



Trauma Among Psychiatric Workers

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WHAT DID WE DO & WHY?

Canadians are becoming more aware of the importance of mental health in the workplace. The Mental Health Commission of Canada recognizes that sometimes traumatic events occur in the workplace and have an impact on workers' mental health. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental disorder that can occur after a person is exposed to actual or threatened death, serious injury or sexual violation. Among nurses, post-traumatic stress can lead to compassion fatigue, lower healthcare quality, and lost work time. However, much less is known about the risks faced by psychiatric workers, the very people who provide daily treatment and care for people with serious mental disorders. There is also little known about how trauma relates to chronic workplace stressors. In this pilot study, we asked staff in a large hospital providing mental health and addictions services about workplace exposure to acute and chronic stressors, in the form of disturbing behaviours faced in the course of providing patient care (e.g., screaming, physically resisting care, self-harm, room destruction, fecal smearing). We included nursing, allied health, and non-clinical staff who often deal with the aftermath of disruptive behaviors.

OUR FINDINGS

Most people with mental disorders are not violent and live productive lives in our communities, but some are prone to violence or other behaviours that make caring for them stressful. A pilot survey of clinical and support staff working on psychiatric units at one hospital found that nearly 25% of respondents self-reported PTSD symptoms at the level of probable PTSD. Nursing staff had the highest PTSD scores. Symptoms were related to experiencing a range of distressing events related to patient care. Events included not only being assaulted but also non-violent acts such as constant screaming.

WHAT'S NEXT?

A larger study has been launched, co-led by researchers at Waypoint and The Royal Ottawa Health Care Group. Over 750 staff have taken part in a survey about their workplace experiences, PTSD symptoms, and help-seeking. Focus groups and 1:1 interviews are looking at staff experience with seeking mental health support for workplace trauma. We are working with several partner organizations, including employers and employee associations, to develop an action plan for reducing staff trauma through policy, practice or action.

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TAKE-AWAY MESSAGES

- There is little knowledge of workplace factors related to PTSD in psychiatric workers.
- One in four psychiatric workers who responded to a survey had elevated PTSD symptoms.
- This study found that trauma is related not just to violence, but also to chronic stressors.