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OVERALL HEALTH REQUIRES EQUILIBRIUM



How you are physically, psychologically, and financially are interconnected, says Charmaine Alexander, senior advisor, disability management, at Desjardins Insurance. Speaking at the *Benefits and Pensions Monitor Meetings & Events* webinar 'Overall Health: The key to employee well-being during and after the pandemic,' she called the equilibrium between these three factors "overall health" and it's key to employee well-being.

A 2018 survey by Desjardins found 43 per cent of people in poor physical health had a hard time managing their financial stress and 61 per cent of those in fair or poor financial health reported struggling with mental health issues. "So clearly we see that these three factors are very closely linked," she said.

Then, in March, the coronavirus "completely upended all aspects of our lives. The world as we knew it suddenly imploded giving way to uncertainty and more questions than answers," she said.

Toll On Health

The presence of the virus has affected people physically, even if they didn't get it, as radical lifestyle changes have taken a toll on health. For three months, Canadians were told to stay home, and they did. However, 63 per cent reported spending more time watching TV; 22 per cent spent more time playing video games; and 25 per cent were drinking more. The lockdown is affecting diets and levels of activity. A study in France showed that 57 per cent of its citizens gained weight during the lock down. According to Obesity Canada, obesity is a chronic illness affecting over seven million Canadians. The

current situation just makes the problem worse on a number of levels.

There are the psychological effects. Employees are dealing with ups and downs in their mental health. Reports have stated that 50 per cent of Canadians say their mental health has declined and 10 per cent have suffered a severe decline.

Financially, many Canadians were struggling even before the crisis hit; up to 44 per cent were living paycheck to paycheck. Some don't have savings to fall back on so it's really throwing them for a loop, in addition to the physical and mental health issues they might be struggling with.

"Taking all this into account, you can easily imagine the combined effects of the current situation on overall health," she said. The key number to remember is 26 per cent of Canadians are in mental and financial survival mode and aren't doing well.

For companies, this can lead to a drop in employee engagement and productivity. Normally tele-working boosts productivity by 13 per cent, but things haven't been normal for several months. Employees have been pouring a lot of their energy into learning how to be resilient.

Employers have had to adapt to this reality. Few had contingency plans in place to deal with such a catastrophic event. They had

to act fast and adapt on the fly to their employees' new needs and expectations. Empathy quickly became the buzzword for managers.

New Reality

A new reality, or rather a new normal, is taking hold and the pandemic has led us to take better care of our employees, she said. The companies that "weather the storm will be those that have risen to this challenge."

Employers and their managers are the cornerstone of this overall health approach which essentially is just injecting more humanity into managing a business. "As a service provider, we also have a role to play," she said, "one where we can accompany employers in offering solutions and introduce wellness programs adapted to each workplace's reality."

This concept of overall health is the next step in the evolution of employee group plans. In the current situation, this new model naturally fell into place. Companies had no choice but to take care of the physical, mental, and financial health of their employees. In the future, this will be a new normal because it touches on all components of health and all drivers of well being at work, said Alexander.