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Why supporting employees to develop their coping skills and resiliency is good business

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Resilience isn't a single skill. It's a variety of skills and coping mechanisms. To bounce back from bumps in the road as well as failures, you should focus on emphasizing the positive.

— Jean Chatzky

How does a person's resiliency predict their life fulfillment?

Each of us wakes up each morning challenged by forces of life that can be opportunities or challenges. An opportunity can be exciting but at the same time stressful, and if not managed can become a challenge. Challenges come in many forms, and vary from personal stressors to work stressors. These can fall on a continuum from mild to moderate to major. Not only the intensity but also the number of stressors happening at once can test a person's resiliency.

One way to think of resiliency is the available energy reserves a person builds up to resist, take on, and push through the challenges of life. Much like a battery, the higher the resiliency charge, the higher the likelihood of a positive outcome. Life fulfillment requires not only a start but requires consistent follow through and action. For example, once a person becomes a parent, becoming an effective parent requires many years of focus and energy. The same applies to succeeding in work, marriage, friendship, and mental health. Individuals don't come with an endless supply of energy. What they do, think, and feel influences their resiliency level and readiness to face each day.
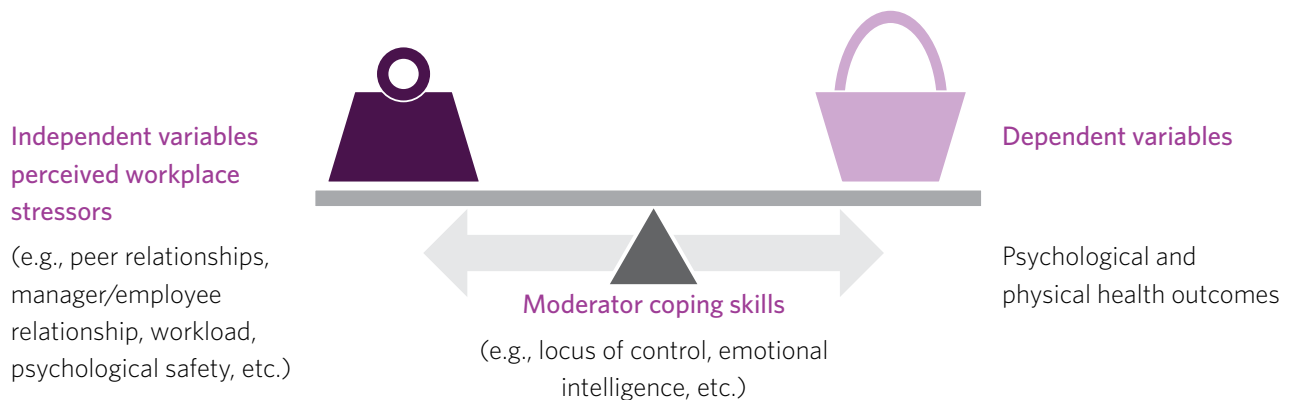
The purpose of this white paper is to provide a frame of reference that demonstrates how an individual's coping skills are linked to total health (physical, mental, work, and life), resiliency levels, and personal fulfillment – the ability to live and enjoy life based on one's visions and value that promote peace and happiness.

Why coping skills matter

People with low levels of coping skills are at higher risk for mental health issues and mental illness than those with high levels. Gaps in coping skills inhibit the ability to solve problems and to make healthy and effective decisions.

To examine how coping skills can predict health outcomes, Dr. Bill Howatt facilitated a doctoral research study that examined the question: "What role does an individual's coping skills have in predicting

psychological and physical health outcomes?" The study found that coping skills mattered and were, in fact, a moderator that partially explains why some individuals had better physical and psychological health outcomes than others. The below graphic shows how a moderator works. The study concluded that when combining a person's coping skills with their perceived stress levels coping skills were significant in predicting which employees were at more or less risk for health issues.

Independent variables perceived workplace stressors

(e.g., peer relationships, manager/employee relationship, workload, psychological safety, etc.)

Moderator coping skills
(e.g., locus of control, emotional intelligence, etc.)

Dependent variables

Psychological and physical health outcomes

Dr. Howatt repeated the above study in the public domain by using a survey called Your Life at Work[1], launched in 2014 by The Globe and Mail, and which collected more than 12,000 individual responses as of the end of 2016. One interesting observation from the aggregated responses is that nearly 60 percent of employees go to work experiencing some form of stress originating from work or home. The degree of stress can range from low to high.

The following terms were used to describe the level of stress: "I'm frustrated; I'm on the edge; I'm losing it." The definition and typical signs and symptoms of stress can be found in the Your Life at Work Survey Infographic: See what your life at work score means[2] on The Globe and Mail web site. (http://www. theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/careers/career-advice/life-at-work/infographic-see-what-your-life-at-work-score-means/article16525294/).

The higher the stress level individuals presented, the greater the risk for mental and physical illness that could be or is currently negatively impacting their quality of life. Moderation analyses repeated with this sample population also found that coping skills were significant for predicting health outcomes and employees' engagement levels.

1   Survey says: We're stressed (and not loving it). http://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/careers/career-advice/life-at-work/survey-says-were-stressed-and-not-loving-it/article22722102/
2   Infographic: See what Your Life at Work score means. http://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/careers/career-advice/life-at-work/infographic-see-what-your-life-at-work-score-means/article16525294/

The link between stress and mental health

The primary sources of psychosocial stressors are financial, work, relationships, and personal factors. Whether a person's mental illness originates from psychosocial factors, genetics, or traumatic events, coping skills and total health (physical, mental, work, life) contribute to resiliency levels.

When a person cannot cope they are at risk for engaging in behaviours that can negatively impact their resiliency. They may fail to eat correctly, stay up late drinking at night, or get less than six hours' sleep. If they don't engage their family or friends for support, they drain their energy reserves. The lower their reserves get, the more at risk they become. Like a battery charge, the higher the resiliency levels, the greater the readiness to provide a strong output. Ultimately, a person's resiliency levels are defined by what they do to build and restore them.

When a person is under prolonged stress it's common for them to experience emotional pain associated with the stressor. Because of this, coping skills and resiliency are not at the levels required to manage the presenting life challenges. The desire to move from pain to pleasure is an intrinsic human instinct. This is typically where ineffective coping tactics such as addictive behaviours, rooted in the premise that they can resolve a stressor, begin as an attempt to escape pain. Feel-good behaviours that spawn out of addictive behaviours such as overeating, using drugs, drinking, gambling, shopping, playing video games, and surfing the Internet can start out as micro escapes from life. However, with increases in frequency, intensity, and duration what start out as attempts to feel better become new problems that bring their own challenges and problems that can dwarf the original issue. Lying, stealing, cheating, aggression, and conflict are also examples of ineffective coping skills whose goals are to stop some perceived pain and to regain control.

It's common for people with poor coping skills to end up with both a mental illness and a chronic disease. For several years, Sam[3] came home every day after work feeling stressed about his work and life. Because of a poor coping mechanism, he spent his evenings on his couch watching TV for hours, while snacking on unhealthy food like chips and pop. This habit resulted in extra body fat that impacted Sam's cardiac and mental health, but he may not be aware that his lack of coping skills led to this deterioration of his health. One wonders how many Sams are unaware of how their daily micro decisions are defining their risk for disease and long-term happiness.

Lifestyle decisions and daily micro behaviours influence total health. Healthy diet, regular physical activity, maintaining a normal body weight, and avoiding tobacco use are ways to prevent or delay the onset of type 2 diabetes[4].

One reason why people don't exercise and take care of their nutrition may be that they have ineffective coping skills. What gets a person moving and focused on balancing their physical health is influenced by what they think, how they cope, and their resiliency to stay committed and focused on making healthy lifestyle choices. These actions suggest that it's wise to focus on mental and physical health together to take full advantage of the inherent interdependencies between aspects of total health.

Prolonged periods of stress increase the risk for strain that results in fatigue, risk of accidents, mistakes, and physical and psychological symptoms[5]. A person who remains under psychological strain, such as

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3   The Coping Crisis Paperback – Sep 8 2015. https://www.amazon.ca/Coping-Crisis-William-Howatt/dp/1926460030
4   Global report on diabetes.World Health Organization, Geneva, 2016
5   Lazarus, R. S. (1966). Psychological stress and the coping process. New York: McGraw-Hill.

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high job demands, can experience mental health issues that include symptoms of anxiety or depression that can disrupt their quality of life, especially when they are not able to keep their resiliency levels up.

A person whose resiliency levels are draining, doesn't get relief from the stressors that are challenging them, and whose symptoms persist, is at risk for moving from strain to increased mental health risk and eventually meeting the criteria for a mental health issue as defined by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders (DSM-5).

Both the Conference Board of Canada and the Mental Health Commission of Canada are educating employers on the impact of mental illness on their bottom lines. One in five people in Canada experiences a mental health problem or illness, with a cost to the economy of well in excess of $50 billion[6]. It has been estimated that only one in three in need is actively seeking support, suggesting that many are suffering in silence.

Mental health is gaining the attention of a growing number of employers who are becoming increasingly concerned about the rising numbers of employees who are going on short- and long-term disability due to mental illness. In addition, Canadian Workers' Compensation systems are increasingly expanding the compensability of mental health claims. The total estimated annual global costs for all types of chronic disease is $2.5 trillion[7], of which mental illness is estimated to be 13 percent. Alarmingly, the amount spent on support is only 2 percent, which equals about $2 per person[8].

As mental health awareness increases and stigma is lowered, it appears the infrastructure for treatment of mental illness is having difficulty keeping up with demand under the current funding formula. A 100 percent-reactive model may not ultimately be the best for addressing mental health. A growing movement supports the value of preventive approaches that assist employees to develop coping skills that can mature their resiliency.

Elements that influence how people cope

This section breaks down the factors that ultimately influence a person's ability to mature their resiliency.

Behavioural-based coping micro skills are the skills a person has learned, developed, and practices that enable them to problem solve and make decisions on demand. They assist intrapersonal development with respect to stress tolerance, self-direction (i.e., capacity to make decisions without direction), and self-awareness[9]. Like an Olympic athlete, the more one practices, the higher the degree of likelihood they will be able to mature their resiliency.

The Coping Crisis: Discovering why coping skills are required for a healthy and fulfilling life[10] pointed out five factors that play a role in shaping a person's mental map – what one uses to automatically filter information. The visual below shows how the five elements influence how a person interprets information they receive or think about:

Experience – life history, parents, childhood experiences, and work.

6   Smetanin, P., Stiff, D., Briante, C., Adair, C., Ahmad, S. & Khan, M. (2011). The life and economic impact of major mental illnesses in Canada: 2011 to 2041. RiskAnalytica, on behalf of the Mental Health Commission of Canada.

7   Bloom, David E.; Cafiero, Elizabeth T.; and Jane-Lopis, Eva. The Global Economic Burden of Non-Communicable Diseases. World Economic Forum and Harvard School of Public Health: Sep 2011.

8   Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse. Mental Health Action Plan 2013-2020. World Health Organization: May 2013.
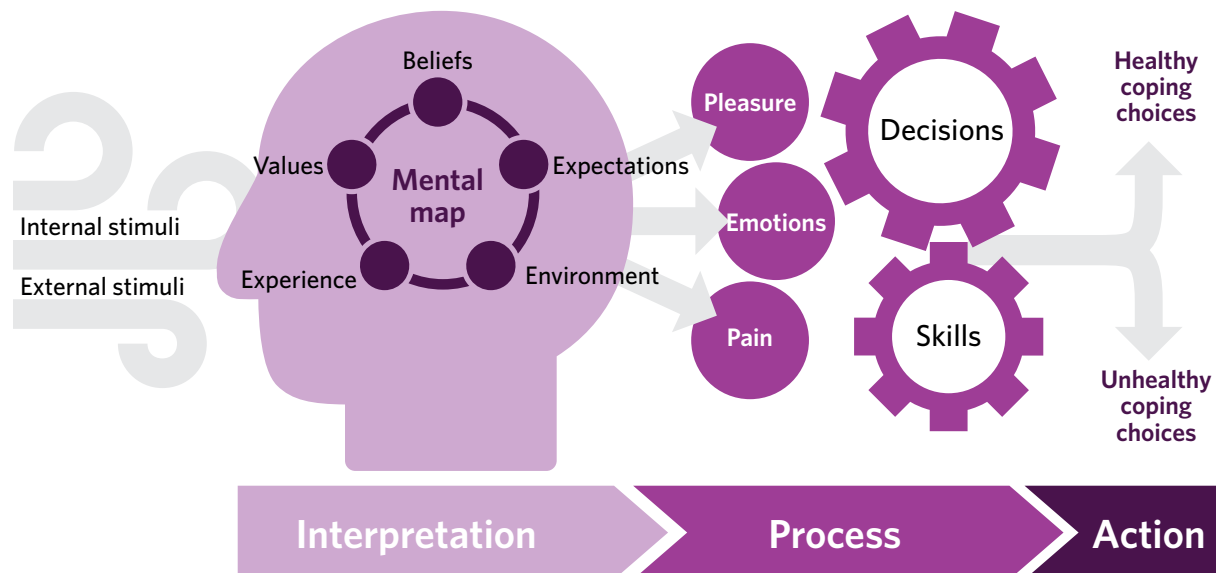
9   Leading From Within (Intrapersonal Domain). http://www.unb.ca/cel/cme/leading-from-within.html

10   The Coping Crisis Paperback – Sep 8 2015. https://www.amazon.ca/Coping-Crisis-William-Howatt/dp/1926460030

Expectations – expectations for the kind of life a person will have.

Values – what a person sees as most important (e.g., family).

Beliefs – what a person believes is true.

Environment – support systems and conditions experienced in life.

How a person filters information – whether they see something as good or bad – influences their emotional reactions, which can come fast, without much warning. They can be intense, powerful, and overwhelming. When emotions are not managed effectively they can drive ineffective behaviours before a person really thinks about the consequences of their actions. For example, most people in relationships can relate to saying something that as soon as it comes out of their mouth they know it will take a day to fix. Understanding this can help prepare a person to take charge of their emotions while they take a moment to think about their options versus overreacting and paying a price to fix damaged relationships or facing other more severe consequences.

How skilled a person is at defining a problem, exploring their options, and then making a decision depends on their cognitive skills. When solving a problem under pressure and making decisions time doesn't stop. Uncontrolled emotions can drive the urge to react quickly. In Sam's case, gaps in his coping skills and low resiliency render him susceptible to making poor decisions. Each decision he makes as he interacts and responds to the world takes one of two paths: healthy or unhealthy. The number of times Sam picks each of these paths ultimately defines and predicts his quality of life.

The mental map is different than personality because it is behaviour-based. Research suggests that personality characteristics are ingrained and seldom change. Personality can influence how well a person copes; however, since it can't be easily changed it will not be a topic of discussion in this paper. Although, a person taking the time to do a factor 5 personality profile, using a screening tool like Fast Big Five[11], can gain some insights and start to understand how they naturally cope, where their strengths and gaps lie, and the impact on their current life situation.

11   Howatt, W. (2014). Fast big five. https://www.howatthronline.com/quicksurveys/bigfiveintro.a5w

Coping skills and resiliency development start with self-evaluation awareness

Coping skills are the tools a person has at their disposal to solve problems and make decisions. They also can support mental health. Helping individuals process and understand how to develop coping skills and mature their resiliency requires first helping them to obtain a baseline to assess their coping skills and total health. Before an individual will be motivated to focus on developing or improving their coping skills and the need to build their resiliency they need to understand what coping skills and resiliency are, why they matter, and how they can collectively impact total health and risk for chronic disease, including mental illness.

Morneau Shepell's Total Health Index (THI)[12] includes a screening tool that assists individuals to obtain their coping skills baseline, as well as a set of recommendations and actions. For an employee to benefit from coping skills it's important for them to be clear on the why and the benefits. The motivation and value for an employee to engage and be open to learn how to develop their coping skills can be triggered in several ways. One way is getting a low coping skills score in the THI. For an employee who is struggling with mental health risk and is on short-term disability leave, one action may be to provide tools to develop their coping skills that will support them to return to work and stay on the job.

Core advice that is critical for employers is that before sending employees to coping skills and resiliency training they need to be clear on the why and what they can expect. Every employee owns their own mental health and thus needs to want to learn how to develop their coping skills and mature their resiliency.

Further evidence of the importance of coping skills

The THI is an evidence-based research tool that provides both employers and employees results and insights. One of the common elements reported to employers is the role coping skills play in predicting employee health, engagement, and productivity. To help make the business case as to the value of coping skills on workforce productivity, this section provides aggregated findings of what we are learning about how coping skills are moderating (influencing) health, engagement, and productivity.

The following two charts are derived from tens of thousands of aggregated Total Health Index (THI) files. With every client we replicate the coping skills moderation analysis as well examine coping skills relationships. This provides the employer with evidence with in their population on the role copings skills has for predicting health, engagement and productivity.

Chart 1 provides a visual of how much influence coping skills has in explaining the variance between perceived stress and different constructs such as mental health, engagement, and productivity. The stronger the score the greater statistical impact coping skills is having. It is interesting that coping skills play a major role for predicting mental health risk as well workplace experience. This re-enforces how important it is for employers to consider the role intrapersonal skills and coping skills are for productivity, sustainability and results.

Chart 2 provides a visual depiction of the positive relationship between coping skills and different constructs to show the influence and role coping skills has.

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12   Morneau Shepell Total Health Index (THI). http://www.morneaushepell.com/ca-en/total-health-index

Chart 1. — Power of coping in mitigating perceived stress
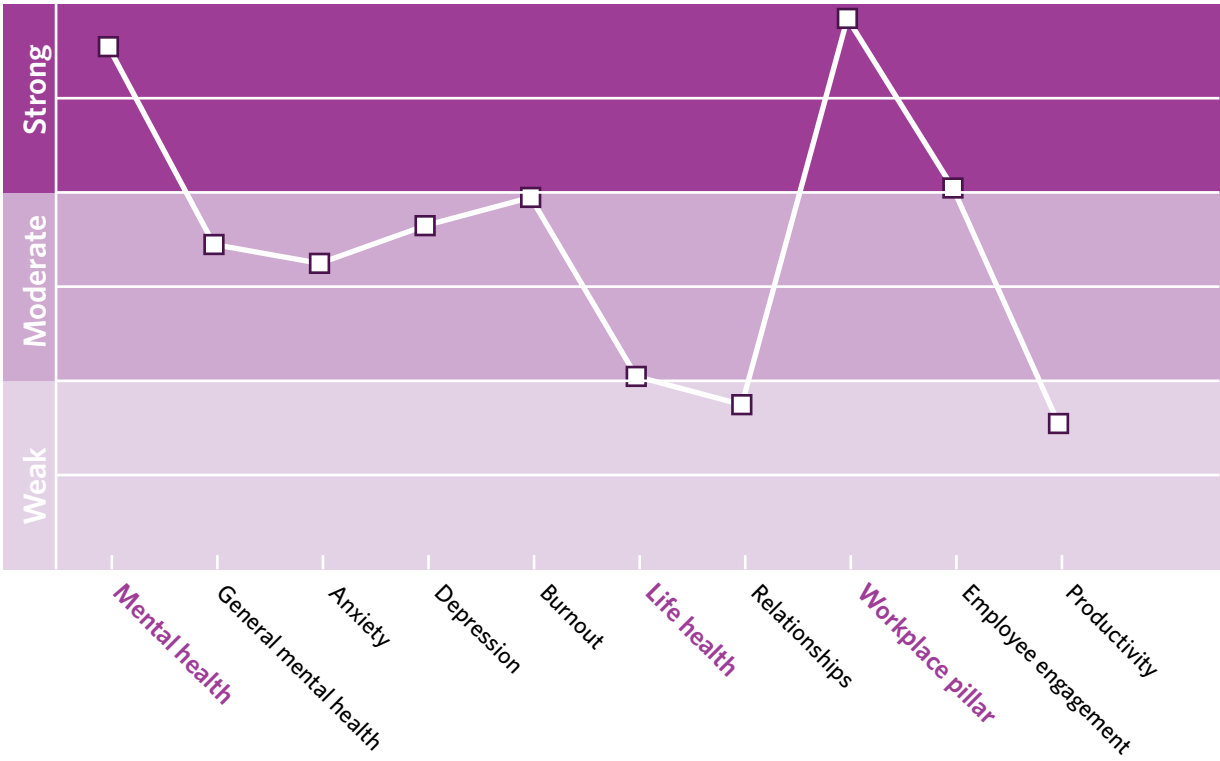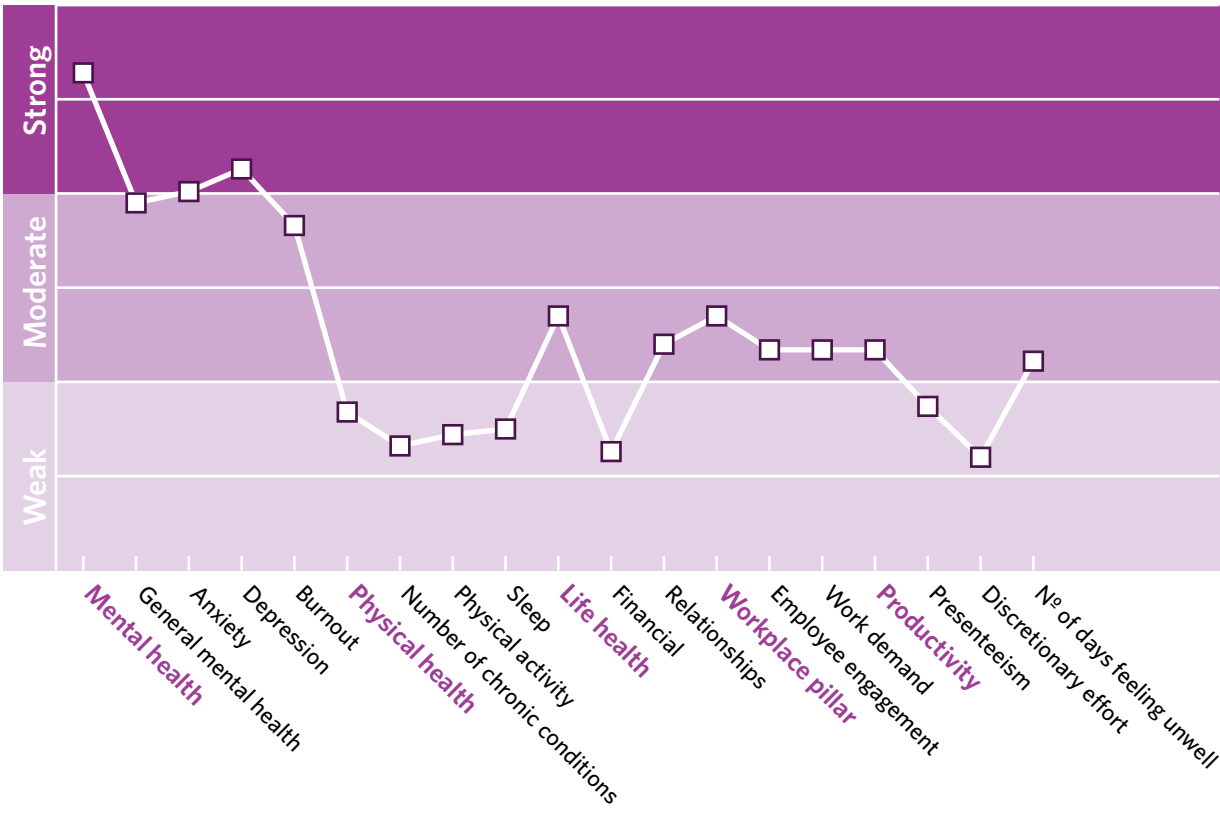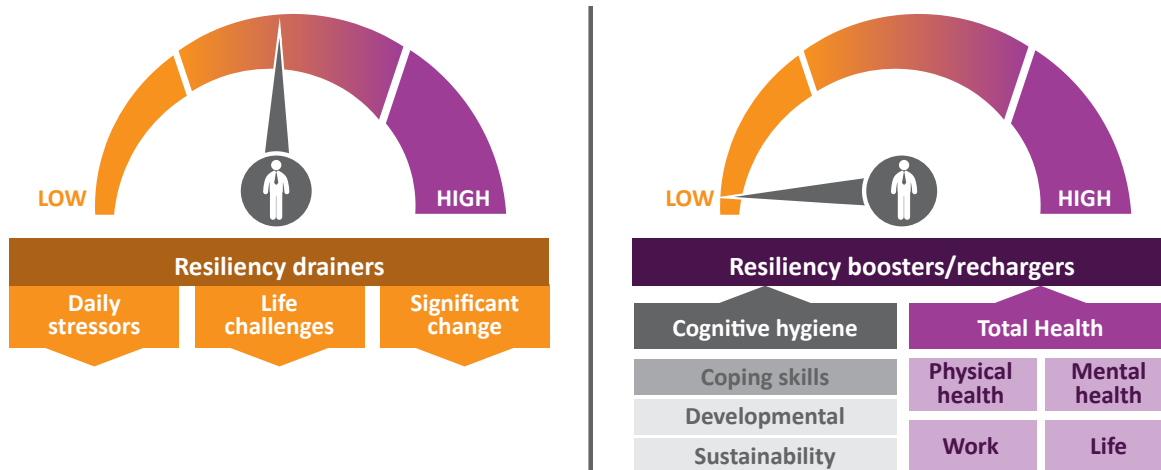

Chart 2. — Relationship of coping skills to employee total health, engagement and productivity

Why cognitive hygiene matters

Cognitive hygiene is the ability to effectively manage negative thinking, maintain cognitive abilities to solve problems, and make good decisions without thinking errors that influence mental health.

Cognitive hygiene is dependent on daily practice. It's akin to oral hygiene in that two key elements are required for success. Oral hygiene starts with developmental skills such as learning how to brush and floss teeth correctly and the sustainability daily actions of brushing after each meal and flossing at least once a day to promote good oral health. Yearly checkups ensure that what is being done daily is enough to prevent cavities and gum disease.

Cognitive hygiene is similar. Foundational developmental coping micro skills provide insight into emotions, thinking behaviours, and how to solve problems. These skills provide the foundation for effective decision making, but ultimately what a person thinks impacts what they do. And what they do each day to influence how they think depends on their sustainability coping micro skills. These are the daily actions they can choose to clean out negative, unwanted thoughts so they don't grow. This creates space from the demands of life and work to promote mental health and mature resiliency. Like oral hygiene, cognitive hygiene's success depends not only on what one knows but also on their daily practices and actions. One who knows how to brush their teeth but doesn't practice it is more likely to get cavities than a person who brushes daily.

Cognitive hygiene influences mental health, which in turn affects the behaviours, actions, and choices that impact overall total health and resiliency to take on the demands of life.

Like seeing a dentist once a year for a dental checkup, we advocate completing a total health index[13] (THI) survey at least once a year to check coping skills and mental health to determine how effective cognitive hygiene has been over the past 12 months.

Developmental coping micro skills

Developmental coping micro skills can support problem solving and decision making. Each of the nine listed below is trainable. Once these are mastered they can become hard wired and help a person cope more effectively so they make good decisions. Some of these skills are taken directly from cognitive

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13   http://www.morneaushepell.com/ca-en/total-health-index

behavioural literature and are taught in a non-clinical way with the focus on thinking more effectively. Thinking can play an important role in how a person processes their world. The purpose is to provide the learner with insight on the foundational skills that impact how they think, as well as to provide a model to understand resiliency and how their daily total health micro decisions have a direct impact on resiliency levels.

An effective adult learning format for teaching developmental coping micro skills is aligned to Bloom's Taxonomy[14] of learning domains, where the person is provided with concepts and opportunities to evaluate the application to their life and understand the benefits of learning and the most effective way to practice so they can remember and apply them on demand.

A learner seldom can master any of the skills in a three-hour course. As Bandura[15] suggested, to get to unconscious competency (being able to execute a behaviour automatically on demand) takes time, patience, practice, and focus. How long it takes depends on the person's situation and mental health level when starting a journey to develop their coping skills.

The individual is introduced to each skill and asked to evaluate their core competency. This can help determine where they have gaps and areas of opportunity to focus. Typically, learners pick one or two skills to focus on at a time. Their current competency defines how much work and time it will take to master the skill.

Nine developmental coping micro skills

The field of positive psychology is having a major influence on exploring how to help people learn to think differently. This section introduces nine developmental coping micro skills, but it's important to note that by no means are we suggesting these are the only and best ones. They were picked from experience as being helpful and a place to start the conversation.

1. **Rotter's Locus of Control**[16] – Locus of control helps measure and understand how much control a person perceives they have over their current circumstances. A person can fall on a continuum from external locus of control, where they feel highly influenced and even controlled by their circumstances and the information they receive, to internal locus of control, where they are more independent. A person on the external side of the continuum can learn to operate more from an internal locus of control. This is empowering and can help them take more control of their decisions and actions, in line with Glasser's choice theory that human beings have control over their choices.

2. **Bandura's Self-efficacy**[17] – Sometimes when a person struggles with life challenges it's due to a gap in critical core competencies such as finance, relationships, intimacy, and work. Believing they can't be successful in a situation can have a negative influence on a person's self-esteem, and low levels of self-esteem can wear down the ability to believe they could ever be successful in such a situation. Bandura provided an informative model that can teach a person to understand how what they believe they will do, their confidence in their abilities, and their self-esteem are linked. When a person is struggling, it's helpful to determine if there is a block in core life skills that if improved could reduce

14   Bloom's taxonomy. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bloom's_taxonomy
15   Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavior changes. Psychological Review, 84, 191-215.
16   Rotter, J. (1954). Social learning and clinical psychology. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
17   Bandura, A. (1991). Self-efficacy mechanism in physiological activation and health-promoting behavior. In J. Madden, IV (Ed.),
      Neurobiology of learning, emotion and affect (pp. 229-270). New York: Raven.

stress and increase confidence and success that would positively impact their self-esteem and overall mental health.

3. **Ellis's ABC Model**[18] – This is an effective model to help a person understand why they may be having negative beliefs about their potential and future. It can unpack the relationship between events that happen and why one reacts and behaves the way they do. The model can teach how to dispute faulty thinking and replace it with more effective thinking. It's difficult to learn to cope if one is starting with faulty thinking that puts them at a disadvantage. This often can result in emotional responses and behaviours that are not in the person's best interest, such as overreacting to a comment from a peer because they filtered it through a belief where there were no supporting facts. The overreaction puts unwarranted strain on the relationship, which would not happen if they had the skills to challenge their faulty and even irrational thinking.

4. **Beck's Cognitive Schemas**[19] – Like computer spyware, little automatic programs can become ingrained and form cognitive schemas or scripts that are used to interpret information and thoughts. Assumptions they form about themselves (e.g., I am a failure) can prevent a person from trying, as they automatically conclude they will fail. When left, a negative schema can have a major impact on a person's perception with respect to their ability to cope or get through thinking that can impact decisions about their potential.

5. **Goleman's Emotional Intelligence**[20] defines how effective an individual is at processing others' purposes and actions, their ability to work with others, and how well they can manage their emotions under pressure. Making effective decisions requires being able to manage emotions so a person does not overreact to information they receive. This skill can help a person learn to manage their emotions more effectively so they can develop their social skills. It's difficult to cope when feeling emotionally overwhelmed. Obtaining a foundation in emotional intelligence can help a person become aware of how their actions impact others and can lower their risk of stress and conflict, as well as build strong social relationships.

6. **Psychological Hardiness**[21] – How a person thinks defines what they do under stress, and how calm they are influences their body's response, such as the degree to which they feel tense or anxious. Some of the most important and helpful life lessons come from experiences. Teaching a person about this micro skill can provide insight as to how they can learn to manage stress through practice and experience. For example, a person who starts working in a call centre finds the pace fast and is not sure how they will be able to manage all the information. If they can maintain their resiliency, with more experience what seemed impossible will become easier. U.S. Navy SEALs are experts in this topic. Their training allows them to learn firsthand that the mind will often shut down before the body. The goal is to teach that the mind can deal with more than most could imagine is possible.

7. **Grit**[22] can be described as persistence, drive, will, determination, resolve, and motivation to achieve a long-term goal. Having a goal can give a person purpose to push forward, so that when they

18   Ellis, E. (2000). Rational emotive behavior therapy as an internal control psychology. Journal of Rational Emotive and Cognitive Behavior Therapy, 18, (1), 19-38.
19   Beck, A. (1967). Depression: Clinical, experimental and theoretical aspects. New York: Harper Row.
20   Goleman, D. (1995). Emotional intelligence. New York: Bantam.
21   Howatt, William (2016). How being hardy is healthy. http://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/careers/career-advice/life-at-work/how-being-hardy-is-healthy/article30406070/
22   Howatt, William (2016). http://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/careers/career-advice/life-at-work/do-you-have-the-grit-to-reach-your-goals/article26179991/

are faced with a challenge they can use the goal as motivation to achieve their desired outcomes. When teaching grit, there is value in introducing the fact that personality can play a role in drive and conviction. However, since this micro skill is being taught as a behavioural-based tool, teaching the value of taking small steps is important. By paying attention to small daily actions a person can develop confidence and conviction to achieve their desired outcomes. Daily focus on micro skills such as paying attention to every bite and only putting healthy food into the body can, over several weeks and months, be transformational. Small steps can achieve big gains. The absence of daily goals and purpose may have a negative impact on a person as they may believe they could never achieve a dream or that there is no need to try because they will fail before they start.

8. **Problem Solving and Decision Making**[23] – At the core of how a person copes in a situation is the ability to break down their challenge and make a decision. This is often referred to as cognitive appraisal. By learning problem solving and decision making people can develop two important skills that are to be used independently. Learning how to ask the why question, not assuming statements are true, and committing to understanding the best available facts before making a decision reduce the risk of overreacting or making a poor choice.

9. **Resiliency** – Resiliency refers to the capacity to deal with and push through different degrees of adversity. How well a person matures their resiliency defines their ability to recover from stressful experiences and overcome hardship to function well and succeed in life[24].

To achieve and mature resiliency there are other actions a person can take besides learning coping skills. These include developing their total health, which includes physical and financial health, social skills, having strong and healthy relationships at work, and doing what is required to maintain their career. This is the one coping micro skill that has links to both development and sustainability.

Nine sustainability coping micro skills

The second cluster of coping micro skills is referred to as sustainability micro coping skills. These are the kinds of proactive micro skills that facilitate and support positive mental health. Below are nine examples that help mature resiliency. Each requires practice to realize its benefits. Consider the example of physical exercise. If a person runs five miles once a year, there's little likelihood they will be able to run a full marathon. However, if they train daily and are clear on the reason and purpose, they are more likely to have the energy to run a marathon. A healthy and fulfilling life is a marathon, not a sprint.

Dr. Howatt introduced the following examples of sustainability coping micro skills in a series of articles in The Globe and Mail supporting the Employee Recommended Workplace Award, a new employer of choice award from Morneau Shepell in partnership with The Globe and Mail. Each skill is referenced so the reader can review the full article:

1. **Mindfulness**[25] – the practice of focusing one's attention to the present moment. The goal is to calmly learn to accept one's feelings and thoughts in a non-judgmental manner. This keeps out worries or fears so the individual notices calm, peace, and all the good things in their life.

23   Kepner & Tregoe. Problem solving and decision making. http://www.kepner-tregoe.com/problem-solving/
24   Yi, J. P., Vitaliano, P. P., Smith, R. E., Yi, J. C., & Weinger, K. (2008). The role of resilience on psychological adjustment and physical health in patients with diabetes. British Journal of Health Psychology,13, 311–325.
25   Howatt, W. (2016). Learn to calm your stressed mind with visualization. http://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/careers/workplace-award/learn-to-calm-your-stressed-mind-with-visualization/article33241100/

2. **Meditation**[26] – the practice of training the mind to an empty space; another form and method to practice mindfulness.

3. **Journaling**[27] – taking a few moments to process each day's events. This can help focus on what worked well and what one can choose to do differently tomorrow. The focus is not on what's wrong; it's leaving the negative on the page and setting up to create a new page for a new day.

4. **Mood management**[28] – paying attention to different emotions at home and at work to reveal early warning signs of trends and strain that provide awareness of where a person can act to reduce emotional stress.

5. **Diaphragmic breathing**[29] – like meditation, it's a formal practice that can help find calm to give the brain a break from negativity to help a person build their reserves.

6. **Positive self-talk**[30] – based on the notion that what we think we create, self-talk trains the brain to think more positive than negative.

7. **Six-step daily health plan**[31] – having a set daily game plan of micro skills that can support resiliency is helpful. This micro skill focuses on micro decisions that impact a person's total health (mind and body).

8. **Gratitude**[32] – most people who are thinking about improving their coping skills and resiliency start with more good than bad. The challenge for some is becoming aware of what is good in their life (e.g., clean air) and acknowledging it. One key to finding peace is to be grateful for what one has.

9. **Removing negative thoughts**[33] – This skill focuses on ending each day with a clear, positive, or neutral mind. If something is bothering a person this skill focuses on finding a resolution so that the negativity is cleared out. If this can't be done alone it can be a signal to get support before the thoughts become habit and impact the belief system.

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26   Howatt, W. (2016). How 'mindful hydration' can reduce stress and boost productivity http://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/careers/workplace-award/how-mindful-hydration-can-reduce-stress-and-boost-productivity/article31965761/

27   Howatt, W. (2016). Experiencing distress? Here are some skills to help you manage it http://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/careers/workplace-award/experiencing-distress-here-are-some-skills-to-help-you-manage-it/article31741330/

28   Howatt, W. (2016). Do you know how to manage your mood at work? http://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/careers/workplace-award/do-you-know-how-to-manage-your-mood-at-work/article32080237/

29   Howatt, W. (2016). A 10-step routine to reduce work stress one breath at a time. http://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/careers/workplace-award/a-10-step-routine-to-reduce-work-stress-one-breath-at-a-time/article33006702/

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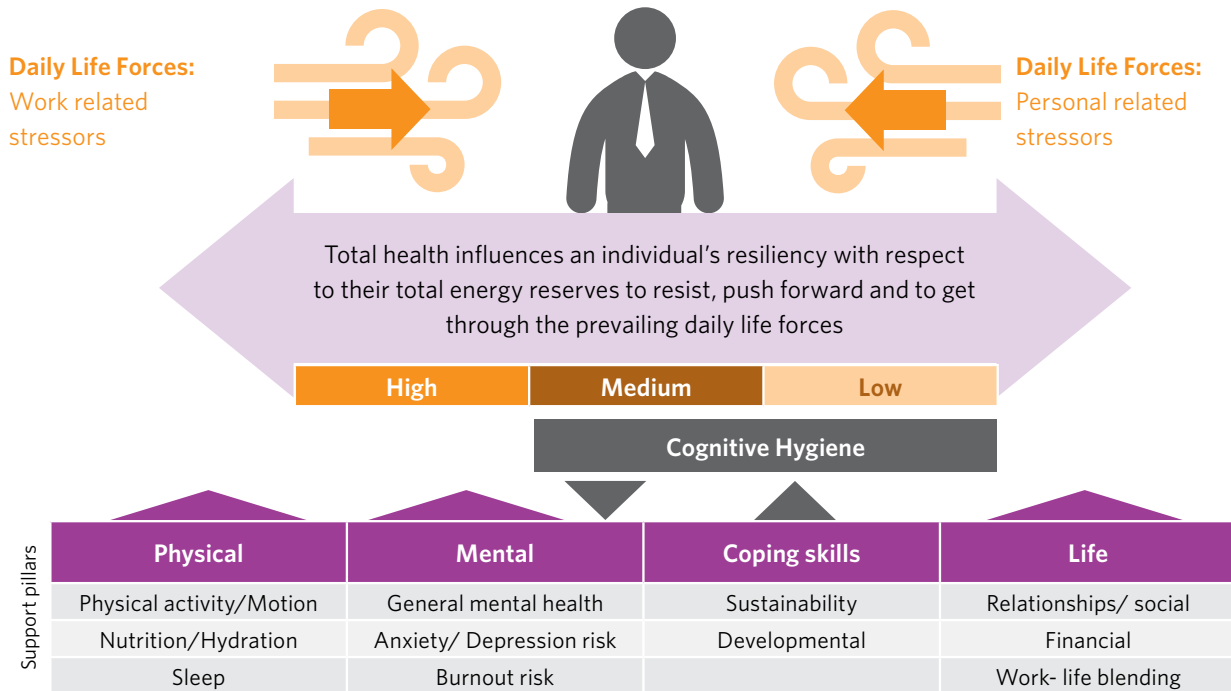
31   Howatt, W. (2016). A six-step plan for employees to improve their health. http://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/careers/workplace-award/a-six-step-plan-for-employees-to-improve-their-health/article33339832/

32   Howatt, W. (2016). How to have an 'attitude of gratitude'. http://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/careers/workplace-award/how-to-have-an-attitude-of-graditude/article31005994/

33   Howatt, W. (2016). How to clean out your negative thoughts. http://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/careers/workplace-award/how-to-clean-out-your-negative-thoughts/article32516712/

The links between cognitive hygiene, total health and maturing resiliency

The below model provides a visual framework for teaching individuals about the links between total health, coping skills, and maturing resiliency.

Employees are challenged daily by life forces that come from work and home. These can include a difficult commute and interpersonal relationships with family members and peers. The forces can come in different levels of magnitude (low-medium-high) and their number can vary from day to day.

The core of this model begins with coping skills that interconnect with physical, mental, and life – all factors that each employee has some direct control and influence over when they understand how.

The arrow from coping skills to mental health with the label cognitive hygiene demonstrates how important what a person thinks has on their mental health. This will be evident by how they think, feel, and behave.

Daily micro behaviours, from what a person chooses to eat, number of hours they sleep, physical activity, budget and disposable cash, and time they spend with children and spouse are examples of activities that influence total health. Mental health shapes what people do, and what they do defines their resiliency. It's important to understand that resiliency is not static; it continually needs to be recharged. As they take on the forces of life, people need to keep building their resiliency so they can not only deal with the small challenges but also the big ones. However, even if a person has a high resiliency level some events in life may be overwhelming. These include trauma and grief that quickly drain a person's resources. When these occur, tapping into peer or professional help can provide energy and insight to cope so they can get back into facilitating total health.

Cognitive hygiene can be improved by practicing sustainability coping micro skills and ensuring that foundational developing coping micro skills are in place.

Additional factors that are aligned to total health, like personal strengths (e.g., creativity and social intelligence), adaptability, and attitude (e.g., optimism), can support a person to mature their resiliency. One way to think about maturing resiliency is learning and developing sources of energy that charge a person's battery so they are ready to take on life the best they can. The higher the charge is maintained, the more likely they will be able to see the light and push through when challenged by a life force. A person who feels hopeless often has gaps in their cognitive hygiene, along with low levels of resiliency.

Maturing resiliency takes a daily commitment to healthy and proactive lifestyle habits such as building a healthy and strong social support system, practicing cognitive hygiene, physical activity, eating a proper diet, getting enough sleep, drinking water, eliminating risk factors (e.g., excessive drinking), and engaging in hobbies and passions.

Resiliency levels have a direct impact on one's perception of whether they will be able to survive – the optimal outcome for all human beings.

Adults who have not been trained in maintaining resiliency can utilize such training modalities as classroom, peer-to-peer, and computer-based. When a person is motivated and wants to learn, these training tools can help, provided the individual is clear on what they want to accomplish and why. I (BH) have created an online program whose primary focus is on supporting individuals to develop coping skills. Pathway to Coping[34] frames and teaches the above coping micro skills. The learner does one module at a time, in the comfort of their home or workplace.

A person's commitment to the degree they are going to invest in maturing their resiliency can have a positive impact on what is known as psychological capital (PsyCap), characterized by (1) having confidence (self-efficacy) to take on and put in the necessary effort to succeed at challenging tasks; (2) making a positive attribution (optimism) about succeeding now and in the future; (3) persevering towards goals, and, when necessary, redirecting paths to goals (hope) in order to succeed; and (4) when beset by problems and adversity, sustaining and bouncing back and even beyond (resiliency) to attain success[35].

The higher the PsyCap, the higher the probability a person will achieve their desired health, engagement, and productivity goals with respect to work and life.

The business case for investing in coping skills to support employees to mature their resiliency

Before spending money getting total health baselines supporting employees to enhance their cognitive hygiene and mature their resiliency, most decision makers require evidence on why these are important and how investing in such programs can increase productivity and results.

This conversation starts with the notion that what a person thinks is what they will do. It seems like an easy concept to grasp; however, in fairness to business people who don't have context with how thinking, mental health, and business imperatives are aligned, this can be a stretch.

When some senior leaders hear a consultant talking about mental health, the message sounds similar to Charlie Brown's dog Snoopy. All they hear is, "wa wa wa wa wa wa wa wa." They don't see the clear links between employee mental health and productivity. To help understand why coping skills and resiliency

34   Pathway to coping online course. http://www.unb.ca/cel/online/courses-programs/coping-skills.html
35   Luthans, F., & Youssef, C. M. (2007). Emerging positive organizational behavior. Journal of Management, 33, 321-349.

levels matter and how they can influence employees' total health, engagement, and productivity, it's helpful to explore some of the reasons why investing in coping skills and resiliency development is good for business.

Following are some examples of the direct relationship between coping skills and business imperatives that impact an organization's top and bottom lines.

Turnover – Some employees leave their job because they can't cope with the demands of their work or direct manager, don't fit into the culture, or can't get along with their peers. Lack of coping skills may be one reason that some HR leaders don't consider. Employees' intrapersonal skills influence how they perceive both their work and the culture, so helping an employee get a coping skills baseline assessment of their risk can be an economical and effective way to retain critical hires. Starting with a conversation around a two-way accountability model, employees and employer can define the employees' workplace experience.

Based on our THI research, in a typical organization approximately 30 percent of the population can benefit from developing coping skills. There is a high probability that some top talent is leaving because they don't know how to fit in, cope, or self-advocate. In a company that is experiencing an 18-percent voluntary turnover rate, it's possible that 4.5 percent of decisions to leave may be related to coping skills.

The estimated[36] replacement cost of a low-paying job is 16 percent of annual salary, mid-range is 20 percent, and highly-educated executive positions, 213 percent. Consider ABC Company with 1,000 white collar workers. Based on an average cost of 20 percent of the aggregate $85,000 salary, replacing an average 19 percent turnover results in approximately $3.2 million annual costs. If within the 4.5 percent turnover related to coping skills the employer could influence a one-percent improvement by facilitating coping skills within the employees' lifecycle and retaining 10 employees a year, the cost saving would be approximately $170,000. The savings in tacit knowledge and productivity could be several times this.

Productivity – How effectively a person copes can predict their risk for mental illness, and there is a direct relationship between coping and presenteeism. Presenteeism occurs when an employee attends work feeling mentally and/or physically unwell, resulting in falling short of achieving minimal standards of performance.

Basically, they pace themselves and do what they can to survive the day so they get a paycheque. If an employee is not feeling well at work and gives their best effort for only half of the day, for the other half they are performing at a substandard level or perhaps not at all. This suggests that approximately half of this employee's salary for the day is not being fully earned. Presenteeism can be 7.5 times costlier than absenteeism, estimated at $20-$30 billion for Canadian employers[37].

If ABC Company found through its THI index that 30 percent of its workforce is putting in less than 70 percent of its best effort each day, this means that approximately 300 full-time equivalent positions are being paid 100 percent for less than 70 percent of their best work. This suggests that in a workforce of 1,000, with an average salary of $85,000, approximately $26 million of payroll is not being fully utilized. While no employer will get all employees to always work at full capacity, our THI research found a direct relationship between presenteeism and coping skills. Employees with high coping skills are at less risk for presenteeism than those without.

36   Merhar, C (2016). Employee Retention - The Real Cost of Losing an Employee.
      https://www.zanebenefits.com/blog/bid/312123/employee-retention-the-real-cost-of-losing-an-employee
37   Employers Health Coalition. (2000). The hidden competitive edge. Employee health and productivity. Managed Care Communications.
      Retrieved from **http://www.acoem.org/health_right.aspx?id=1312**

Disability management – How effectively a person copes with the demands of their workplace and how high their resiliency levels are can predict their workplace attendance. Our THI research found a direct relationship between coping skills and attendance. Employees with high coping skills tend to have good workplace attendance. They are at less risk for chronic disease and are typically more active in taking care of their physical health than those with low levels of coping skills, which have been linked to chronic disease and poor physical health.

The prime objective of disability management is to facilitate quick and safe return to work by employees. Disability continues to be a concern for many organizations, especially short-term disability due to mental health issues such as adjustment disorder[38]. These are work- or life-related problems that cause stress and can result in a person feeling depressed, anxious, or self-destructive. Cases where an employee whose mental illness isn't resolved can develop into complex, long-term disability. Mental health problems and illnesses typically account for approximately 30 percent of short- and long-term disability claims[39].

As mental health issues continue to be discussed in the workplace, factors that employers will be advised to track closely include the average age of persons who go on long-term disability, the reasons, and the duration. Organizations where the average employee goes on LTD at age 52 and remains off until they are 65 are funding insurance premiums for these employees for 13 years. With the increase in short-term disability due to mental illness, the cost and risks associated with a drop in the average age and the number of employees under 30 who go on long-term disability may become crippling for some organizations. One challenge with treating and supporting employees with mental health issues is that they are at high risk for comorbidity, which is having more than one chronic disease (e.g., diabetes, addictions and depression).

The key for any disability program is a safe return to work. There are different tactics to shorten the duration of disability absence, lessen the costs of an absence, such as to work with the employee to gradually reintegrate them into the workplace permitting them to gradually and incrementally cope with an increase in their job tasks over time.

Physical health – A prominent neurologist once said, "What's good for your heart is also good for your brain."

While we acknowledge that many mental illnesses have a genetic predisposition[40], there is ample evidence that there are many things we can do to support our brain to keep it healthy, just as we've come to do for heart health. In doing so, we can reduce our risk of relapsing or developing a mental illness in our lifetime.

Our brain is constantly receiving inputs from our environment through various organs. This causes our brain and body to secrete chemicals (neurotransmitters and hormones) to respond accordingly to these inputs. Today, some of these chemicals are measurable; they include serotonin, melatonin, GABA, dopamine, epinephrine, estrogen, testosterone, cortisol, and insulin. Together, like musicians playing instruments in an orchestra, every chemical has an integral part. Translated into day to day life, they determine if we are calm, excitable and anxious, depressed, obsessive and compulsive or develop a craving and addiction.

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38   Adjustment disorders. http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/adjustment-disorders/basics/definition/con-20031704
39   Sairanen, S., Matzanke, D., & Smeall, D. (2011). The business case: Collaborating to help employees maintain their mental well-being. Healthcare Papers, 11, 78–84.
40   Cross-Disorder Group of the Psychiatric Genomics Consortium. Identification of risk loci with shared effects on five major psychiatric disorders: a genome-wide analysis. The Lancet, February 28, 2013

How we are able manipulate these chemicals will determine our ability to cope with stress, which in turn could determine if a mental illness is more likely to manifest. Hence, there is value in learning how to modulate brain chemicals through lifestyle. Experts often advocate having a healthy lifestyle by being more active, eating well and getting enough sleep.[41] Why, you ask?

Exercise stimulates a number of hormones which give us a sense of well-being and euphoria because exercise causes higher levels of endorphins and testosterone.[42] And with regular exercise, cortisol, a stress response hormone is lowered.[43] If this hormone is allowed to build up to high levels in our body, we develop a sense of anxiousness and panic. Foods are in fact 'drugs' and some of them behave as uppers and downers. Examples of uppers include sugar and caffeine, while alcohol is a depressant. These substances affect our brain function and, in turn, our moods. Inadequate sleep reduces our serotonin sensitivity,[44] which are often referred to as a 'happy' hormone, while increasing cortisol. When this hormone reaches high levels, insulin is secreted which triggers us to crave sugar, eat more foods with carbohydrates, and drink alcohol.

Recently at TELUS, they led a study using a Wellness Solution called Self-Health. They were able to show, in just twelve weeks, improved hormone profiles and reduced disease risk, including the risk of depression through lifestyle changes. This is evidence that developing healthy lifestyle skills is a coping strategy and a method of improving physical and mental resilience.

In the same pilot, we were able to show a savings of $17 per employee on the benefit side, a 9% cost reduction as a result of lowering the risk of diabetes and a cost savings of $72 per employee, a 15% reduction for heart disease in one pilot group with more junior employees.

In another pilot, the average age was higher and hence, their risk of disease would increase. We were able to show more significant savings of $70 per employee on the benefit side, a 27% reduction, as a result of lowering the risk of diabetes and a cost savings of $70 per employee, a 14% reduction for heart disease in this group with more senior employees.

Employee conflict and legal risk – Research in several different workplace climates has demonstrated that employees who perceive unfair treatment by their employers often resort to lawsuits and other legal claims as a means of attempting to rectify their feeling of injustice.[45] The unfair treatment in question is not necessarily a violation of an employee's legal rights in their workplace but, instead, an organizational injustice that could be as simple as the employer's failure to meet the worker's expectations regarding fair procedures for decision-making or respectful communications with the employee.[46] In other words, it appears that some workplace legal claims are initiated not because an employee's legal rights have been violated or even because an employee thinks his or her rights have been violated but, instead, because the employee feels unfairness and sees the law as the only viable recourse to which to turn for resolution.

41   Walsh R. Lifestyle and mental health. Am Psychol. 2011 Oct;66(7):579-92. doi: 10.1037/a0021769. Review. PubMed PMID: 21244124

42   HAWKINS, VIVIAN N. et al. "Effect of Exercise on Serum Sex Hormones in Men: A 12-Month Randomized Clinical Trial." Medicine and science in sports and exercise 40.2 (2008): 223–233.

43   Anderson, Elizabeth, and Geetha Shivakumar. "Effects of Exercise and Physical Activity on Anxiety." Frontiers in Psychiatry 4 (2013): 27.

44   Too little sleep gradually desensitizes the serotonin 1A receptor system. Roman V, Walstra I, Luiten PG, Meerlo P. Sleep. 2005 Dec;28(12):1505-10.

45   VanBuskirk, Kelly. Why Employees Sue: Rethinking Approaches to the Resolution of Employment Conflicts. Toronto: Thompson Reuters (in press, 2017); Lind, E.A., J. Greenberg, K.S. Scott, and T.D. Welchans. "The Winding Road from Employee to Complainant: Situational and Psychological Determinants of Wrongful-Termination Claims." Administrative Science Quarterly. 45.3 (2000): 557-590; Bies, R. and T. Tyler. The "Litigation Mentality" in Organizations: a Test of Alternative Psychological Explanations. Organizational Science, 4.3 (1993):352-366.

46   Ibid.

A problem that arises from this reality is that, once consulted, lawyers have a tendency and, in fairness, perhaps a professional duty, to metamorphose an employee's complaint of unfair treatment into a potential legal claim.[47] What the concerned employee may not have seen as a legal matter, then, may be transformed into a lawsuit or other legal claim by a lawyer[48] who was consulted only because the aggrieved employee had no other recourse. The experience of the U.S. Postal Service in using a mediation process to address workplace conflicts rather than traditional legal procedures supports the assertion that many employees who feel unfairly treated at work are likely to be satisfied with non-legal resolutions.[49] In a study of the REDRESS workplace mediation system, it was found in approximately 180,000 exit interviews that over ninety (90%) percent of both complainants and respondents were satisfied with the opportunities that the process provided to present their views, to participate and to be treated fairly.[50] Further, it has been found that a majority of employees who consider making legal claims against their employers are not primarily motivated by potential financial compensation and are, in fact, willing to incur indebtedness in order to pursue a rectification of injustice.[51]

Employers may, however, conclude that attention to employee justice perceptions and the development of internal procedures such as REDRESS for response to perceived injustices are worthwhile expenditures of resources. Organizational decisions in that sphere should necessarily be informed by the costs of the alternative, which is potential resort to the legal system. On that point, and even putting aside the very real but not immediately quantifiable cost of reduced employee citizenship that is generated by employer unfairness,[52] 2015 data indicates that employment-related disputes that are referred to Canadian courts are likely to cost employers an average of between $31,000 (for a two day hearing) and $81,000 (for a seven day hearing) in legal fees alone.[53] In the unionized work context, procedurally simpler grievance hearings are likely to cost employers an average of $13,000 in legal fees.[54]

The important consideration for employers lies in employees' perceptions of unfair treatment and how employers can both increase their provision of fairness at work but, also, how employees can be helped to better cope with perceived injustices. While measures of personal characteristics such as the Norwegian Hardiness Scale may provide insight into the capacity of prospective employees to cope with perceptions of unfairness at work,[55] it is also clear that employee experiences of felt unfairness can be reduced by employers and also efficiently addressed when they arise, in order to depreciate the likelihood of employee referral to legal action.

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47   Markovits, Daniel. *A Modern Legal Ethics: Adversary Advocacy in a Democratic Age.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008.

48   Ibid.

49   Bingham, Lisa B. Employment dispute resolution: The case for mediation. Conflict Resolution Quarterly, 2004, 22(1-2):145.

50   Ibid.

51   VanBuskirk, Note 1.

52   Leon, Matthew R. and Jonathon R.B. Halbesleben. Observed mistreatment: Understanding Schadenfreude in the response to supervisor abuse, in Perrewe, Pamela L, Jonathon R. B. Halbesleben, and Christopher C. Rosen. *Mistreatment in Organizations*, 2015.

53   *Canadian Lawyer.* June, 2015: http://www.canadianlawyermag.com/images/stories/pdfs/Surveys/2015/CL_June_15_GoingRate.pdf (accessed January 26, 2017).

54   Ibid.

55   Lo Bue, Salvatore, et al. "Hardiness Promotes Work Engagement, Prevents Burnout, And Moderates Their Relationship." *Military Psychology* 25.2 (2013): 105-115.

Conclusion

The end goal of this paper is to provide a point of view on why coping skills matter and to help the reader understand the link between coping skills and maturing resiliency. To provide evidence of the impact of coping skills, we reported Morneau Shepell's THI findings from its Canada benchmark database. This dataset of thousands of Canadian employees from different sectors and types of organizations shows what our research has found to date with respect to coping skills and their impact and potential for curbing and reducing risk factors that negatively impact an organization's workforce productivity and create financial strain.

One key point for all employers to keep top of mind: though coping skills and resiliency are important, there is no quick fix. Employees need to be engaged in the process and to see the value of taking responsibility to learn and develop coping skills. Employers can train their leaders to better cope and manage their employees; however, no silver bullet nor training will solve this problem. The message here is that total health for a workforce is created one employee at a time, and that what an employee thinks defines what they do.

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