



On the cover

Learning how to manage stress and anxiety during the ongoing pandemic helps us all take better care of ourselves.

Mental health during COVID-19

By Marnie Douglas

Tools and resources to help employers' and employees' mental health and well-being have become invaluable during the pandemic. Here are some that could make a difference in your workplace.

When the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic in March 2020, thoughts quickly went to how to stay physically healthy and avoid contracting the virus. The impacts on mental health weren't immediately clear.

More than a year later, as the COVID-19 pandemic continues, recent reports show mental health is a major concern for Canadians. According to Morneau Shepell's Mental Health Index, which reports on the mental health status of employed adults amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, our psychological health risk score was lower in January and February 2021 than at the start of the pandemic, reflecting a decline in mental health among Canadians. And people are feeling more isolated now than in April 2020. Employers are seeing increased "COVID fatigue": anxiety, exhaustion, and stress in the face of continued public health orders and necessary measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Addressing this fatigue is critical, and minding one's mental health has become just as important as protecting physical health. Stress and burnout during the pandemic have significantly impacted workers, regardless of the industry they work in or whether they work remotely or on site.

Fact finding

The need for employers to have access to tools and factual, reliable information to help them navigate psychological health and safety in the workplace has become clear as the pandemic has progressed.

The BC Municipal Safety Association (BCMSA), a non-profit organization that works to improve worker health and safety in all industries across the province, heard about this need from its members early in the pandemic.

"When the pandemic hit, we felt there was an increase in mental health stresses, and as the pandemic has gone on, that's become even more evident," explains Mike Roberts, executive director with the BCMSA. "We saw the need fairly early on for resources, so we reached out to members to find what people were looking for."

From those working remotely, the BCMSA heard that the divide between work and home was no longer so clear-cut. Says Roberts, "Suddenly, the weight of childcare, school, aging parents, and isolation was compounding, and there was less of an ability to separate home and work."

Others were facing the challenges of implementing new safety protocols and COVID-19 safety plans at their workplaces. "We heard that a typical workday no longer existed because nothing about our lives during COVID-19 was typical anymore," says Roberts.

Through the feedback the BCMSA received, Roberts and his team identified some key areas where industry was looking for guidance. First and foremost were tools and resources for how to cope with the psychological impact of this sudden shift to a new normal.

Tools at the ready

With this in mind, the BCMSA developed a psychological support tool kit, available for free on its website (bcmsa.ca) to workers and employers province-wide. It includes a five-part virtual summit featuring industry experts discussing and making recommendations on topics identified by members as areas of concern. The first four summit videos contain information on identifying psychological impacts and needs during COVID-19; understanding substance use and impacts during COVID-19; communicating effectively with people experiencing psychological distress; and responding to employees' psychological needs as a manager. The fifth video is an industry leaders panel. There's also an online discussion forum where participants can network, exchange ideas, and ask questions of both peers and industry experts.

In addition, the tool kit offers screening tools, checklists, and tip sheets with information to help employees and employers detect deteriorating mental health, look for help, and build up personal coping strategies.

Roberts's goal with the tool kit was to connect with 1,500 workers across B.C. The result?

"Since we launched, we have connected with 32,000 employees and employers province-wide. The response has been phenomenal," he says. In addition, 2,500 people across 16 industries have registered to view the virtual summit video series, and the tool kit's downloadable content has been downloaded more than 2,500 times.



Tool kit an ‘invaluable resource’

Rob Ingraham is the manager of corporate occupational health and safety with the Capital Regional District (CRD) in Victoria. Ingraham completed the tool kit training through the BCMSA. He’s found it an “invaluable resource” and has made the tool kit available to all managers and employees at the CRD.

“I use it almost every day in some form,” he says. “Everybody is dealing with COVID differently. People have a range of coping skills, and anxiety comes in waves. Some are managing well and others are really struggling. This resource is helpful for anyone, regardless of where they are at.”

Ingraham believes using the tool kit has helped managers be more empathetic to COVID fatigue and understanding of what others may be going through during the pandemic. They are better equipped to respond to employees’ concerns and to recognize that performance issues and changes in productivity could be connected to stress caused by the pandemic.

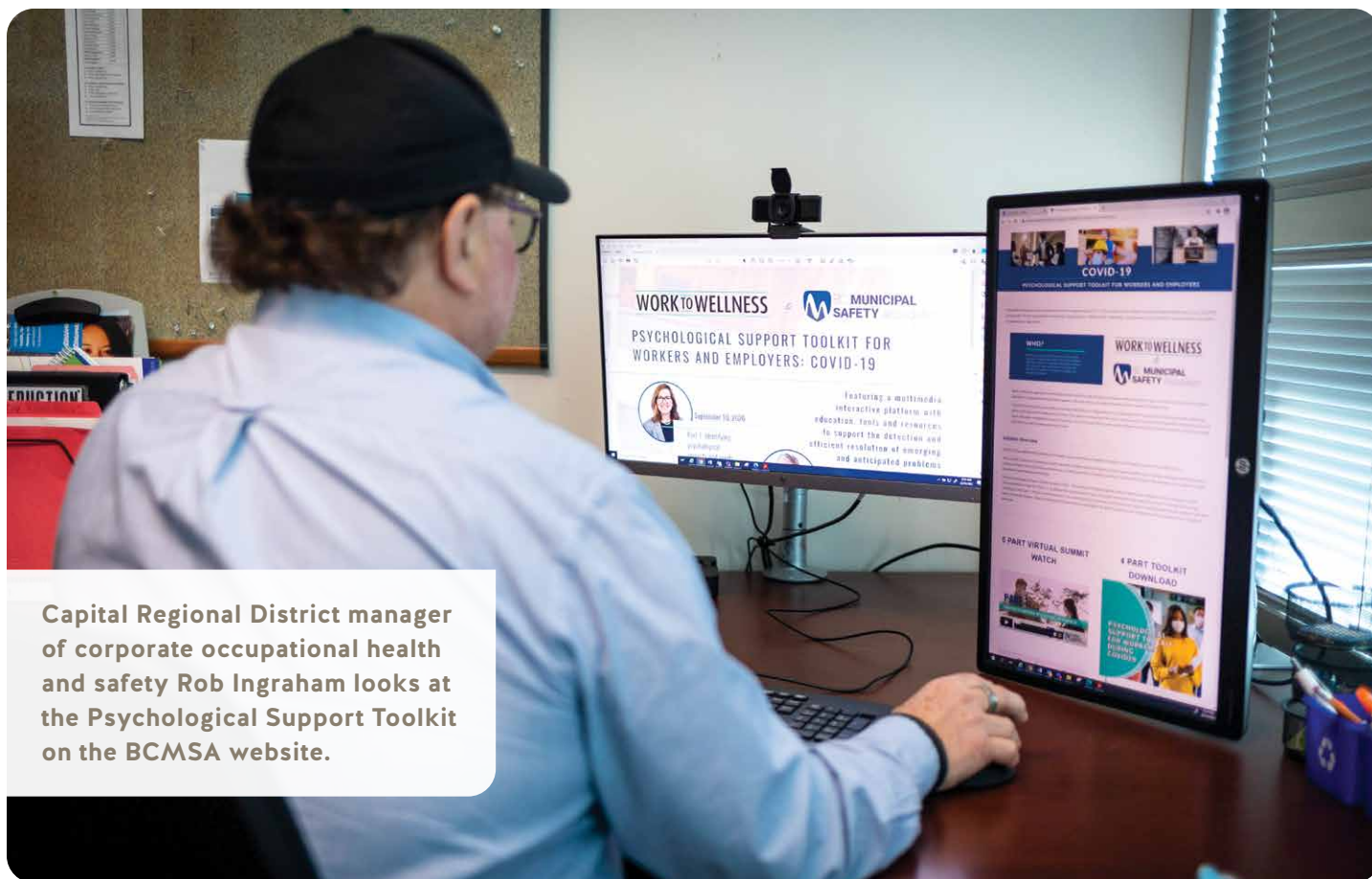
It’s especially important for managers to provide clear and factual information that is also easy to understand, he says.

“There’s a lot of misinformation out there that can foster fear and confusion. This tool kit provided us with credible information to share, and I’m confident because it’s been vetted by the BC Centre for Disease Control and the BCMSA,” he adds.

Guides for employees and employers

WorkSafeBC also recently released two resources to help address the mental health effects of COVID-19 in the workplace — a guide for employers and a guide for employees. Learning how to manage stress and anxiety during the ongoing pandemic helps us all take better care of ourselves, support the people we work with, and be more productive in our jobs, explains Amenda Kumar, an occupational health and safety consultant in Prevention Programs and Performance at WorkSafeBC.

“The focus in the workers guide is on what can they do to manage stress and anxiety, how to educate themselves on the unknown, and how to manage and set boundaries around what information they seek out,” says Kumar. “The downside of having access to so much information is that overload can take a toll on mental health.”



Capital Regional District manager of corporate occupational health and safety Rob Ingraham looks at the Psychological Support Toolkit on the BCMSA website.

Key for employees, she says, is practising self-care strategies, which can help one regain a sense of control during times of stress. Some simple tips include the following:

- Be conscious of your physical health, prioritizing regular exercise, a balanced diet, and adequate sleep.
- Practise stress-reduction activities such as mindfulness and deep breathing.
- If you're working at home with a full house, find a quiet and private space.
- Maintain social connections, whether by phone or virtually.

The guide for employers explains how the pandemic can impact mental health, suggests ways to support mental health in the workplace, and even offers tips on how to talk to employees about the subject.

“One of the best ways to reduce fear and anxiety with your employees is to have a conversation with them about how they're doing,” Kumar says. “Make the time, be an active listener, and don't downplay how someone might be feeling.”

As an employer, it's important to provide consistent communication, encourage open and supportive dialogue, and, when possible, share good news with your employees.

Trudi Rondou, senior manager, Prevention Programs and Performance at WorkSafeBC, says, “It's been a year of changes and shifting public health orders, and people may not realize how it affects them. With these resources, we wanted to provide practical tools.” The goal is for “employees to understand what they can do to take of themselves and recognize the stress that COVID-19 has caused” and for employers to learn “what they can do to help employees as we all navigate these very challenging times.”

Often, people don't believe there's a preventive aspect to mental health — but Rondou believes that developing coping skills during less stressful times helps prevent the more difficult times from having significant psychological impact. She adds that continued attention is needed as the pandemic moves through different phases.

New initiative supports mental health

Kira Berntson, manager, Prevention Field Services at WorkSafeBC, says understanding and addressing risks to psychological health is integral to workplace safety. “Physical and psychological safety go hand in hand as part of overall workplace safety,” she says.

As mental health is recognized as a key health and safety issue affecting industries across the province, Berntson points to WorkSafeBC’s High Risk Strategies and Industry Initiatives now including a Psychological Safety Initiative. The Psychological Safety Initiative was developed to support the management of psychological risks in the workplace that contribute to injuries or illnesses. The goal of the initiative is to increase awareness and improve psychological health and safety in workplaces across B.C.

Mental health resources

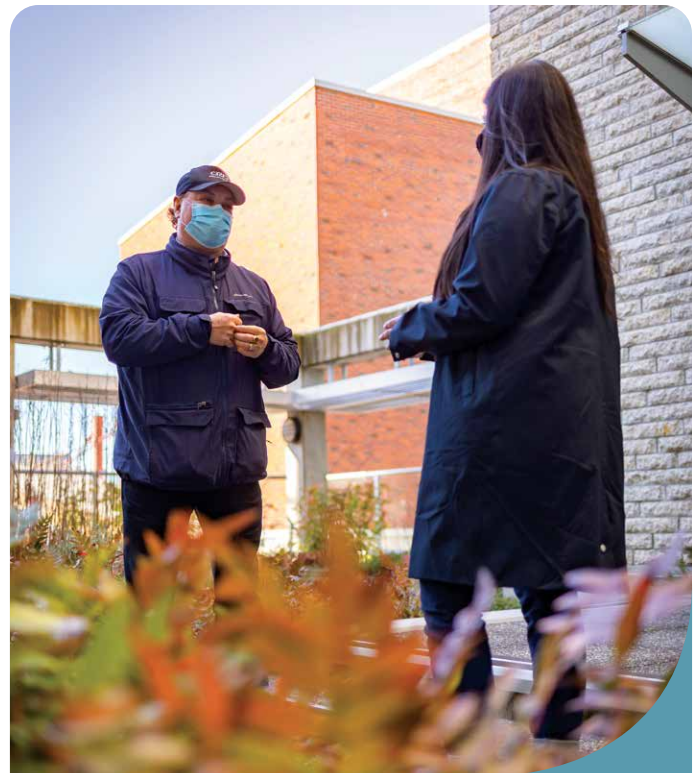
To access the BC Municipal Safety Association’s COVID-19 Psychological Support Toolkit for Workers and Employers, visit bcmsa.ca.

You can find our resources on mental health and COVID-19 by searching “COVID-19 mental health” on worksafebc.com, including the employer and employee guides discussed in this article: [Managing the mental health effects of COVID-19 in the workplace: A guide for employers](#) and [Addressing the mental health effects of COVID-19 in the workplace: A guide for workers](#).

For more information on the 2021–2023 [Psychological Safety Initiative](#), search “psychological safety” on worksafebc.com.

If you need urgent help

If you are experiencing a mental health emergency, call 911 or go to your nearest hospital. You can also call the [Crisis Intervention and Suicide Prevention Centre of BC](#) to talk with a trained volunteer at 1.800.784.2433. Help is always available. ☺



It's important for employers to keep lines of communication open during the pandemic.

The advertisement is a vertical graphic. The top half shows a welder in red pants and a green shirt working, with bright sparks flying. The bottom half shows two workers in white hard hats and yellow safety vests looking at a blueprint. The background is a mix of green and black geometric shapes.

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