

# It's 2018 and Mental Illness Still has a Stigma?

Written by **Neil Wallace, Principal; Barb Higgs, Senior Client Representative**  
TRG Group Benefits & Pensions Inc.

We know from the name that symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) surface after an event. But what it doesn't tell us is that PTSD inflicts stress over and over because the memories endlessly repeat and loop. We also now know this cycle can begin and trigger mood disorders even years after the event. Awareness and knowledge have been growing in recent years thanks to strides in neuroscience.

In a climate of growing understanding and compassion, we've also realized that it's never simple. [PTSD is but one of many mental illnesses caused by a complex mix of factors](#). Many stay quiet about their suffering. This is true even though none of us are immune. Witnessing or experiencing disturbing events creates pathways in the brain. In turn, these can shape and drive self-destructive behaviours, which are really just attempts to relieve stress. In the short term, this may seem to work but it also masks the illness and can delay treatment.

Fortunately, change is happening. High profile figures have recently come out about their troubles: Janet Jackson, Ryan Reynolds and Ariana Grande...even Prince Harry now speaks freely about his struggles after his mother's death. Corporations have launched programs: [Bell's Let's Talk promotion](#), [Michael Landsberg's innovative Sick Not Weak website](#), and the [Canadian Mental Health Association](#), all do great work educating and dispelling myths. But is it enough? Is change really happening?

It's tempting to say no. While some celebrities speak openly, mental illness has claimed the lives of others: Robin Williams, Kate Spade and Anthony Bourdain, just recently. And we're always shocked, even baffled. These are wildly successful people, by any measure. Still, they've thrown up a front on their illness. Why? Because hiding, or masking, is an expression of shame. But what is shameful is that there is still a stigma.

It's important that the conversation stays loud and alive because mental illness is like a stone thrown into a pond. It quickly sinks out of sight. But we still see its presence in the ripples. These are the behaviours, substance abuse, anger, even violence, that flow out and touch the family, the community, and most relevant to this blog, the workplace.

In this context, symptoms are expressed as absenteeism, relationship problems and compromised job performance. It's not a small concern. The latest statistics for 2011 show that absenteeism, low productivity, and turnover alone cost Canada's workplaces more than \$6 billion. The projected cost in just three years is nearly \$50 billion. To bring that sky-high number back to earth, [it's one in five people](#). If your workplace has 25 people, five of them are living with a mental illness. We're surprised by this number because the symptoms of this disease are often too well hidden.

These high numbers show a challenging truth we can't ignore. We are all affected, if only indirectly. Yet, as employees, we are still learning to trust that disclosure will not hinder our career. As employers, we're grappling with how to reconcile our duty of care to employees and to shareholders in a way that goes beyond simply having a sick day policy and offering disability insurance.

But back to the question about whether change is happening. Yes, gains have been made even if progress seems slow. But, as journalist Steve Dubner pointed out, big changes usually happen incrementally...civil rights, gay rights, and advances in technology. All these breakthroughs came from many small steps.

I would also add that perseverance and continual discussion are the small steps that lead us closer to change. Mental illness must become so accepted that it's no more blog worthy than a broken leg. It costs us billions and it can kill.

