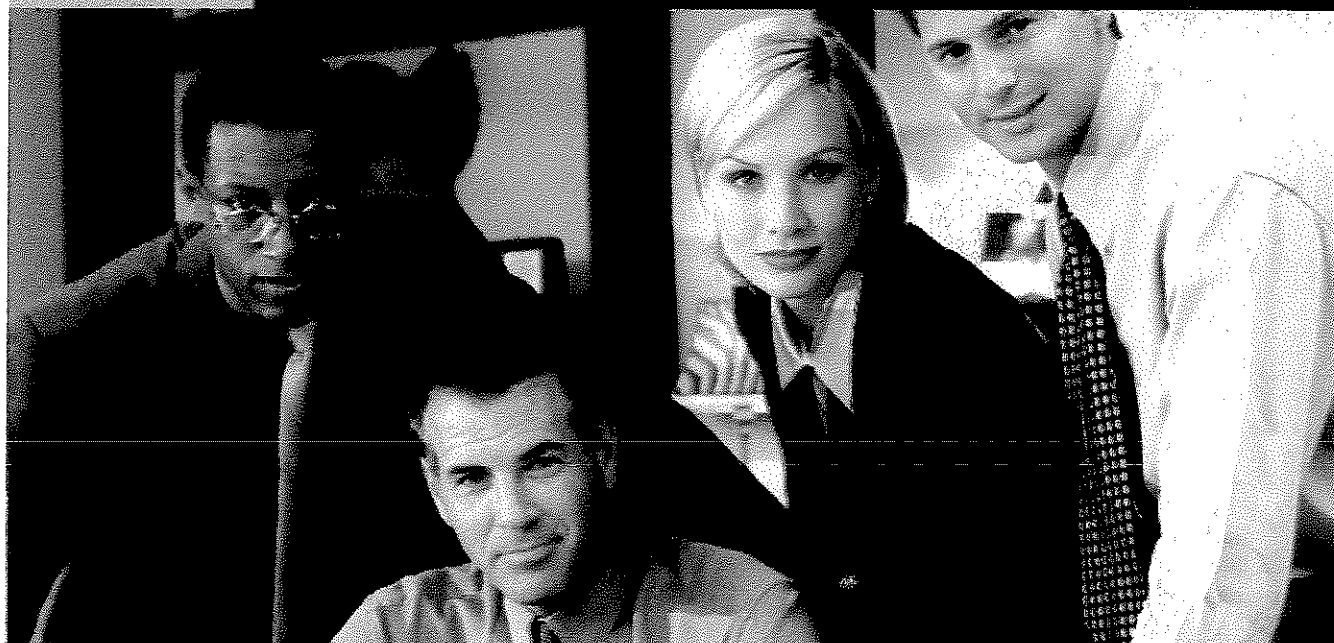




A Tool for Managers



What You Need to Know  
About Mental Health

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# What You Need to Know About Mental Health A Tool for Managers

**Y**ears ago, mental health was something that people didn't talk about. Now, through the work of many individuals and organizations, our comfort in talking about and dealing with mental health problems is increasing.

Mental health issues are a growing concern for society and the workplace. Recognizing the signs and helping people get early treatment is crucial. Too often, mental health problems lead to absent employees or employees who are present but not fully functioning.

As a manager, how you set the stage in the workplace matters to employees' physical and mental health. This tool has been developed to help you learn more about mental health issues. It provides information and advice on preventing and recognizing mental health problems, getting



employees the help they need, planning for an employee's return to work after an absence and creating a welcoming workplace.

There are many resources available to you on the Internet and directly, by seeking professional help. This tool does not suggest that you diagnose mental health problems. Rather, it is meant to build your understanding of mental health issues.

## SOME FACTS ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

When we think of “poor mental health,” we often think of mental illnesses such as bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. The truth is that the term refers to these problems but also to many more. It often includes problems such as burnout, stress and lack of balance, which can lead to more serious problems.

### DID YOU KNOW?

- One in five Canadians will personally experience a mental illness in his or her lifetime.<sup>1</sup>
- Mental illness affects all of us, whether it is directly or through a family member, friend or co-worker.<sup>2</sup>
- Mental illness does not discriminate—it affects people of all cultures, educational levels, incomes and ages.<sup>3</sup>
- Mental illness leads to lost productivity and health-care expenditures, costing the Canadian economy at least \$14.4 billion per year.<sup>4</sup>

## MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS

### POOR MENTAL HEALTH COSTS EMPLOYERS

- *Lost productivity*—Productivity loss can result from absenteeism and “presenteeism” (when an employee is present at work but functions at less than full capacity).<sup>5</sup>

### “I’d Rather Say That I Had a Heart Attack”

Why would someone want to hide the fact that they are experiencing a mental health problem? The answer is simple. People with mental health problems are far too often stigmatized.

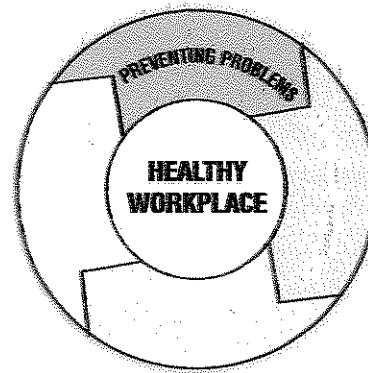
The word “stigma” is an ancient Greek term that once referred to the prick marks that people would inflict upon their slaves to demonstrate ownership. Today, it refers to the invisible prick mark that symbolizes society’s discomfort with mental health issues.<sup>1</sup> The stigma associated with mental health problems can often result in stereotyping, fear, embarrassment, anger, avoidance and discrimination.

The best tool to combat the effects of stigma is education. Knowledge helps people to become more comfortable around those who have mental health problems. It is important for managers and others to take the time to learn about mental health.

<sup>1</sup> As cited by Heather Stuart in “Stigma and Work,” *Healthcare Papers: New Models for the New Healthcare*, 5, 2 (2004), pp. 100–101.

- *Increased health-care costs*—Not only are health expenditures 50 per cent greater for workers who report high levels of stress,<sup>6</sup> but stress-related absences cost Canadian employers about \$3.5 billion each year.<sup>7</sup>
- *Poor relationships*—Misunderstandings and faulty assumptions related to mental health problems can harm relationships among colleagues and clients.
- *Diminished innovative capacity*—Researchers at Harvard and Yale universities suggest that people who are overworked or under “time pressure” are less likely to think creatively on the job. In fact, the more time pressure people feel, the less quickly their cognitive skills and innovative capacity recuperate.<sup>8</sup>
- *Errors and accidents*—Mental health problems can increase error rates and the number of accidents on the job.<sup>9</sup>
- *Legal cases*—*The Canadian Human Rights Code* indicates that the workplace should be free of harassment and discrimination and that employers should accommodate employees to the point of “undue hardship.”<sup>10</sup>

## WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT PREVENTING MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS<sup>11</sup>

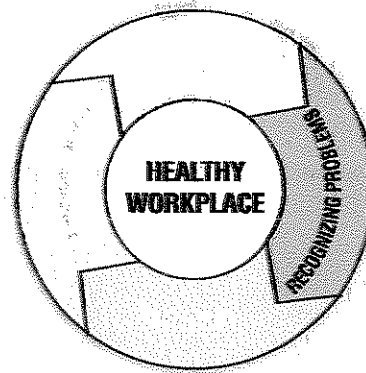


Healthy work environments are critical in the prevention of stress and other mental health problems. Managers play an important role in building and sustaining healthy work environments. You can be proactive by following some of the suggestions below.

- *Build awareness* by making sure employees have access to resources to help them identify the early signs of stress and mental health problems.
- *Actively promote wellness* through stress management programs and healthy lifestyle choices.
- *Communicate* through frequent two-way communication, and create an environment where employees feel comfortable discussing challenges and concerns.

- *Be clear* about performance and behavioural expectations of employees.
- *Create and promote* a work culture of fairness and respect.
- *Role model* healthy behaviour.
- *Allow employees* as much flexibility as possible regarding where and how work gets done, to help them balance their personal and work lives.
- *Give staff greater control* over how and at what pace they do their work, and greater input into decision-making.
- *Help employees manage workload and priorities.*
- *Ensure that people's skills are aligned* with their job requirements.
- *Ensure that employees have the tools and information* to do their jobs.
- *Provide opportunities* for growth and development.
- *Educate yourself* about mental health issues.

## WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT RECOGNIZING PROBLEMS



Early detection and recognition of mental health problems are critical to ensure healthy outcomes for the individual and the organization. For employers, healthy outcomes translate into fewer absences and reduced health benefit costs. Many of the more serious mental health problems may begin with high stress.

While it is important to leave diagnosis to the trained health-care professional, you should be aware of some of the early signs of mental health problems. Some signs to watch for include:<sup>12</sup>

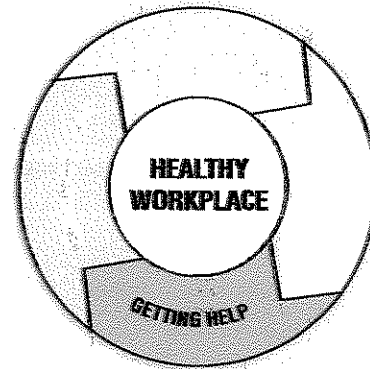
- Consistent late arrivals or frequent absences;
- Lack of cooperation or general inability to work with colleagues;
- Decreased productivity;
- Increased accidents or safety problems;

- Frequent complaints, fatigue or unexplained pain;
- Difficulty concentrating, making decisions or remembering things;
- Decline in dependability—for instance, not achieving work tasks or meeting deadlines;
- Lower quality of work;
- Decreased interest or involvement in, or enthusiasm for, one's work;
- Expressions of strange and grandiose ideas; and
- Marked personality or behavioural changes that are “out of character.”

#### Is It a Performance Issue?

Consider this. An employee's apparent “negative attitude” might actually be related to a mental health issue. It is important to rule out health problems as the source of performance issues. Not only is this good management practice, but it will also help you to avoid wrongful dismissal charges. If work performance is a concern, take the time to assess the root cause. Is poor performance on the job a matter of lack of capacity on the part of the employee? Is it an issue inherent to the job or workplace? Or does it signal high stress levels or a mental health problem? No matter what the reason is, continue to be positive and provide constructive feedback about people's performance.

#### WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT GETTING EMPLOYEES THE HELP THEY NEED



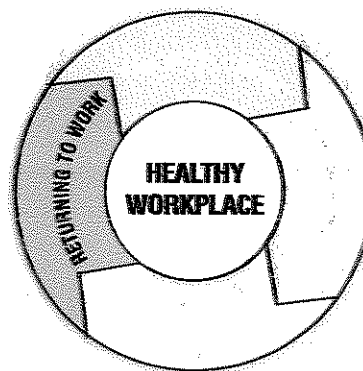
As a manager, you can recognize signs of problems, but you are not trained to diagnose or treat mental health problems. That's up to trained health professionals. But should you get involved? Yes! As an effective manager, when you recognize the signs of mental health problems, you should offer to help. Helping employees to find the support and resources they need will help to reduce work absences. And, early detection and treatment are key to keeping employees at work.

#### Here's how you can help:

- *Take action—but don't take over—*  
If you recognize signs of mental health problems in an employee, address them with the employee and ask how you can help.
- *Be open-minded—*Treat mental health problems as you would any other illness and have empathy—it could just as easily be you.

- *Do your research*—Before you talk to the employee, find out what your workplace offers and what policies, if any, the organization has to support the individual. Consider options such as shortened working hours, decreased workload, stress management courses and counselling.
- *Direct employees to appropriate resources and supports*, such as the following:
  - *Information and toolkits.* These resources help employees understand their rights and responsibilities in the workplace. They also help employees learn more about, get help with, manage and prevent the recurrence of mental health problems. (See page 9 for a resource list.)
  - *Employee Assistance Programs.* These programs provide confidential assistance in a number of forms, including professional assessment, counselling and referral services. Alternatively, you can provide referrals to community-based organizations or resources, and provide employees with the time and support they need to get help.

## WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT PLANNING FOR AN EMPLOYEE'S RETURN TO WORK



Some mental health problems may lead to an extended absence from work. In most cases, however, returning to work is quite common. Planning for an employee's return to work should begin as soon as is practical after he or she leaves the workplace.

### Time Matters

The longer an employee is away from the workplace, the less likely the person will ever return. In fact, once on disability leave, an individual has only a 50-per-cent probability of returning to work after six months. After one year, this probability drops to 20 per cent, and after two years, 10 per cent.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Alice Dong, et al., Ontario Medical Association Committee on Work and Health, *Mental Illness and Workplace Absenteeism: Exploring Risk Factors and Effective Return to Work Strategies* [online]. (Toronto: Ontario Medical Association), [cited March 27, 2005]. <http://oma.org/pcomm/OMR/apr/02returnwork.htm>.

## **WHILE THE EMPLOYEE IS ABSENT**

Your organization may have a plan for managing employee absences. Find out what it is and follow it. If your organization does not have such a system, here are some things to keep in mind.

- *Develop a plan.* Be prepared and be organized.
- *Keep in touch.* Doing so will help in the return-to-work process.
- *Make it clear that the employee's job is waiting for him or her.*  
Be clear on what the employer's obligation is towards employees regarding their legal right to have the same or an equivalent job back and how long the employer is required to offer this.
- *Be understanding.* Recovering from a mental health problem is different than recovering from a physical one. Employees often find it more difficult to discuss their problem due to the stigma that surrounds mental health issues.
- *Know your limits.* It is neither necessary nor appropriate to obtain details about the employee's specific mental health problem. Ask only for the information you need to help the employee return to work and to determine any appropriate accommodations.

- *Work with others.* The employee, manager, human resources department and health-care professionals (if applicable) all have a role to play in helping the employee recover and return to work. For example, providing a job description to the employee's health-care professional can help that person determine what workplace accommodations might be helpful or necessary.
- *Don't rush the return.* In many cases, the return to work should be gradual. The most likely time for a relapse is the point at which an employee returns to work after an absence.

## **THE RETURN TO WORK**

Coming back to work after an absence can be difficult. To ease the transition for the employee, make sure that the workplace is readied and free from stigma, misconceptions and discrimination.

- *Make it a positive experience.*  
Welcome the employee back and remember that he or she may be uncomfortable or embarrassed about the situation.
- *Privacy comes first.* Details are confidential. Unless the employee volunteers the information, you must not share detailed medical or personal information with others.

- *Talk to the returning employee.*  
Ask what he or she needs and how the employee wants to handle questions from other staff members.
- *Encourage the employee to be prepared for questions.* It can be helpful for the employee to “prepare a line” to talk about the mental health problem. Some people also find positive humour can help to make themselves and others more comfortable when discussing mental health.
- *Help the employee gradually shift back into work.* Make sure the pace works for the employee—for instance, some people may prefer part-time work, at least at first. If applicable, seek the advice of the employee’s health-care professional.
- *Match tasks to the employee’s abilities.*
- *Set realistic goals and expectations with the employee and revisit them frequently.*
- *Dispel any myths among staff about mental health problems.*
- *Be a role model for other employees.* Treat the returning employee with fairness and respect, and use positive, inclusive language when speaking about mental health issues.
- *Make sure the workplace is free from instances of harassment and discrimination.* If such incidents do occur, deal with them promptly.
- *Accommodate the employee.*  
Reasonable accommodations are not “special treatment.” They simply allow employees to fulfill their job requirements. An employer is required to accommodate employees to the point of “undue hardship.”<sup>13</sup> For more information, see the Canadian Human Rights Commission’s website at [www.chrc-ccdp.ca](http://www.chrc-ccdp.ca).
- *Use existing supports.* Your organization may have policies or practices for managing employees’ return to work, such as disability management initiatives.
- *Consult your Employee Assistance Program, if applicable.* This program may be able to counsel you and your employees.

## **What Do Accommodations for People with Mental Health Problems Look Like?<sup>1</sup>**

Accommodations in the workplace vary by individual—no one solution will work for everyone. The employee, the employer and the employee's health-care professional should work in partnership to develop a plan.

Some examples of possible accommodations include:

- Providing flexible work arrangements (such as a later start time, more frequent breaks, the opportunity to work from home and time off for counselling);
- Restructuring of tasks (for instance, reducing or eliminating non-essential tasks);
- Providing additional time to learn new responsibilities;
- Using alternate forms of communication (such as written instructions) to clarify expectations;
- Facilitating effective interaction with other co-workers (such as assigning the employee a mentor, coach or "buddy");
- Helping employees to manage time pressures and tasks (for example, meeting with the employee frequently and helping the employee to prioritize tasks); and
- Ensuring an appropriate work environment (for example, managing noise levels).

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from the following texts: World Health Organization, *Mental Health and Work: Impact, Issues and Good Practices* (Geneva: WHO, 2000); *Mental Health Works, Managing Mental Health in the Workplace: How to Talk to Employees, Deal with Problems and Assess Risks* (Toronto: Mental Health Works, 2002); Kendra M. Duckworth, *Work-Site Accommodation Ideas for Persons with Psychiatric Disabilities* [online]. (Washington, D.C.: Job Accommodation Network, U.S. Department of Labor), [cited March 27, 2005]. [www.jan.wvu.edu/media/Psychiatric.html](http://www.jan.wvu.edu/media/Psychiatric.html).

## **FOR MORE INFORMATION**

- **B.C. Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information**  
[[www.heretohelp.bc.ca](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca)]
- **Canadian Council for Rehabilitation and Work** [[www.ccrw.org](http://www.ccrw.org)]  
(information on recruiting and promoting people with disabilities)
- **Canadian Human Rights Commission** [[www.chrc-ccdp.ca](http://www.chrc-ccdp.ca)], or your province's/territory's human rights commission
- **Canadian Mental Health Association** [[www.cmha.ca](http://www.cmha.ca)] (national and local offices have a number of resources, including *Working Well: An Employer's Guide to Hiring and Retaining People with Mental Illness*)
- **Canadian Psychiatric Research Foundation** [[www.cprf.ca](http://www.cprf.ca)] (has a handbook for families called *When Something's Wrong*)
- **Centre for Addiction and Mental Health** [[www.camh.net](http://www.camh.net)]
- **Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health**  
[[www.mentalhealthroundtable.ca](http://www.mentalhealthroundtable.ca)]

- Mental Health Works [[www.mentalhealthworks.ca](http://www.mentalhealthworks.ca)]
- National Institute of Disability Management and Research [[www.nidmar.ca](http://www.nidmar.ca)]
- Paths to Equal Opportunity website, Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services. [[www.equalopportunity.ca](http://www.equalopportunity.ca)] (accessibility and accommodations resources)
- World Health Organization [[www.who.int/mental\\_health/media/en/712.pdf](http://www.who.int/mental_health/media/en/712.pdf)] (research on mental health and work)

**Examples of tools for identifying early signs of mental health problems:**

- Canadian Mental Health Association, "Depression Test" [[www.cmha.calgary.ab.ca/virtuallibrary/depressiontest/index.aspx](http://www.cmha.calgary.ab.ca/virtuallibrary/depressiontest/index.aspx)]
- Mental Health Works, "Recognizing the Problem" [[www.mentalhealthworks.ca/employers/faq/question2.asp](http://www.mentalhealthworks.ca/employers/faq/question2.asp)]
- B.C. Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information, "Wellness Modules" [[www.heretohelp.bc.ca/helpmewith/wellness.shtml](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/helpmewith/wellness.shtml)]

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| <p>1 Canadian Mental Health Association [online], [cited March 27, 2005]. <a href="http://www.cmha.ca">www.cmha.ca</a>.</p> <p>2 Ibid.</p> <p>3 Ibid.</p> <p>4 1998 estimate, cited in Thomas Stephens and Natacha Joubert, "The Economic Burden of Mental Health Problems in Canada," <i>Chronic Diseases in Canada</i>, 22, 1 [online]. (2001), [cited March 27, 2005]. <a href="http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/publicat/cdic-mcc/22-1/d_e.html">www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/publicat/cdic-mcc/22-1/d_e.html</a>.</p> <p>5 Senate of Canada, <i>Mental Health, Mental Illness and Addiction: Overview of Policies and Programs in Canada</i> [online]. (Ottawa: Senate of Canada, November 2004), [cited August 24, 2005]. <a href="http://www.parl.gc.ca/38/1/paribus/commbus/senate/com-e/soci-e/rep-e/report1/repintnov04vol1-e.pdf">www.parl.gc.ca/38/1/paribus/commbus/senate/com-e/soci-e/rep-e/report1/repintnov04vol1-e.pdf</a>.</p> <p>6 Statistics Canada, "General Social Survey: Time Use," <i>The Daily</i> [online]. (Tuesday November 9, 1999), [cited August 24, 2005]. <a href="http://www.statcan.ca/Daily/English/991109/d991109a.htm">www.statcan.ca/Daily/English/991109/d991109a.htm</a>.</p> <p>7 Cara Williams and Josée Normand, "Stress at Work," <i>Canadian Social Trends</i>, 70 (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2003).</p> | <p>8 Teresa M. Amabile, Constance N. Hadley and Steven J. Kramer, "Creativity Under the Gun," <i>Harvard Business Review</i>, 80, 8 (August 2002), pp. 3–11.</p> <p>9 Gaston Harnois and Phyllis Gabriel, <i>Mental Health and Work: Impact, Issues and Good Practices</i> (Geneva: World Health Organization and International Labor Organization, 2000).</p> <p>10 Canadian Human Rights Commission: "Undue hardship describes the limit beyond which employers and service providers are not expected to accommodate. Undue hardship usually occurs when an employer or service provider cannot sustain the economic or efficiency costs of the accommodation," [online], [cited August 25, 2005]. <a href="http://www.chrccdp.ca/preventing_discrimination/page3-en.asp">www.chrccdp.ca/preventing_discrimination/page3-en.asp</a>.</p> <p>11 Sources include the following: Mental Health Works [online]. [cited March 30, 2005]. <a href="http://www.mental-healthworks.ca">www.mental-healthworks.ca</a>; Bill Wilkerson, <i>Roundtable Roadmap to Mental Disability Management in 2004–2005: The Business Years for Mental Health</i> [online]. (Toronto: Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health, June 2004), [cited August 24, 2005]. <a href="http://www.mental-healthroundtable.ca/june_2004/monitor_june2004.pdf">www.mental-healthroundtable.ca/june_2004/monitor_june2004.pdf</a>; Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada, and</p> |
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Canadian Mental Health Association, *Coping with Stress* [online]. (Toronto: 1997), [cited October 27, 2005]. [www.cmha.ca/english/coping\\_with\\_stress/](http://www.cmha.ca/english/coping_with_stress/); B.C. Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information [online], [cited September 29, 2004]. [www.heretohelp.bc.ca](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca).

- 12 Mental Health Works [online], [cited August 24, 2005]. [www.mentalhealthworks.ca](http://www.mentalhealthworks.ca); Canadian Mental Health Association, *Depression in the Workplace* [online], [cited August 25, 2005]. [www.cmha.ca/english/info\\_centre/mh\\_pamphlets/mh\\_pamphlet\\_24.pdf](http://www.cmha.ca/english/info_centre/mh_pamphlets/mh_pamphlet_24.pdf); B.C. Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information, *The Primer: Fact Sheets on Mental Health and Addictions Issues* [online], [cited September 28, 2004]. [www.heretohelp.bc.ca/publications/factsheets/primer.pdf](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/publications/factsheets/primer.pdf); Bill Wilkerson, *Roundtable*

*Roadmap to Mental Disability Management in 2004–2005: The Business Years for Mental Health* [online]. (Toronto: Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health, June 2004), [cited August 24, 2005]. [www.mentalhealthroundtable.ca/june\\_2004/monitor\\_june2004.pdf](http://www.mentalhealthroundtable.ca/june_2004/monitor_june2004.pdf).

- 13 Canadian Human Rights Commission: "Undue hardship describes the limit beyond which employers and service providers are not expected to accommodate. Undue hardship usually occurs when an employer or service provider cannot sustain the economic or efficiency costs of the accommodation," [online], [cited August 25, 2005]. [www.chrcccdp.ca/preventing\\_discrimination/page3-en.asp](http://www.chrcccdp.ca/preventing_discrimination/page3-en.asp).

## **What You Need to Know About Mental Health**

by *Allison P. Cowan* and *Judith L. MacBride-King*

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