

Would you tell your manager you had a mental health problem?

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Although nearly four in 10 workers wouldn't tell their manager if they had a mental health problem, half said that if they knew about a coworker's illness, they would desire to help, a new survey by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) shows.

The survey, headed by CAMH Senior Scientist Dr. Carolyn Dewa, reveals that workers have both negative and supportive attitudes about mental health in the workplace. The study was published in the *International Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*.

"A significant number of working people have [mental health problems](#), or have taken a disability leave related to mental health," says Dr. Dewa, head of CAMH's Centre for Research on Employment and Workplace Health (CREWH). Annually, almost three per cent of workers are on a short-term disability leave related to mental illness.

"Stigma is a barrier to people seeking help. Yet by getting treatment, it would benefit the worker and the workplace, and minimize [productivity loss](#)," she says.

In the survey of 2,219 working adults in Ontario, two key questions were asked: First, would you inform your manager if you had a mental health problem? And second, if a colleague had a mental health problem, would you be concerned about how work would be affected? Researchers then probed more deeply depending on the answers.

Among the 38 per cent who would not tell their manager, more than half were afraid that it would affect their careers. Other reasons for not disclosing were the bad experiences of others who came forward, fear of losing friends, or a combination of these reasons. Three in 10 people said they wouldn't tell because it wouldn't affect their work.

A positive relationship with their manager was the key reason given by those who would reveal that they had a mental health problem. Supportive organizational policies were another factor influencing the decision to come forward, which was cited by half of those who would disclose.

Some findings in the current survey underscore why people may be reluctant to reveal a mental health problem at work. When asked if they'd be concerned if a worker had a mental illness, 64 per cent said yes. More than four in 10 also indicated concerns about both reliability and safety.

Dr. Dewa's past research has shown that workers with depression who receive treatment are more productive than those who don't. Without disclosing, it may be difficult to get treatment, as work absences for counselling sessions or appointments need to be accounted for, she notes.

And safety issues can also be alleviated through workplace policies and procedures, as well as a trusting relationship with a manager. "The manager's position is so important, and it's really important to invest in training them," says Dr. Dewa.

On a more positive note, she says, "One surprising thing we found was that 50 per cent said they were concerned because they'd want to help their co-worker." About one in five also worried about making the mental health problem worse.

For organizations who want to address the issue of stigma around [mental illness](#), she advises that a number of elements need to be in place, including their policies and procedures, as well as facilitating positive relationships among managers and coworkers. Having a positive example of supporting someone with a [mental health](#) problem is also helpful.

Provided by Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

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