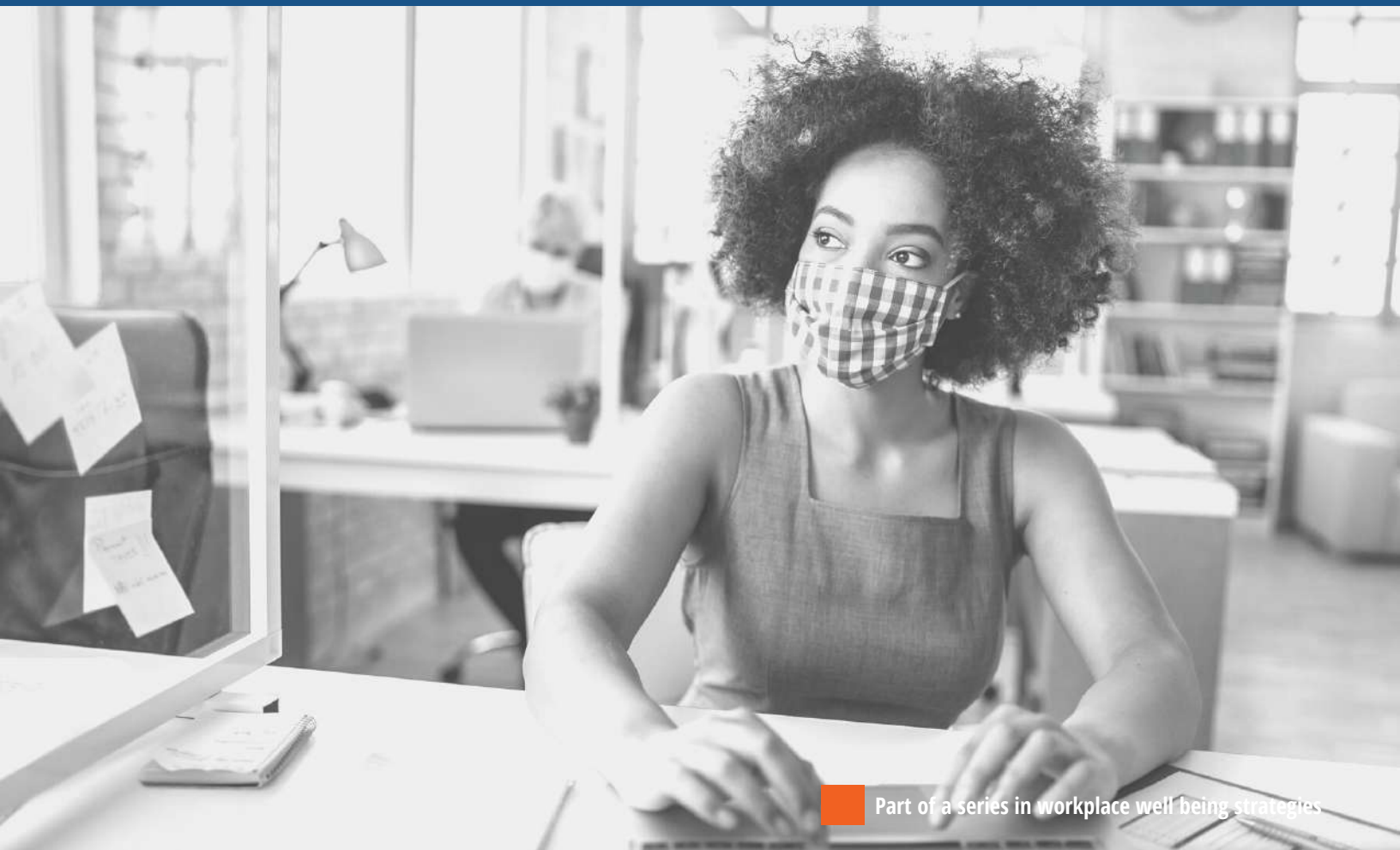

COVID-19's dramatic impact on the disability landscape

Examining the effects of the coming mental health Tsunami on workplace disability management.

Dr. Liz R. Scott, PHD, MENG, MBA, MSC, BSC, RN, COHN-S, CRSP, CDMP
Principal / CEO
Organizational Solutions Inc., Burlington, Ontario



COVID-19's dramatic impact on the disability landscape



Dr. Liz R. Scott is the CEO and Principal of Organizational Solutions Inc., a leading workplace absence management firm.

By Liz R. Scott, PhD

There is no doubt that COVID-19 is a Global concern and focus. COVID-19 has been identified as a disease that likely leads to permanent or long-lasting disability.

Researchers and laypeople have indicated a forthcoming Mental Health Tsunami that will have ripples for many years to come.¹ The feelings of fear of contracting COVID-19 has led to a reduction in hospital visits for other medical reasons. Data shows in the United States alone, cardiac symptom visits have reduced by 38 percent and in Spain by 40 percent.² Cardiologists are concerned that some people are dying at home because they are too afraid to go to the hospital. This lack of seeking medical care is not restricted to cardiac but extends to conditions

such as strokes, appendicitis, and other urgent conditions.³ Without urgent treatment, there could be harmful or profound impacts on health status. Doctors and Specialist visits plus surgeries have been delayed, prolonging suffering and extending the duration of disabilities.⁴ The number of Mental Health Short Term Disability cases is increasing, and the number of claims progressing to Long Term Disability is also higher.⁵ The importance of staying connected with the workplace has never been more important for physical and psychological recovery.

¹ Torjesen, 2020

² Garcia et al., 2020

³ Garcia et al., 2020

⁴ Galloway, 2020; Sparks, 2020

⁵ Rolfe, 2020

Psychological Impact

When the COVID-19 outbreak started spreading across the world, thousands of people began facing severe health issues. A decision was made to stop all social and economic activities to prevent the pandemic's spread.⁶ The sudden loss of social connections has been reported to have negatively impacted society. Previous research demonstrates that social interactions are essential for mental health.⁷ Handshakes are also known to contribute to the feeling of social connection, and these are no longer endorsed as a form of greeting.⁸ It is also known that the loss of social connections can evolve into loneliness. Loneliness has been recognized as a psychologically painful and damaging emotion that can result in the feeling that social needs are not adequately met.⁹ In reflecting back to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, social needs are one of the underpinnings of health.¹⁰ Studies further indicate that sense of belonging is an important element in the workplace, and in order to achieve a sense of belonging, one must form relationships with work colleagues.¹¹ COVID-19 has interfered with the natural progression through the hierarchy of needs.¹²

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Addiction-risk is another aspect of health and well-being that has increased significantly with the pandemic.¹³ It is well known that traumatic events can precipitate societal shifts in addictive behaviours such as alcohol consumption.¹⁴ The COVID-19 pandemic is particularly concerning due to the shift to work from home arrangements, which has heightened vulnerabilities and triggered or exacerbated alcohol use disorders.¹⁵

The psychological impact of quarantine is wide-ranging, substantial, and can be long lasting.

This is not to suggest that quarantine should not be used; the psychological effects of not using quarantine and allowing the disease to spread might be worse. The disease itself multiplied by forced quarantine to combat COVID-19 applied by nationwide lockdowns can produce acute panic,

⁶ Pandey, 2020

⁷ Giorgi et al., 2020

⁸ Giorgi et al., 2020.

⁹ Giorgi et al., 2020; Ornell et al., 2020

¹⁰ D'Souza & Gurin, 2016

¹¹ Hu & Liden, 2015

¹² Giorgi et al., 2020

¹³ (Giorgi et al., 2020).

¹⁴ Kniffin et al., 2021

¹⁵ Grant et al., 2017; Bamberger & Bacharach, 2014

anxiety, obsessive behaviours, hoarding, paranoia, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the long run.¹⁶ These have been fueled by an "infodemic" spread via different platforms of social media. Mass fear of COVID-19, termed "coronaphobia," has generated a plethora of psychiatric manifestations within society.¹⁷

Tan et al. (2020) conducted a systematic review of thirty-five articles. Mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and sleep disorders have increased significantly. Job insecurity, long periods of isolation, and uncertainty of the future worsen the psychological condition, especially in younger people and those with a higher educational background.¹⁸ Factors associated with the severity of psychiatric symptoms in the workforce were marital status, physical symptom presence, poor physical health, and viewing return to work as a health hazard.¹⁹

After recovery from COVID-19, there is a continuing risk of lung disease, heart disease, frailty, and mental health disorders.²⁰ These complications are likely to create additional medical, psychological, and economic burdens.²¹ When a patient diagnosed with COVID-19 survives, it may be just the first battle on the long road to recovery. Although there is not enough data to definitively establish and characterize a post-COVID-19 syndrome, potential long-term consequences can be inferred from emerging data and prior experiences with other serious respiratory illnesses and post-intensive care syndrome.²² There is a large collection of physical, cognitive, and psychological disabilities that can develop in those that survive a critical illness.²³



An "infodemic" spread of information via multiple platforms has exacerbated our stress, panic and anxiety about the pandemic.

¹⁶ Dubey et al., 2020

¹⁷ Dubey et al., 2020

¹⁸ Tan et al., 2020

¹⁹ Tan et al., 2020

²⁰ Jiang & McCoy, 2020

²¹ Jiang & McCoy, 2020

²² Jiang & McCoy, 2020

²³ Jiang & McCoy, 2020

Non-Psychological Conditions

There are many non-COVID-19 related health care consequences to consider. The lack of treatment and care will continue to present concerns even after we emerge from COVID-19 restrictions. It has been documented that the diagnosing of circulatory system diseases has seen a 43.3% reduction, and type 2 diabetes diagnoses were down 49%.²⁴ The number of first prescriptions of associated medications was also lower than expected for the same time period. The gap between observed and expected cancer diagnoses showed a 16% reduction.²⁵ This is a direct result of people not seeking care; there is no improvement in Global health mysteriously associated with the pandemic.

There has been an increase in Short Term and Long Term Disability cases. The durations of disabilities has been profoundly impacted by lack of access and delays in treatment availability. The lockdown resulted in the closure of face-to-face counselling or physiotherapy; while some have successfully transitioned to virtual and online modalities, the efficacy of treatment has not been proven.²⁶ These challenges have led to an extraordinary increase in overall durations associated with disability claims.²⁷

How does disability management fit into the COVID-19 challenge?

The desire of companies to create a work environment that motivates employees to consistently meet customer expectations continues to be a priority and has escalated in importance throughout the pandemic. Corporations can integrate proven disability management strategies right into their healthy organization goals. Well-designed disability management programs show a savings by reducing lost days and lowering the resultant costs.

In studies going back to the beginning of the disability management era, it has been found that even casual contact with the employee decreases absence by 30%. Of course, disability management has grown in sophistication, but the underlying principle of maintaining the work connection has not changed.²⁸ The impact of maintaining the workplace connection between the employee and employer has become even more important in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

When an employee becomes absent, there is a clear necessity to identify the true nature of the disability and how it can best be resolved. A key component of disability management emphasizes that it is vastly important to ensure employees get into the right treatment, as this can increase the likelihood of prompt recovery.²⁹ Sometimes, it is difficult for employees to advocate for themselves in a compromised health state; a supportive case manager can assist in making certain the employee is in receipt of appropriate care.³⁰

²⁴ Williams et al., 2020

²⁵ Williams et al., 2020

²⁶ Victor et al., 2018

²⁷ Galloway, 2020; Sparks, 2020

²⁸ Kristman et al., 2017; Lau et al. 2019; Negrini et al., 2018

²⁹ Andersen, Nielsen & Brinkmann, 2014

³⁰ Durand, Nastasia, Coutu, & Bernier, 2017

Positive Impact of Work

Overall, individuals reported that employment provided significant benefits in their recovery from mental illness and that work played a central role in their lives and identities.³¹

The issue of return to work planning has been amplified throughout COVID-19.³² The overlay of mental health concerns, in particular, anxiety associated with working in an enclosed environment in proximity to others, is a concern that needs to be addressed in the return to work plan.³³ In the return to work field, researchers will need to add this concern to the list of items to explore in return to work planning. If the employee is returning to a work from home scenario, there are also multiple mental health issues created by lack of social interaction to consider.³⁴

As the Tsunami approaches and the ripples anticipated, it is clear that disability plans will experience an unprecedented increase. It is also clear that compassion and understanding will need to be considerations in planning a return from disability. The mental health and additional disability implications are far-reaching and will require ongoing research and planning.

³¹ Dunn et al, 2018

³² Ornell et al., 2020

³³ Ornell et al., 2020

³⁴ MacEachen et al., 2020; Tan et al., 2020

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About the Author

Liz R. Scott PhD, is the CEO of Organizational Solutions, (lscott@orgsoln.com) a successful disability management company that has been recognized for award-winning cost reduction results, “best practice” program designs, and the ability to solve a complex variety of organizational health and disability concerns.

An internationally respected and consulted thought-leader, professor, public speaker and author in the field, Dr. Liz Scott has been honored several times as a finalist in the Ernst and Young Entrepreneur of the Year Awards. She is the co-author of a book called “Comprehensive Disability Management” and, as well as leading the successful Organizational Solutions Inc., teaches at McGill and Guelph Universities.

Contact Organizational Solutions Inc, to find out more on our Short Term Disability management services, Workers’ Compensation Claims Management and other solutions to bring employees back to work, swiftly, safely and sustainably.



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