

# Disability Management Mitigates COVID Impact



BY: **DR. LIZ R. SCOTT**

**T**he literature and evidence is projecting a mental health tsunami, making workplace disability management even more essential. There is no doubt that COVID-19 has had a profound and long lasting impact on society and become a global concern. Even once COVID-19 has abated the long-term impacts of the disease will lead to higher numbers of long lasting or permanent disabilities.

Researchers have also acknowledged it is not just COVID-19 claims that are a worry, but the missing attention to other health conditions. It has been estimated that the number of hospital visits and treatment seeking for serious and sometimes fatal conditions has decreased significantly. Initial data shows cardiac symptom visits are down by 38 per cent and cancer diagnosis are down 16 per cent. Conditions such as strokes, appendicitis, and other emergencies are resulting in a higher number of prolonged or even fatal outcomes. The lack of surgical spots has also resulted in prolonged suffering and extended disability durations.

As a direct side effect, insurers have noted a higher number of cases getting to long-term disability.

So as the number of mental health issues continue to rise and conditions become prolonged due to lack of availability of urgent care, it is even more important to have a supportive work environment and a solid disability management program in place. The importance of staying connected with the workplace has never been more important for physical and psychological recovery.

## Psychological Impact

When the COVID-19 outbreak started millions of people across the world suddenly had uncertainty, isolation, and fear about the future. There were decisions made that essentially stopped economic and social activities in order to slow the spread of the deadly virus. Media reports daily on death and illness numbers – ‘info-besity’ – has taken hold of hearts and minds. Personal interactions and mechanisms of greeting changed overnight, there are no more embraces or even handshakes.

Social connections have been lost resulting in loneliness and isolation for many people. Loneliness and isolation has long been recognized as psychologically damaging and

painful. As far back as Maslow’s renowned research, ‘social needs and safety’ are the basis for all human wellness. Studies are further developing that demonstrate the ongoing importance of a sense of belonging. COVID-19’s forced increase in remote working has impacted the ability to form relationships with co-workers and feel that sense of belonging.

The other known aspect of health and well-being that is being impacted by COVID-19 isolation is substance use and addictive behaviours. It has been demonstrated in previous research that traumatic events often can precipitate societal shifts in addictive behaviours. These include substances and also an increase in eating disorders, plus other heightened vulnerabilities.

The predominant increases in psychological conditions are anxiety, obsessive behaviours, paranoia, depression, and post-traumatic disorders. These are all fuelled by the abundance of information that is flooding the social media.

The mass fear has been coined ‘coronophobia’ and is contributing to the plethora of psychiatric manifestations in society. The research into COVID-19 impacts is deepening and the emerging systematic reviews echo the concerns of heightened psychological impact that will continue beyond the end of the pandemic. The ‘post-COVID-19 syndrome’ is starting to be anticipated.

## Non-Psychological Impact

Many non-COVID-19 related healthcare consequences have emerged which are also very important to consider. The lack of availability of treatment and care will continue to present concerns for years to come. Empirical research has shown diagnosis associated with the circulatory system have reduced by 43 per cent, type 2 diabetes 49 per cent, and initial cancer 16 per cent. These trends are a direct result of people not seeking care. There is no mysterious global health improvement associated with the pandemic!

It has also been demonstrated that short-term and long-term disability cases have been increasing. The durations of disability have also been prolonged due to delays in treatment availability and lack of access to care. The lockdown eliminated face-to-face counselling or physiotherapy. While virtual and online modalities now exist the efficacy of treatment has not been demonstrated. Regardless of the efficacy there has been published evidence of an extraordinary increase in overall durations of disability claims.

## Disability Management Solutions

There is an opportunity and need to ensure integrated and proven disability management strategies exist to assist in the control of durations and also the support for employees that are experiencing either COVID-19 related or residual impact conditions. Companies are continuing to seek solutions to positive work environments that support individual’s mental health. The need remains for employees to consistently meet the needs of customer expectations and deliverables. The importance of ensuring there is a workplace employee connection is vital. A key component is when an employee becomes absent the true nature of the disability needs to be examined and a plan put in place to resolve and return to work. Great care needs to be taken not to medicalize concerns that can be addressed by strong support programs. A supportive approach and appropriate treatment and care can make the difference between a prolonged disability and recovery.

A solid disability management program and return-to-work plan can have significant benefits. A well-designed plan can help reduce the fear associated with return-to-work in particular anxiety. If an employee will be returning to work, but from home, issues of social isolation and lack of interaction need to be taken into consideration. The importance of maintaining a workplace connection is even more important in light of COVID-19. Overall, individuals report that employment provides significant benefits in recovery and restoring their identity and hope for the future. Work is central to well-being.

As the mental health tsunami continues to build, it is clear disability plans will see unprecedented increase in claims. It is also clear that compassion and understanding will need to be an essential part of recovery and return-to-work. It is yet unknown the ultimate far-reaching impacts, but having programs in place can help mitigate the waves. **BPM**



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