

Prevention helps control spiralling benefit costs

By Bill Zolis

In Canada last year \$20 billion was spent by governments and corporations on stress related issues. How does this affect your company? You simply need to check your sick leave and LTD costs.

The daily pressures of life — jobs, relationships, money, raising children and now war and terrorism — have become such constant companions that many of us operate with the constant feelings of anxiety, pressure or burn-out. Many of us have accepted stress as a standard part of life. Although we may try to ignore it, stress doesn't go away. It just goes to work inside the body.

A true visionary Human Resource manager will acknowledge the importance of their role in supporting a wellness path for the workforce and cost saving for the bottom line. It's important to understand the importance of education and consider investigating the growing trend toward self-directed health care.

Why bother?

You will have taken an important first step toward:

- increasing employee satisfaction
- decreasing employee absenteeism
- containing rising benefit costs
- investigating new strategies and approaches to address stress-

- induced illness in the workplace
- enhancing your strategy to attract and retain qualified employees
- building employee morale

Making the strategic move to investigate complementary care modalities is the first step to a comprehensive program, promoting a healthy and productive work environment, as well as cost effectively augmenting a back-to-work strategy.

Everyone knows that conventional health care approaches are necessary but the key to optimum, long term health lies in prevention. More than ever before, Canadians are taking an active role in creating personal health plans for themselves and their loved ones, and are looking outside of traditional Western methods to complementary care disciplines. Why? Simply because it has been proven that complementary care successfully augments the effectiveness of allopathic treatments.

For instance, massage therapy is a reliable means to alleviating stress, a common workforce ailment that precipitates increased sick days and long-term leave among employees. Long-term sufferers of headaches and back pain may find relief through the services of a naturopath or chiropractor. A few moments of quiet meditation during the day may be just the ticket to improve concentration and produc-

tivity.

Employees looking to achieve and maintain an appropriate body weight will better benefit from the counsel of a trained nutritionist, rather than rely on fad diets that can be harmful to their health.

Complementary care practitioners believe in assisting the body to tap into its own innate restorative ability. A naturopath for example lives by the philosophy "*vies medicatrix nature*" or the vital force of nature. By focusing on preventative medicine, naturopaths not only succeed in improving the quality of life of their patients (through nutritional advice and lifestyle counselling) - but may also reduce the amount of expensive prescription drugs taken by these patients, reducing overall benefit claims.

A chiropractor also practices techniques that aim towards whole body wellness. To a chiropractor, wellness is the state of health where the body is free of interruption or interference to any part of the nervous system, enabling full expression and enjoyment of life. Through chiropractic care the body is better able to return to a healthy balance. This, in turn, aids the body to maintain optimum health and contributes to overall wellness.

Yoga and meditation, two complementary care modalities that have not historically had a place in the corporate arena, are gaining mainstream acceptance. Yoga and meditation both reduce the mental chatter - providing techniques for dealing with stressful situations. Both in meditation and on the yoga mat one learns about breathing and paying attention to the body, increasing the ability to remain focused and calm in the midst of distractions.

Ultimately, it is about learning how to achieve positive control over body, mind, and environment, which in turn, lessens stress levels. What is learned on the yoga mat or meditation cushion is directly applicable in every part of our lives.

Meditation is now being prescribed by an ever-increasing number of doctors for a host of illnesses. Many hospitals have incorporated meditation into their practice for relief from pain to disease management. Meditation can help to treat mental conditions such as anxiety disorders and depression. Meditation can also reduce chronic pain in people who suffer from conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis. Meditation has also provided both short- and long-term relief of symptoms such as gas and bloating.

While many complementary care disciplines are still on their way to becoming mainstream, there is a groundswell of public interest that makes them worthy of your consideration. The opportunity to improve workforce wellness through complementary care practices, and decrease insurance costs, is equally intriguing.

How?

Educate your employee population about how to incorporate some of these practices into their lifestyle. Provide greater accessibility for employees to utilize these services.

Have your Broker check your insurance policies to determine whether or not you allow eligible complementary care expenses.

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