What are the health and safety risks and consequences of unaddressed OT workplace psychological health problems?

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Unaddressed OT workplace psychological health problems can affect many stakeholders in the environment. It can influence the OT experiencing the psychological health problems, their coworkers, their employer, and their clients. Below is a brief description of the risks and consequences that unaddressed psychological health problems can have on each of these stakeholders.

Effects on the OT:

When OT's do not have psychological support and may be suffering from a psychological condition, this can result in workplace absenteeism, decreased production, conflict, and strain which can put them at a higher risk of accidents, incidents, and injuries (Gilbert & Bilsker, 2012).There is a risk of prolonged mental health conditions which can lead to substantial financial and social losses resulting in chronic conditions. There is a risk of the OT being unable to return to work if a chronic condition develops. Additionally, unaddressed psychological health problems can result in depersonalization, or a lack of empathy towards clients and coworkers, which can further affect quality of care given to clients (Brown, 2015).

Effects on the employer/organization:

There can be many risks for the employer if workplace psychological health problems go unnoticed. For example, there could be liability concerns if employees make poor safety decisions that are putting clients and coworkers at risk. There are also financial consequences if the employees are feeling job strain and dissatisfaction, which can result in poor productivity, conflict, and greater employee turnover. (Guarding Minds @ Work).

Effects on the client:

There may be a decreased level of care due to poor cognitive functioning such as decision making, risky behavior, poor concentration, and possible physical symptoms of mental health conditions such as fatigue. This could lead to a safety concern if the clients are not being treated properly. In a larger scale, if poor quality of care and safety records are sustained for too long, this could affect how other clients view the practice as a whole, and could affect their choice to receive treatment from that organization.

Effects on the Coworkers:

Organizational culture is built on trust, expectations, belief, honesty and accountability. When a psychological condition goes unaddressed, other employees will feel the effects of those who are suffering with mental health problems. This can lower moral, decrease overall sense of community, and may change how the accountability of coworkers. If the organizational culture begins to break down, this undermines the effectiveness of the overall program (Guarding Minds @ Work).

Occupational Therapists work in many different environments including schools, hospitals, long-term care facilities, and in private practices and with persons of all ages and abilities. Due to the variety of the environments our practices, the affects of unaddressed psychological health conditions of OT's may range from mild to severe, but should never go unaddressed.

RESOURCES

Gilbert, M., & Bilsker, D. (2012) Psychological Health and Safety: an Action Guide for Employers. Mental Health Commission of Canada
http://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/system/files/private/document/Workforce_Employers_Guide_ENG.pdf

Great West Life Assurance Centre for Mental Health in the Workplace. (2010). Elements and priorities for working towards a psychologically safer workplace.
https://www.workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com/pdf/WorkingTowardAPsychologicallySafeWorkplace_20101.pdf

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Moll, S.E. (2014) The web of silence: a qualitative case study of early intervention and support for health care workers with mental ill-health. BMC Public Health 2014. 14:138 doi: 10.1186/1471-2458-14-138