

The Mental Health Roundtable

COVID Stressing Everything, Everyone



Dr. Richard Heinzl



Dr. Sam Ozersky

Mental health in the workplace and society has been front and centre stage for close to a decade. Efforts and resources have been invested in a campaign to reduce stigma and provide access to more Canadians.

However, the inadequacies of the mental healthcare system in Canada have been amplified as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Dr. Richard Heinzl and Dr. Sam Ozersky discussed the state of mental healthcare in Canada in the following roundtable.

Dr. Heinzl is a physician, humanitarian, and entrepreneur whose passion is the intersection of technology and healthcare

worldwide. He has been with WorldCare for over 10 years. As the global medical director for WorldCare, he manages the delivery of medical second opinions to members, engages with clients, and contributes to the strategic direction of the company.

Dr. Sam Ozersky is Mensante's founder and CEO. In 2008, the Canadian Association of Health Informatics selected him as recipient of the 2008 Community Based Physician Innovation Award for developing 'FeelingBetterNow,' a mobile-ready mental health app developed by doctors to support self-care, mental health practitioners; EAP/EFAP counselors; and disability and absence management programs.

BPM: What sort of impact are you seeing from COVID-19?

Richard Heinzl: The reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic for many is shock and anxiety. Along with a virus epidemic, we have an epidemic of fear and anxiety in Canada and in the world. Almost everybody I know is on edge in some way and some are having more extreme reactions to it.

It's also about being scared for yourself and for your loved ones and not knowing how this might affect them.

So you're seeing all kinds of things. Suicide, substance abuse, and spousal abuse hotlines are ringing off the hook. In terms of the workplace, suddenly everything's turned upside down. Employment has been completely disrupted, we've been sent home and we have fear for the future and whether our jobs will still be there.

This is now transitioning into how we're learning to cope. We're trying out new things, trying to figure out how to continue working and making contributions. We're

adjusting.

In the long term, we're going to have a permanent change in society where we're going to work and live differently.

Sam Ozersky: Obviously, the attempt to contain the virus has caused tremendous loss of jobs which is a major stressor, creating new mental illnesses and making old ones much worse.

On top of that, being isolated from friends and family and being in a holding pattern is enormously stressful. We already are start-

ing to see suicides. A 19-year-old woman in the UK had a mental illness, but it was getting worse. She left a note after committing suicide saying more people are going to die of mental illness connected to the pandemic than from the virus itself.

That's definitely a problem and the problem is magnified by the state of mental health-care in even the best western countries. Everybody knows somebody close with a serious mental disorder. That is on the demand side.

On the supply side, it's hard to find access to care. You want to see a psychiatrist here in Toronto, it's an eight-month wait.

Unfortunately, we cannot wait. Mental illness comes with loss of brain tissue, which may not ever be recoverable. Heart attacks, you lose muscle tissue; brain attacks you lose brain tissue. The longer we wait, the more brain tissue is rotted away.

Even worse is that diagnoses at the primary care level are wrong 75 per cent of the time and the overall rate of good guidelines level of care is less than one in eight. Of the seven million people in Canada who have a mental disorder, only one million are getting proper care.

We already have a mental health system that doesn't work. It's fragmented and the silos don't talk to each other. You have a system that is already under enormous capacity problems and problems with quality. And then you basically flood it with millions of more people.

What can we be doing now for ourselves?

Richard: You have to take care of your physical body by eating healthy, exercising regularly, getting the right kind of sleep, and being aware of the tendencies at this stressful moment to overdo alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs. Instead of shortcuts, you need a good solid wellness approach to support your own mental health.

You can also connect with others you know to share your concerns. Reach out to people – a family member or a trusted friend – and maintain those healthy relationships to build a strong support system.

While you need to stay informed, you have to get the right news from reputable sources. There's a bombardment of information and a lot of it is misinformation out there. It's like 95 per cent of every news item is about COVID. I don't need to be hit with it all the time. I could feel my stress levels rising when that happens. So some time ago, I started turning the TV off and limited my news to once a day.

Sam: What I find to be extremely helpful is mindfulness meditation and it's freely available on the web. Not only can it lower blood pressure, we're finding it can actually trigger the regrowth of lost brain tissue that occurs with stress because of the cortisol response. Cortisol levels go up with stress and it eats away at the brain.

Richard: With mindfulness meditation already in vogue, maybe the COVID-19 crisis will act as a catalyst to really allow us to incorporate that so that it is very normal and very healthy.

Who is delivering that message? Is it up to employers since government is certainly not doing it?

Richard: I don't think that's government's role. It's more of the role of society in general. Workplaces and employers will be front and centre. They're not really used to giving that message, but maybe they'll be compelled to with what's going on.

Sam: What the government and businesses should be doing is creating and funding improvement and innovation in virtual care for mental disorders. In fact, there is a large fund here in Canada that was just launched to do that exactly. What has happened, and I call it from virus to virtual, is that we realized care in medicine and for mental health is going to become a lot more virtual because you can have pandemics.

We just have to make it more efficient and inclusive. The way you do that is through virtual technologies. You can do psychotherapy CBT or teach people mindfulness via Zoom. eCouch in Australia and our FeelingBetterNow app here in Canada provide you with a virtual therapist that has algorithms for creating and developing a

diagnosis, conducting triage, and creating treatment plans that can be followed by the patient.

And that virtual psychiatrist or psychologist diagnosis is far more accurate because people are more honest talking to a screen than a person, plus the algorithm does not forget to ask questions. Many of the problems that come with diagnosis are because doctors simply don't ask all the questions.

What lessons are we learning from this situation?

Richard: What the COVID-19 virus is teaching us is that we can do things virtually and digitally. It really does point to the potential of telemedicine and new ways of accessing and receiving help. And the beautiful thing about a digital approach is it's totally scalable. You only have about 70 psychiatrists in all of Saskatchewan, but you can have an infinite number of virtual avatar psychiatrists who can reach out to people. So this virus is showing you can accelerate the acceptance of telemedicine.

As well, COVID-19 is dramatically all about prevention. We've been saying forever that medicine is still too much of a curative model. We wait until people are sick and then we spend 90 per cent of the health-care budget trying to help them in the last moments of their life. And that's just not the way to go.

So maybe this whole wellness thing will be better integrated into society and we'll see a shift in our culture because COVID is presenting an opportunity where we can shake ourselves up and get out of the rut that we're stuck in and try something new.

It's amazing to see the society really turn on a dime, completely turn around, and extremely interesting to see that the entire world, with just snap of the fingers, change behaviours. That to me points to potential and maybe there's an opportunity that we can actually emerge better from this, we can become stronger than we were.

Sam: And we'll be better prepared for the next pandemic – the environmental one. We're going to have to take that much more seriously.

