canada, Canadian businesses lose \$20 million a year due to mental health related disability, absence and productivity losses. The impact is substantial. When people are struggling, work environment is often either a positive or a negative factor – one way or the other, it is significant.

Generally speaking, how psychologically healthy are Canadian workplaces today?

It's difficult to give a percentage, but we know that awareness is growing and overall we are doing more, such as mental health training for managers and increasing mental health literacy in the workplace. Significantly, the 2013 Sun Life-Buffett National Wellness Survey of employers tells us that, among all health

issues, Canadian organizations are most concerned about employees' mental health.

What misconceptions do you regularly need to dispel?

As cited by the Mental Health Commission of Canada, it's a fact that one in five Canadians suffers from a mental health issue every year, but normal human biases lead us to believe that none of us will be that "one." It creates a dichotomy in that most people think you're healthy or you're not healthy. That's not the case. Mental health is a continuum, and it's important that five out of five Canadians take action. Second, there's a misconception that self care, or taking time to look after yourself, is for people who are "weak" or "sensitive." As a result many people work, work because they think they're "strong enough." The reality is that we're all human. We all need to balance the supply and demand of our energy. Finally, people tend to think that if they enjoy their work, they will be okay even if they are working all the time. That's not true. People do burn out from positive events and positive demands.

What major trends or issues are contributing to psychological health in the workplace?

We would not be where we are today without the work of the Mental Health Commission of Canada, including its *National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace*, released in January 2013. Organizations are also more aware of the costs of mental health issues in terms of absenteeism, turnover and disability. And then there is the legal imperative. Changes in labour law and occupational health and safety, as well as recent human rights decisions, are

contributing to everyone paying attention to psychological health and safety. We're also seeing more of a systems approach, and by that I mean more collaboration between employees, employers, health professionals and insurance carriers. The organizations that are able to do that are experiencing the most success.

How has your role evolved?

My background in psychology and business come together more regularly now. When helping to address workplace mental health issues we're dealing with complex interactions of a number of variables including physical and mental health, workplace issues, business indicators, and time required for changes to take place. Overall, employers are much more informed and have a wider perspective, so we're having a business conversation about psychological health and safety. My approach now focuses on solutions that are even richer and more tailored to each organization, for better results both for employees' health and the organization.

What can employers with psychologically healthy and safe workplaces look forward to?

For those employers, we're starting to get good data, such as that of the American Psychological Association Psychologically Healthy Work Program, that show a clear decrease in turnover. Fewer employees report chronic work stress, fewer of them intend to seek employment elsewhere and more are recommending their employer as a good place to work. These translate into increased productivity and organizational performance.