Supporting Positive Mental Health in the Workplace

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Shelina Visram:
Hello everyone. Welcome to a Toronto Centre podcast. I'm Shelina Visram, a Program Director for Toronto Centre. It probably doesn't come as a surprise that employee mental health concerns are at an all-time high. Mental health may not seem like something that an employer should concern themselves with, but the reality is that mental health can have a critical impact on a company's morale, engagement, and bottom line. Today's podcast will address some key points for leaders, including financial regulators and supervisors, to consider as we shift to supporting positive mental health in the workplace. I have the pleasure of, once again, speaking with Dr. Kennette Thigpen, affectionately known as Dr. K. Dr. K is CEO and Founder of Welltrust Partners, and a distinguished corporate well-being consultant and speaker. Welcome, Dr. K.

Dr. Kennette Thigpen Harris:
Thank you so much for having me again. It's always a pleasure to chat with you and I'm excited to talk about mental health today.

Shelina Visram:
Thank you very much for your time. Alright, let's begin. So, let's start with what do we mean when we say supporting positive mental health in the workplace?

Dr. Kennette Thigpen Harris:
Great question. So, I think it's really about first, maybe setting the foundation of the difference between mental health and mental illness. Oftentimes, I feel like these two words are used interchangeably, and I think we do this because mental illness sounds like a deficit, whereas mental health sounds a little bit better. As we talk about mentally healthy employees, I think the first thing is really understanding that mental health is- everyone has it. Every single person has mental health. Now, everyone might not have a mental illness. Mental health is about when those stressors come up in our life, are we able and do we have the ability to cope accordingly, where mental illness is a disorder when we're not able to cope and it affects how we think, act, and behave. So, I think that's the difference. The other piece is, it's on a continuum. So, someone can technically have a mental illness and still be mentally healthy.

Now what I mean by that is, if someone has a mental illness, let's just say depression, they could be coping very well with it, maybe due to medication, maybe they're seeing a therapist, or maybe they just have phenomenal coping skills. So, they can have a mental illness and still be doing well. On the other side of the continuum, or the spectrum, you can have someone who does not have a mental illness but is not doing mentally well. So, that's one thing I think it's important to kind of talk about when we're looking at the continuum and what's the difference between mental health and mental illness. I think the other factor is, Shelina, how many times have we experienced stress? If I were to ask the world out there, have you ever experienced stress? I'm sure every single solitary hand would go up in the air because stress is ultimately a part of mental health, and I don't think people always necessarily see it that way but if people can start understanding that stress and how we cope or the lack thereof, is ultimately part of our mental health.

The reality is, depending on what research you're looking at, it says that between 50% and 70% of our workforce is stressed out. And so, you know what? Let's just go with a low number of 50%, knowing that that means half of us that are listening to this, half of those in your corporations, half of those in my corporation, are stressed out. So, when we think about the importance of having mentally healthy workforces, you can see just by those sheer numbers alone, how it's so important. Now before we even get there, and I know you said, "What is a mentally healthy workforce and what does that really mean?" And before we even get there, I think it's also about understanding that we have to have psychologically safe work environments.

What I mean by that is you have to have an environment where people feel that they can trust you, and that they feel safe. So, if people feel that they can be trusted, they can trust you and they feel safe, they're more likely to talk about these mental health challenges or their mental health in general. So, in understanding that piece as well, we have to know that there's the cognitive culture of organization and the emotional culture of an organization. A lot of corporations, what we'll see, is they focus more on the cognitive culture, which is really about how individuals think and behave based upon policies and procedures, all the written stuff. But many organizations don't focus on the emotional culture of an organization, which is how people truly feel, the emotions, the feelings, and the attitudes. So, it's about having that true balance in order to truly have a mentally healthy workforce.

Shelina Visram:
That was a very important distinction you just helped us understand, so I appreciate that. So then, how does stress impact the workplace?

Dr. Kennette Thigpen Harris:

Great question. So, I often see stress as, what I would say is a ripple effect. Stress does not happen in silos, as much as we would like to think stress happens, we can compartmentalize it, we can put it in a little box, we can put it on a shelf for later, but that's not the reality. The reality is, I think of the ripple effect of stress as you know, when you drop a rock in the ocean and you see all the ripples that go on forever and ever and ever, that is what stress is. So, when stresses that rock that has dropped in the water, it has a large impact on many different people including yourself. So, one thing that I know for sure is, it's a two-pronged approach. So, one, there's the individual aspect of how does stress impact me as an individual. But the other piece of it is how does stress impact organizations?

So, when you think about that ripple effect, yes, it's probably impacting you as an individual, your health, how you're managing it, what you're doing. Another layer of that ripple would probably be your family and your children, your spouse. I can think about times that I've been stressed, and I was a little bit snappy with my partner and he's like, "You need a little time out". So, it impacts your family, it impacts how you interact with your children; if you're involved with community activities, you may no longer have the energy to be able to do those community activities that you have. It impacts the workforce as another ripple effect, because then it impacts your brand as a company. So, I can remember being called into a particular organization because someone had unfortunately died by suicide, and the employee had actually wrote a note back to the employer about all the stress that they were under and how they had caused it.

Now, I'm sure there was many different factors in it, but you can see how that stress quickly has an effect on even the brand of your company. So, that ripple effect is far reaching and that we got to be mindful of. From an individual standpoint, that impact is more so along the lines of, if stress goes unaddressed, it can lead to both anxiety and depression. Anxiety being the number one mental illness and depression being the number two mental illness. So that's the impact that it has on an individua. In the workplace, there's even far more reaching concerns and impact that it has.

So, you have what I like to call, the vicious cycle that could easily take place where you have an individual, an employee who has stressors, they have unhealthy mental health, and when it goes unaddressed, typically what begins to happen, or a couple of things, one: absenteeism, where they're just calling out for work and they're not, typically, they're not going to say, "Hey, I'm not coming in today because my mental health is a little challenged. I'll try to be back tomorrow." The second thing that we probably, typically see is presenteeism: where individuals are showing up, logging on to do their job, but they're probably staring at the walls trying to figure out is it snow white, cloud white, eggshell white, or sand white? Or maybe they're surfing the internet trying to find a cute little dress to buy. So, they're at work, they're just not fully present. Then the third thing that we typically see is the individual just downright resign. When we think about the bottom line that stress has on organizations, looking at the absenteeism first, individuals who have stressors and mental health is challenged, they probably miss on average about 12 days of work, 12 unplanned days of work.

Now you might be thinking, you know what, that doesn't sound like a whole lot, but when you start taking your total number of employees, let's just say the 50% of your workforce that we talked about that's stressed out, you can see quickly how those numbers add up. On the other end of it, you have the presenteeism, where we see on average that someone who is going through presenteeism due to stress, they're probably missing about 35 days of unproductive time. So, the presenteeism is even a larger concern for individuals and then of course the people that resign, and so again, when you start putting that dollar amount on it, what happens to that work when people resign or are not doing the work? It doesn't magically go away; it goes to the next person. So, that next person begins to experience additional stressors.

They get to the point where now they're back at the beginning of a line of, now I'm another employee that has mental health challenges because I don't have the right coping skills. So, you can quickly see how this two-prong approach the stress affects both individuals and the organizations as a whole.

Shelina Visram:
Yeah, and it's interesting, the vicious cycle just sort of continues, and I think that's what you're referring to as the ripple effect. So, think about not only how it affects you, but the ripple effects of that if it's not managed well with various tools. So, that's interesting, which leads me to my next question: so, what can managers and leaders do to support employees?

Dr. Kennette Thigpen Harris:
Absolutely. So, what we can do to support employees is what I like to call the **E4 method**, E4, because I'm going to give you four E's that hopefully will be simple and easy for us to remember, and it's **engage, explore, escalate,** and **empower**. So, engaging is really, exactly what it sounds like. It's knowing who your employees are, really getting to know them, and I know sometimes I'll hear, well, it's just been so a little bit more challenged in this hybrid model or during COVID, I don't even know my full team members like that anymore. And it's like, okay, well, how do you become very intentional about really engaging with individuals? One thing I like to say, it's so important to do caring contacts. Now, caring contacts is a phrase that came out of individuals who maybe were more suicidal, and so they would do these caring contacts afterwards to make sure they were doing okay.

But my thing is like, can we move from a more reactive measure to a more proactive measure? So, why wait until that comes to those caring contacts? But caring contacts can be done before someone reaches to that point. And so, that caring contact looks like a sticky note on somebody's computer. It's sending a quick little message or a song over links, or Teams, or Slack. It's about just reaching out to say, "You know what? I didn't really need anything, Shelina, I just wanted to check on you, see how you're doing. I know you said the kids had a soccer game this weekend. Just wanted to see how things are doing." So, really engaging and knowing individuals because when you know individuals, you'll start to pick up on those auditory or visual things. So, their voice may not sound "just so" you might say, that sounds a little different.

Or maybe just looking at them, whether it's via camera - I'm a big proponent of "Everyone, turn your camera on." So, if my team members come to a call and their camera's not on, I'll say, "I really want to see your beautiful face, what's going on?" and they know that, but it gives me opportunity to put eyes on them to see, are there things that I'm observing that might be a little bit different? And you only know that if you get to know someone and engage with them. The second E is explore: this is really about exploring and asking those simple questions of, "How are you doing?" "How are you feeling?" "What's been happening?" One of my favorite questions to ask, because people say, you know what? People will say, "How are you doing?" And they'll say, "Fine." And it doesn't give you a lot more information. But one of my favorite questions to ask individuals is, "On a scale of one to five, how stressed are you?" "On a scale of one to five, how stressed are you?"

And individuals are either going to say, "A hundred!" and they're going to say, "It's, it's so bad, it's beyond five, it's a hundred!" But at least it gives you an idea of where they're falling on that spectrum. So, if I say, "How stressed are you?" and they say, "I'm at about a four," my follow up question is going to be maybe, "What's happening that's getting you to be at a four, and then what are some things, what are steps that we can do together to get you down to maybe a two?" I don't want it to be perfect. I'm not saying you have to go from a four to a zero or to a one, but how do we just make those small incremental steps to reduce down that little scaling section?

So, I think that's important to ask individuals, again, "How are you doing? What is your stress level on a scale of one to five?" So, explore with individuals. The third thing is really about escalate. As leaders, it's so important that we know when to escalate; although individuals around us may be having mental health challenges, we're not wanting you to be the psychiatrist, or the psychologist, or the therapist, or to be Superwoman or Superman and jump in and save the day. That's not what this is about. But it's about understanding when maybe your resources have run out, but someone still needs additional help. And not being afraid to say, "You know what, something just doesn't sit right with me." Maybe it's just a suspicion, and understanding who to escalate that to, so whether that's your HR or maybe you have other resources out there that you can escalate it to, but no one can escalate and don't feel like one that I don't want to step on anybody's toes, I don't want to do the wrong thing, and then they're upset with me. It's better off to do something than to do nothing.

And then the last thing, the last E is empower. It's really about empowering individuals to take full control of their mental health. Again, I said it's a two-pronged approach where individuals can do things to protect and prioritize their mental health. And yes, organizations can help their employees do things to protect and prioritize their mental health, but it's really about empowering individuals to step in and to take care of their own mental health and have those proper coping skills to be able to manage accordingly.

Shelina Visram:
Yeah, those examples are very interesting because I was actually going to ask now, do I need to, as a people manager, do I now have to know psychology to be able to help, and clearly, by way of example, you've illustrated that isn't the intent. The intent to reassure somebody that you care, and that you are there to support, and that you will do whatever you can to be able to first acknowledge that they are stressed and maybe you could do something little. I mean, usually I tend to go for a short walk with somebody rather than just say, how are you? I'll say, I'm heading out for a short walk. Would you like to join me? Can we go for a coffee? Or something like that? And I find in an environment like that, you'll get more than just, "I'm fine." So, it's perhaps a good way to see that they're sort of doing okay, watch for the body language, and support them as much as you can. Right, thank you. Then from, so that's from the management leader perspective, what about from an employee perspective, because this is a shared responsibility, right? It's not just about the companies taking the responsibility and people, managers, and leaders. So, what can employees do to support themselves?

Dr. Kennette Thigpen Harris:
Yes, absolutely. It's definitely a shared responsibility, so I'm glad that you reiterated that. The first thing I like to think that individuals can do is really to take time to recharge. I oftentimes think about our cell phone, and there's individuals who, when it gets down to 10%, they're ready to beg, borrow, and barter in order to get a charger so that the battery life on the phone doesn't run out. And, I think we have to take that same concept for us as individuals as, when our battery is running low, do we still want to beg, barter and barter in order to recharge ourselves? And when you think about it with our phones, there's certain things that you do on your phone that are more likely to drain your battery. So, if you're listening to music constantly, you're playing games or watching movies, it's more likely to drain your battery life.

And there's certain things that we can do; so, whether we put it on power save mode to hopefully save some of our battery life, or we plug it up, those things save our battery life. And in our personal lives, it's about understanding what are the things that give us energy, that recharge us, and what are the things that drain our energy? And so, I often challenge individuals to make a list of all the things, or people, let's be honest, that may drain your energy, and the reality is, we want to do more of the things that give us energy, and we want to figure out the things that drain our energy, how do we eliminate it, or reduce it, or delegate it to someone else? So again, I challenge individuals to make that list: on one side, put, these are my energy gains and list everything you can think about. On the other side, put, these are my energy drains, and then look, take a look at that list, and understand again, are there ways that I can eliminate this drain? Can I reduce or modify this drain? Or are these things that I can maybe delegate to somebody else?

The second thing is really about setting boundaries. I think that when we're thinking about the work environment, we find it sometimes more challenging to set boundaries because we're like, "Uh-oh, someone's here to tell us what to do, and I can't push back, and I can't say, no." No is completely fine to say, even in the workforce. I think sometimes it's understanding about, you know, how do you say no, but setting those boundaries, and when I think about boundaries, I often vision it as a fence. So, a fence, when closed, is designed to hopefully keep things out, whether it's things or people keeping them out, and when it's open, it's there to allow people or things in.

And that's the same way that we have to treat our lives as "You know what, today I may not have the mental energy or the bandwidth for certain things, so guess what? I need to close that fence or that gate. But you know what? Later on in the day, or maybe the next day or later in the week, I may have more energy and greater bandwidth, so then I can open up the fence or the gate to allow things or people in." And again, at the end of the day, it's about protecting and prioritizing your mental health of what you need. The third thing that I would say is really about practicing positivity. We have between 60,000 and 80,000 thoughts per day, and typically about 80% of those are negative. I mean, every time I hear those statistics, my mind is blown because our default setting as human beings is negativity.

And so, when we think about what are those negative thoughts that we're having throughout the day; no, I'm not saying that we have to track down all 60,000 or 80,000 thoughts, but the ones that might be more challenging or more negative for you, are you able to list those out, think about those, and figure out how to reframe those thoughts? Sometimes it's about, we always say, "Oh my goodness, I have to do this, or I must do that!" When you start doing that, or even, "I should do something!" So, we start saying things like, "I must, I should, I have to..." You're already setting standards upon yourself that when you don't need it, you're probably going to be more likely stressed out. But even shifting those small words of "I must, I have to, I should" to "I get to, I want to," there is a clear distinction of, "I get it. I have a choice in this matter" versus something that's mandatory, that "I have to do."

So again, just really changing our thoughts from something that's more negative to something that's a little bit more positive, and that doesn't mean that life is all rosy and sun shining, but it's about recognizing those thoughts that you're having and then changing them. And the last thing that I would say is really about what I like to call the "life-work integration". A lot of times, we say the "work-life balance". I'm not sure if things are quite a balance. I haven't figured out that balance yet, but it's really about, for me, I like to use a term "life-first" because I want to do things in my life and then I'll fit in all the demands around it. So, if I know that I want to go to Zumba, if I know that I want to spend time with my family, those are the things that I'm going to plug into my schedule. Cause I know I want them to happen. And then around that I fit in the rest.

Typically, what people do is they say, "You know what? I work these 8, 10, 12, 15-hour days, and now I have no energy left to do the things that I desire." So, when we start looking at life and work and we start saying, "You know what? At the end of my workday, I don't have the energy or the time to do the things that I desire." That's an indication that you probably want to shift the order to say, "What are those life things that I really want to get done?" And prioritizing that, and then fitting work into that from there. So, that's super important when we think about what individuals can do to support themselves.

Shelina Visram:
So, all the items that you mentioned: recharge, set boundaries, practice positivity and life-work integration; speak to me about a shift in our mindset. We tend to start with, "Well, I'm stressed every day, so why bother? It's not going to go away." But it's more about being proactive in taking steps to learn, to accept and manage and prioritize those. Everything is important, so you just have to learn to prioritize, so I find that very interesting, and particularly your last point around life-work integration and how you want to think about life-first, because we all think about work-first, and we say, "The other stuff can wait, let me get to the work." But the reality is, the work never seems to end. So, you need to find a way to integrate both, so thank you for that. If you had to sum up how to ensure a mentally healthy workplace, what would you say?

Dr. Kennette Thigpen Harris:
Oh, let's see. To sum it up, what I would say is I'm going to give you a brief equation that would hopefully make this easy for individuals to remember, but it's simply **A + B + C - D** = a mentally healthy workforce. So, just really quick, the **A is autonomy**, the **B is belonging**, the **C is competence**, and the **D is demands**. So, let me just walk through this equation really quickly as we sum things up. So, autonomy is, individuals want the flexibility and choice of how they do their jobs. So yes, they already know what they're doing, but what's even more important of what they're doing is how they get to do it. And when we think about the autonomy, this is where I think we saw a lot of the Great Resignation, or the great realization of, "You know what, this no longer serves me because how is not being accommodated for me." So again, the autonomy is again, people want flexibility and choice.

The B is belonging where individuals want to feel connected. Now, as human beings, we all have a desire to want to feel needed, to feel valued, to feel connected to something that's greater than themselves. So, when someone doesn't feel belonging, it's a little bit more challenging to have that trust to connect with individuals, to engage, to explore, to escalate all those E4s that we talked about if they don't feel belonging to an organization. And a lot of times, when we talk about belonging, especially now in the workplace, it's around diversity and inclusion. And so, how I like to look at the belonging piece of it is, the diversity with this belonging is more so about, "You know what? You're being invited to the party." The inclusion of this is really about, "You know what? Would you like to dance?" I'm inviting you to dance at this party with me." But the belonging is saying, "You know what? I'm going to get out on that dance floor and I'm going to shake a tailfeather like nobody's business, like nobody's watching." So, people want to feel belonging.

The third thing is really around competence. People at the end of the day want to feel some sense of challenge at their job. There has to be a good intersection of what task I'm able to perform, and what pressures are put on me in order to do that job. If we're looking at something that has a low task level, and its low pressure to perform, somebody's going to get bored really quickly. And when someone gets bored really quickly, they ultimately say, "You know what? It's really not meant for me" or they're not going to do the job. As you kind of move with, as you increase the task for individuals and you increase the pressure a little bit, people will eventually get to a place where they meet their optimum level.

Now, at that optimum level, people typically are able to stay there for about two to three hours and then are either going to shift a little bit back to their comfort zone or they keep trying to perform at a high level where they become in crisis mode. And again, now we're looking at mental health challenges again. So, when it comes to competence, it's really about finding that balance between what individuals do and creating a career path for them. People want to learn; at the end of the day, people continuously want to learn. So, how do you slowly or quickly create those paths for individuals versus people becoming very stagnant? So that's the C.

And then we want to minus the D, which are the demands. So D are the demands, and we want to minus this out. And so, the demands are really thinking about, what are the demands that we are putting on individuals? And this can be the spoken or unspoken norms that are within an organization. I often think of demands sometimes as the "follow the leader" mentality where someone, I'll go into an organization to do consultations, and somebody will say, "Well, they expect me to work around the clock and to pick up my phone at a minute's notice and respond to all emails." And I was like, "Wow, that's really interesting. Is that in policy somewhere? Did someone tell you that?" And they're like, "No, it's not in policy. It's not in procedures. No one told me to do it, but this one time I saw my manager who responded back at an awkward time. Maybe it was in the middle of the night, or early in the morning, so I thought I had to do it too." So, it becomes that "follow the leader" mentality. So, the demands are really understanding, are there certain times of the job? Are there unspoken norms about working around the clock and responding to email notifications, and the Slack messages, and the Teams messages that are going off? Is it working in a high demand type of job where it's very stressful? Are there certain things that can be put in place, when you take a look at your policies and procedures, that kind of begin to decrease those demands.

And if you're thinking, "I have no clue what these demands are." I promise you, if you stop and pause long enough to ask and survey the individuals on your teams, they'll be able to tell you. And those are the things that you want to figure out: "How do I begin to mitigate some of these demands so that we can truly have a mentally healthy workplace?" So, at the end of the day, keep in mind A plus B plus C minus D equals a mentally healthy workplace.

Shelina Visram:
I think our audience is going to love the equations, I know I do. They help me remember much easier. In terms of final thoughts as we wrap up the podcast, some takeaways from you for us.

Dr. Kennette Thigpen Harris:
I would say a couple of things just to kind of recap. I think one: it's understanding that mentally healthy workforces is everybody's responsibility. So again, not only the individual, but also the organization. So, it's a two-pronged approach of taking responsibility on both sides. I think the other thing just to remember, as managers, we can use the E4 method of really engaging, exploring, escalating, and empowering, and then as individuals, it's important for us to be able to recharge and understand what are those energy gains and what are the energy drains. Remember to set boundaries, practice positivity, and understand the work-life integration. Shelina, something else that I would share with you and the listeners today is, in a couple of weeks, I have something very special that's coming out and I'm super excited, but it's a book and a workbook that really encourages individuals to protect and prioritize their mental health. It has hundreds of coping skills and strategies in there that individuals are going to be able to utilize. But the book and the workbook is called "Cut Yourself Some Slack". And so, at the end of the day, something that we know is that stressors are not going to go away, whether it's positive or more challenging stress, we're all going to experience it. But the thing that becomes really helpful for us is if we have ways to be able to cope with it.

Shelina Visram:

Thank you, and I look forward to, congratulations on the launch of your book, and I look forward to reading it and perhaps have a podcast on it with you. Thank you, Dr. K. The session has been very insightful, as you've highlighted, using examples, how we can all contribute to positive mental health in the workplace. Thanks again very much for your time, and I look forward to working with you in the future.

Dr. Kennette Thigpen Harris:

It's always a pleasure. Thank you so much.

Shelina Visram:

Take care. Thank you. You've been listening to a Toronto Centre podcast. Thank you all for joining.