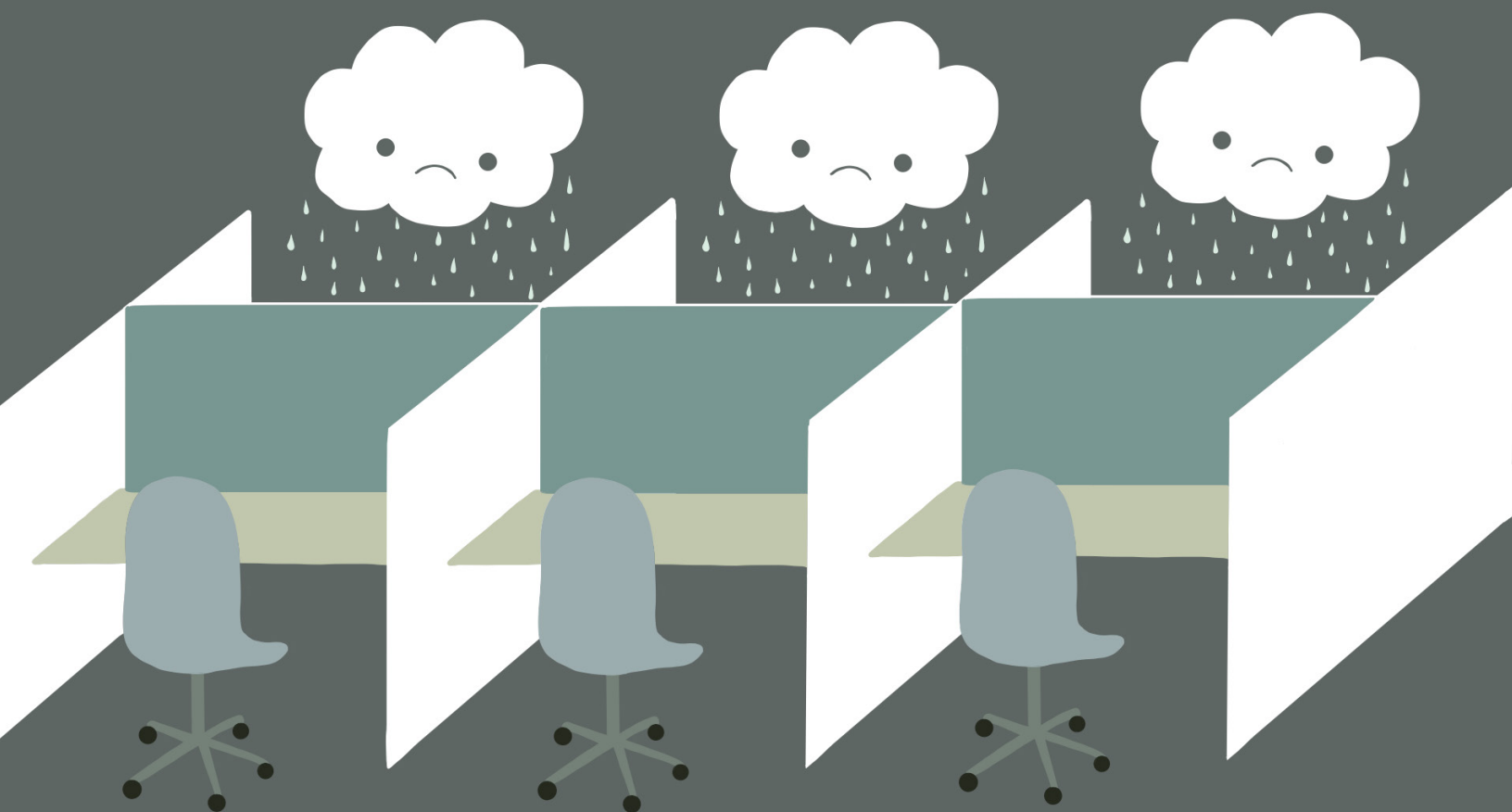


# MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE

How Communications Professionals Get By

By: Cady Pavagadhi



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# ABSTRACT

By the time Canadians reach 40 years of age, one in two have or have had a mental illness.<sup>1</sup> As the conversation about mental health continues to grow, we must not only end the stigma surrounding mental illness but also understand what impacts our mental health and look for ways to improve and protect our mental well-being. The impacts of mental stressors are amplified in the communications industry with those who work in the industry two and a half times more likely to experience mental illness and increased job-related stress.

The higher risk for mental illness can be attributed to the nature of the industry, the lack of acceptance for mental illness, and lack of policy surrounding mental well-being. These challenges continue to impact corporate communications firms and freelance workers alike. This white paper will discuss mental health in the communications industry. This paper talks about the prevalence of mental illness in the workplace and its impacts, how and why the communications industry is impacted, and ways to improve mental health in the industry.

# THE HISTORY OF MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE

A decade ago, many people believed that those with mental illness could not be in the workplace. Those with mental health issues were forced to take unexcused leaves because of things like nervous breakdowns, were fired because of a perceived lack of motivation or dedication, or got into trouble over a “bad attitude.” There were many ways mental illness manifested itself in the workplace, but it was rarely addressed face on.<sup>2</sup> Often, co-workers and management didn’t talk about mental health, and when they did, it sounded like office gossip rather than support.

In 1996, a World Health Organization report, “Global Burden of Disease Study,” brought light to these issues for the first time. This report emphasized that over the next two decades, many nations would see a shift from infectious disease and malnutrition to non-communicable diseases like depression and heart disease.<sup>3</sup>

When Bill Wilkerson, a corporate crisis communicator, read this report, he knew this would impact the working population. Wilkerson dealt with employees distressed by downsizing, mergers, or other changes every day. He observed that intimidating management only added to their distress.

“If this burden of disease [mental illness] was going to hit the working population, and we continued to have a negative effect on the mental health of employees, then it was surely going to have a significant impact on the workplace in terms of productivity and competitiveness,” said Wilkerson.<sup>4</sup>

It wasn’t until 2006 that mental health in the workplace was discussed at a national level in Canada. The Senate passed a motion to examine the impacts of workplaces on mental health

**Mental Health:** Mental health, also called mental well-being, refers to our emotions, our thoughts and feelings, our ability to solve problems and overcome difficulties, our social connections, and our understanding of the world around us.

Everyone has mental health, just as everyone has health.

**Mental Illness:** A mental illness is an illness that affects the way people think, feel, behave, or interact with others. There are many different mental illnesses, and they have different symptoms that impact peoples’ lives in different ways.

Source: Canadian Mental Health Association, BC Division, [www.cmha.bc.ca](http://www.cmha.bc.ca)

— which would be a catalyst for long-awaited and necessary change.<sup>5</sup> A few months later, the Mental Health Commission of Canada released “*Out of the Shadows at Last — Transforming Mental Health, Mental Illness, and Addiction Services in Canada.*”

“It is in the workplace that the human and the economic dimensions of mental health and mental illness come together most evidently.”

*Out of the Shadows at Last — Transforming Mental Health, Mental Illness, and Addiction Services in Canada*

Today, one in five Canadians experience a mental health problem or mental illness in any given year, and one in six people have to deal with a common mental health issue such as anxiety, OCD, PTSD, or depression in the workplace, according to the Mental Health Commission of Canada.<sup>6</sup>

Although mental health can impact all Canadians at any point in their lives, some careers have been known to bring on higher levels of stress, isolation, thanklessness, overloading, and emotion.

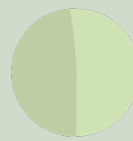
Careers with the highest rates of depression include healthcare workers, social workers, creative artists or writers, grounds workers, and financial advisors.<sup>7</sup>

# Mental Health in Other Canadian Industries

## 1 HEALTH CARE



1 in 3 Canadian physicians screen positive for depression



43 per cent of nurses report being sexually harassed or assaulted



68 per cent of nurses have been physically assaulted



86 per cent of nurses reported being subject to verbal violence

## LAW

Unlike other industries, higher-ranking lawyers at large firms report more depression than their lower-status colleagues.

28

per cent experienced symptoms of depression

19

per cent showed anxiety

21

per cent experienced alcohol-dependency

## 3 MINING

79.3 per cent feel “elevated” levels of fatigue



Miners average about 6.2 hours of sleep per night, while the average Canadian gets 7.1 hours per night

Source: Janet Pun, “The State of Mental Health in Canada’s Healthcare Workers;” Jim Middlemiss, “Mental health’s toll;” Government of Canada, “Psychological Health in the Workplace”

# EFFECTS OF MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE

In any given week, 500,000 Canadians do not go to work due to a psychological health issue.<sup>8</sup> The impacts of these health issues can vary depending on the nature of the problem. The Mental Health Commission of Canada has established a list of Risk Factors for Poor Workplace Psychological Health.<sup>9</sup>

RISK FACTORS	EXAMPLES
High demand and/or low control	An employee is expected to absorb the work duties of two colleagues who have been let go due to organizational restructuring.
High effort and/or low reward	An employee goes above and beyond to provide excellent customer service but has never been recognized by the department for her contributions or work ethic.
Unfair treatment	An executive promotes one employee over another due to favouritism only, not demonstrated experience or skills.
Excessive workload	An intern is assigned many more projects than he can be reasonably expected to complete during his work term.
Unfulfilling work	An employee is frequently assigned to photocopying duty by senior employees, thus rarely has an opportunity to work on cases related to his competencies.
Low employee engagement and/or influence	A company never organizes employee engagement opportunities such as town halls or potlucks, leaving employees feeling as if they do not matter.
Little/no professional development opportunities	An employee's requests to attend a conference, that would significantly help her to carry out her work duties, are denied ever year.
Poor physical work environment	A broken air conditioner has not been repaired in over a year, causing employees in the office to become overheated and irritated during the summer months.

RISK FACTORS	EXAMPLES
Physical violence at work	A client forcefully shoves his legal advisor against a wall after the verdict of his trial is read.
Abuse of Authority	A manager takes credit for a proposal that he did not author at a stakeholders' meeting and uses his power to discourage the employee from raising concerns.
Discrimination	A recruiter deliberately excludes applicants based on their status, e.g., visible minorities, race, gender, marital status, disability when forwarding potential candidates for a new position to human resources.
Sexual Harassment	A female employee receives unwanted comments of a sexual nature regarding her appearance from co-workers.
Other Harassment	An employee follows a temporary worker around the office and repeatedly asks for personal information to which she has no right.
Lack of Work Accommodation/Flexibility	An employee's request to take the day off due to a family emergency is denied by his boss.
Non-Work-Related Illnesses and/or Conditions	An employee who suffered a motor vehicle accident in the past year experiences anxiety at work.

Source: "Psychological Health in the Workplace," Government of Canada, <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/services/health-safety/reports/psychological-health.html>

As a result, work-related mental health issues cost the Canadian economy \$20 billion per year, which means that work-related issues account for roughly 39 per cent of the \$51 billion that psychological problems cost the Canadian economy annually.<sup>10</sup>

# MENTAL HEALTH IN THE COMMUNICATIONS INDUSTRY

The communications industry includes a wide variety of jobs, which can usually be divided into public relations, advertising, publishing, journalism, and digital media specializations. Communications work is also present in all other industries because of the nature of the work. Overall the communications industry is growing with over \$67.6 billion in revenues in 2017, a 1.5 per cent increase from 2016.<sup>11</sup> However, in other aspects, like mental health, the industry is lacking.

People in the communications industry are two-and-a-half times more likely to suffer from mental illness and stress than other industries according to a study conducted by Morneau Shepell on behalf of National Advertising Benevolent Society.<sup>12</sup>

This statistic prompted the Public Relations and Communications Association (PRCA) and PRWeek to take the issue of mental illness more seriously and work directly with PR professionals to address the mental well-being of the industry. A study of more than 540 PR professionals found 60 per cent said they had suffered or been diagnosed with mental health issues. Stress disorders, anxiety, and depression were the most common. Others mentioned panic attacks, body dysmorphia, seasonal affective disorder, OCD, and self-harm.<sup>13</sup>

In the same PRCA and PRWeek study, several respondents linked their mental health issues to their workplace, and 49 per cent felt more stressed than 12 months ago.<sup>14</sup>

Ig2, the largest independent creative agency in Canada, and the National Advertising Benevolent Society found one in ten members of the marketing community is affected by mental illness, and one in 20 is expected to miss more than ten days of work per year due to mental health issues.<sup>15</sup>

## Why is this happening?

Evidently, there is an issue with mental health in the communications industry. To better understand why these employees feel this way, we will look at the following three categories:

### 1. Lack of acceptance

When asked if the communications industry was accepting of employees and employers with mental health issues, the survey results made it clear that employees and employers have different perceptions. The PRCA-PRWeek study found that 46 per cent of bosses view the industry as “fairly accepting” of people suffering mental health; whereas, only 26 per cent of employees consider the industry as “fairly accepting” of the same issues.<sup>16</sup>

Though there is a difference in responses, very few people in the industry would deny the need for further change. As organizational leaders have had to adapt to the growing importance of mental well-being during their professional careers, a shift in culture, attitudes, and practices will take time.



## 2. Lack of policies

For an industry that is more experienced and educated on the power of communication than any other, it seems odd that a lack of communication is one of the reasons the industry feels down, stressed, and overwhelmed.

Proper training and guiding policies surrounding mental health have allowed for specific organizations and their leaders to not only support their employees but also help them improve their mental state. But even when mental health-focused committees and policies exist, 44 per cent of employees were unaware that their organization had such policies — pointing to a significant problem with internal communications.<sup>17</sup>

For organizations that do not have policies, employees are left feeling misunderstood, trapped and forgotten — all of which only negatively contribute to mental well-being.

## 3. Nature of the industry

For those in the industry, phrases like “stay later,” “need it done ASAP,” “not good enough,” and “the client is underwhelmed” can sound all too familiar. The communications industry is a highly demanding and constantly changing industry — the perfect recipe for not being able to “shut off.”

Jay Bertram, Executive Director of the National Advertising Benevolent Society, says that mental health issues in the industry are “due to the longer hours, high demands and increased expectations at work.”<sup>18</sup> However, it isn’t just the internal demands of the organization,

“unreasonable client pressure and bullying is partly to blame,” says Graham Goodkind, co-founder of Frank PR.<sup>19</sup>

Although it is noted that leaders and organizations are becoming aware of mental health issues in the industry — the stigma still exists. People are identifying and learning about mental illness, but this has not made people less reluctant to talk about it.

“They’re worried about optics and stigma and often put their needs and health aside for too long. They then reach the point where addressing their mental health and working at the same time is no longer possible,” says Blessie Matthew from the University of Alberta Career Centre.<sup>20</sup>

At this time, there is minimal research regarding the mental health of communicators working on and with social media. However, likely the same issues surrounding self-esteem, isolation, and fatigue that affect the everyday social media user are only magnified for communicators spending upward of 15 hours a week working on social media.<sup>21</sup>

## Who is it impacting?

Within the communications industry and its specializations, there are two primary forms of work — corporate and freelance.

### Corporate

Corporate communications include in-house and agencies and is the most abundant form of communications work.

Corporate settings can include many of the Mental Health Commission of Canada's risk factors mentioned earlier. These include abuse of authority, excessive workload, unfair treatment, high demand, low reward and interpersonal communication issues. However, later we will see that not all corporate communication settings are like this; in fact, some work hard to avoid these risk factors.

## Freelance

Freelance work is gaining popularity as the result of a growing gig economy. Creatives and communicators can write, design, or plan for clients and charge them by the hour, day or task.<sup>22</sup>

As the type of work is very different from a corporate nine-to-five job, freelance work brings on different mental health challenges.

Often freelancers leave the corporate world to better their mental health and find that they have relieved themselves of the stress and burnout that comes with a corporate job. However, others find that working for themselves to be harder on their mental health.

There are four challenges of freelance that impact mental health.

### 1. Full responsibility

As a freelancer, you no longer have to report to superior but it means that you have to bear the entire workload, the pressure to find clients, and all responsibility. This means that in busy times there is no co-worker to help carry the weight, and you are responsible if things are not done to a client's standards. This makes it

easy to feel overwhelmed and stressed — which can contribute to mental health issues such as anxiety, OCD, and panic disorder.<sup>23</sup>

### 2. Isolation

According to a recent study by Epson, 48 per cent of freelancers working from home admitted that they find the nature of their work to be "lonely" at times and 46 per cent claim that freelancing is isolating.<sup>24</sup>

By having the freedom to work from home or in new cities, the challenge of building human connection grows. It is also hard to receive positive encouragement because there is no corporate morale or co-workers to lean on. In essence, there are very few people who understand what you are dealing with, which makes dealing with stressful situations even more taxing. Prolonged isolation can lead to a lack of self-esteem, anxiety, and loneliness.<sup>25</sup>

### 3. Lack of consistency and security

One of the most significant challenges of freelance work, in general, is the lack of consistency and, therefore, financial security. This lack of security and consistency can significantly impact stress levels and lead to over-working and poor work-life balance.<sup>26</sup>

Freelancers often work without health benefits, sick days, or employment insurance, which can contribute to financial insecurity and added stress.

# SOLUTIONS

Communicators can build on practices from other industries. Mental health strategies should be offered in conjunction with health and well-being policies and address prevention, early identification, support, and rehabilitation. These policies should be put into place by leadership, but to ensure success, they must involve staff at all levels.

From the research discussed above, the following interventions and practices have been outlined to help to protect and address mental health in the workplace:

**Provide a supportive environment** — Actively reduce the likelihood of work-related mental health issues by supporting a healthy work-life balance, developing the positive aspects of work, recognizing and rewarding the contributions of employees, motivating career development and involving employees in decision making.

**Work with industry members** — Organizations should remain aware of the practices of other companies who have taken action in order to not waste resources. Organizations can and should work together to better the mental well-being in the industry. Organization leaders should be aware of their workplace environment, and how it can be improved to promote mental well-being.

**Address mental health** — Address mental health problems regardless of the cause and offer support to those dealing with mental health issues or with related concerns.

Also address and encourage mentally-well workers to form and practice positive mental health activities to maintain their mental well-being.

## Getting it right: Examples of workplaces supporting mental health

### External

In early 2018, lg2 decided to take a stance on mental illness and help raise awareness within the marketing and communications community.<sup>27</sup> Having worked with Bell Media on Bell “Let’s Talk” for seven years, lg2 knew it was time to do their part.

The goal was to help break the stigma of mental health and grow the conversation in their own communications community, and lg2 did just that through a series of personal stories shared the week of the Bell Let’s Talk campaign. Three of the agency’s employees shared their experiences with mental health in a brochure that was distributed to other agencies across Canada. A dialogue these employees once kept very secretive was now being used to demonstrate the power of acceptance.

### Internal

Red River College (RRC) in Winnipeg, Manitoba, offers an employee assistance program for employees and their families called Homewood Health’s Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP).<sup>28</sup> The completely anonymous program offers short-term counselling and

support for issues including depression and anxiety, stress management, grief and bereavement, work and family balance, substance use, and work-related problems.

Within RRC's departments, there's a conscious effort to help manage mental health issues.


"I know I can trust my co-workers and director with anything I might be going through or need to talk about," Lauren Parsons, Communications Officer at Red River College and mental health advocate, says.

Lauren has experienced the pressures of working in corporate communications at workplaces that have no mental health support or policies. Now, Lauren's co-workers support her and help to


balance her workload. During peak times with a variety of projects and upcoming deadlines, Lauren's director has made it clear that the workload can be distributed to co-workers, or when that is not an option, they can create a plan to manage the workload.

"I think it's important to stay engaged in a communications role, but now I'm not obligated to be glued to my phone 24-hours a day," Lauren says. "I do check my emails and sometimes send emails outside of work hours, but it's more of a convenience rather than an obligation."<sup>29</sup>

The emphasis the college and its management-level employees have placed on balance and mental health has helped to address Lauren's generalized depression and anxiety disorder.



*"I suffer from generalized anxiety disorder. I remember the tipping point. I was in my car smack in the middle of winter during the month of February when I had a panic attack. I thought I was going to die. My nerves were all tied up and I felt completely choked up. I rushed in to see my family doctor and was told to stop [what I was doing] right away. The truth is that you never really heal from mental illness, but what I learned is that you can find ways to better deal with it. My condition is no longer considered severe. What really helped was just talking about it, with my family, my friends, my colleagues, and honestly, what I realized is that once you do, people actually understand and suddenly it's a lot less scary and stressful."*



Gabrielle Godbout  
Copywriter, Ig2

# KEY TAKEAWAYS

## 1. Mental health is significantly impacted by work-related issues.

Work significantly impacts mental health, and those working in the communications industry are two-and-a-half times more likely to suffer from mental illness or stress.<sup>30</sup> Nationally, work-related mental health issues cost the Canadian economy \$20 billion.<sup>31</sup> The number is set to increase if changes are not made. Employees are less willing to sacrifice their mental well-being, as a study from the Harvard Business Review found that “50 per cent of millennials and 75 per cent of Gen-Zs report leaving jobs for mental health reasons.” The study collected survey responses from more than 1,500 U.S. adults varying sectors and representation groups — including groups that have historically been underrepresented in mental health.<sup>32</sup>

## 2. The type of work and the work environment in the communications industry contribute to mental health issues and mental illness.

There are trends within the communications industry, including the type of work and the standard for work that can contribute to poor mental well-being when not adequately managed. The creative nature of the work also allows communicators to work in freelance or corporate environments, which both challenge mental health in different ways. Freelance work tends to either significantly reduce or increase stress and work-related pressures, whereas corporate work tends to impact self-esteem, stress levels, and overall satisfaction. In general, freelance work can be extremely isolating. Just under 50 per cent of freelancers feel their work is lonely or isolating.<sup>33</sup>

## 3. There are actions that employees, managers, and leaders in the communications industry can take to improve mental health in the industry and life beyond the workplace.

There must be a shift towards ending the stigma surrounding mental illness and a desire to address mental health in the workplace to improve mental health statistics in the communications industry. By actively reducing the likelihood of work-related mental health issues, being aware of the resources available and sharing them throughout the organization, and addressing and supporting existing mental health issues, the industry can become a leader in terms of positive mental well-being and workplace culture.

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