



Supporting Mental Health in First Responders:

Co-Worker Support in Stay at Work/Return to Work

SaskFirstRespondersMentalHealth.ca

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Introduction

When an employee has been off work due to a mental health condition, co-worker support can mean the difference between a successful and unsuccessful return to work. Co-workers and their attitudes are a key component of an employee successfully reintegrating into the workplace. Supervisors (or line managers) play key roles in building this co-worker support as they manage the occupational relationship between the employee and the employee's co-workers.

While much of this support depends on pre-existing relationships between the employee and their co-workers, as well as the overall workplace culture and attitudes towards mental health, there are some tips that supervisors can follow when an employee is experiencing a mental health condition. It's important that this is considered a key job task for supervisors and is given the attention it deserves.

Workplace accommodations and workload

The goal of workplace accommodations is to help employees who have a disability remain productive at work. An accommodation plan must address the specific workplace issues that impact the employee's ability to perform the job. This may involve assigning some of the employee's regular duties to co-workers. Keep in mind, though, assigning extra work can have a negative impact on co-workers; it may cause resentment and even lead to them experiencing mental stress themselves. One way to mitigate the negative effects is to spread the additional workload among as many co-workers as possible so no one individual carries too much of this responsibility. It's also important that co-workers are only reassigned duties for a limited time, as it can be mentally and physically taxing, diminishing their goodwill towards the returning employee.

Clear communication

It's important to communicate clearly with the co-workers of an employee who is off — within the bounds of confidentiality and adhering to organizational processes. Identify what parts of the accommodations co-workers need to know and which parts must remain confidential. Co-workers should be made aware of how long the employee is expected to be off work, given notice when that employee is returning to the workplace, be informed about the employee's work limitations if it will affect the work of the co-workers, and understand what the workplace accommodations involve if it affects their work. This is also a good opportunity to remind co-workers of the organization's mental health policies and processes, how accommodations are developed and why, and to emphasize that the organization is committed to supporting the mental health of all staff in the organization.

Listening and caring

It's important to have an open and collaborative communication style that encourages co-workers to communicate their needs and concerns with the supervisor. Make sure co-workers are aware that they can approach the supervisor with these issues, and provide opportunities and an environment for co-workers to feel safe to communicate these.

Addressing stigmatization and negative talk

Occasionally, some co-workers may have a negative attitude toward workplace accommodations or even mental health conditions as a whole. It's important to speak positively about the process and about the opportunities this affords the employee and the organization. The supervisor can emphasize the organization's commitment to mental health and provide information on how early reintegration into the workplace is a key part of the recovery process.

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