

Learn how they improved  
their workplace mental  
health supports

VIA RAIL





## Developing and implementing a successful workplace mental health strategy

Every organization is unique and requires a tailored approach to workplace mental health that addresses their specific needs. Regardless of industry or company size, employee well-being is essential to creating a healthy workplace environment.

There are many effective actions that organizations can take to promote mental health in the workplace. We recommend you read this success story of an employer who developed and improved their mental health strategy. You can learn from their experience and apply similar actions to your own workplaces.



## Essential components of a healthy organization

A mentally healthy workforce is key to a company's success. In this case study, you'll learn more tactics for success to improve workplace mental health.

Here are 3 critical components of organizational success:

- **Leadership commitment** to changing workplace culture
- **Organizational assessment** to better understand your needs and risks.
- **Tailored mental health strategy**

The case study below showcases what's possible. It highlights Sun Life's commitment to bringing our tested best practices to you in supporting the health of your employees.

# Learn how they improved their workplace mental health supports



## Making a robust wellness culture even stronger

VIA Rail has been Canada’s national passenger train provider since 1977. They have more than 3,000 employees from coast to coast and welcomed more than five million passengers in 2019. VIA Rail services are growing – with government support for extending and improving passenger rail networks.



## The opportunity

VIA Rail already had a strong wellness program and health culture. But as was the case for all employers in the transportation sector, the impact of the pandemic on employees was significant.

The company had rising concerns about employee mental health and accelerated their focus on improving mental health supports. This focus began at the top. The Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and senior leaders prioritized a strong mental health culture within the organization.



## The approach

VIA Rail engaged Sun Life’s Organizational Health Solutions team in 2020, with a specific focus on mental health. There were two steps in this process.

- 1. Understanding the current state**  
In reviewing disability data, the team noted differences in mental health claiming activity between union and non-union employees.

Approximately 2/3 of VIA Rail’s employees are unionized. In this group, for 2020, 30% of short-term disability claims were for mental health. In the non-unionized group however, mental health accounted for 50% of approved claims. Additional insights revealed that disability trends differed by sector, business unit and region.

- 2. Completion of the Workplace Mental Health Risk Assessment**  
To understand the diverse mental health needs of VIA Rail’s organization, the team facilitated four bilingual focus groups. The team adapted its approach based on VIA Rail’s needs. There were virtual sessions as well as an in-person focus group with maintenance centre employees in Montréal. This area of the company had seen higher incidence of disability – and mental health was a top concern.

These focus groups provided a truly cross-regional, cross-business-unit perspective. The groups included employees at all levels of the organization.

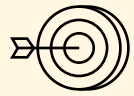
The assessment revealed several areas of strength and opportunity. Some of the key recommendations included:

- Clearly communicating VIA Rail’s commitment to mental well-being from the senior leadership team
- additional support to leaders and managers
- facilitating employee access to mental health services within VIA’s network of existing supports.



*“Together, we go further. At VIA Rail, we care deeply about our employees’ psychological health. With work playing such a significant role in our lives, we strongly believe that we, as an employer, can and should positively contribute to the health and wellbeing of our employees. Here is a look at our journey towards achieving this goal.”*

Martine Rivard, Chief Employee Experience Officer, VIA Rail



## The actions

VIA Rail continues to build and refine their mental health strategy. Here are some of the actions they've taken over the past year.

- **Strengthened their leadership commitment.** Company leaders communicated to employees that mental health was an organizational health priority. This included a direct message from the CEO emphasizing the importance of workplace mental health. The message also referred employees to a range of support services available internally. This included telemedicine, access to unlimited online mental health therapy, the Employee and Family Assistance Program, and wellness supports.
- **Improved ease of access.** VIA Rail created a one-stop shop wellness site for all employees. This centralized available mental health tools and access to resources.
- **Increased focus on prevention.** Before the pandemic, VIA Rail began offering the services of an Occupational Therapist (OT). The OT specialized in supporting employee mental well-being. This was part of a proactive approach to address early signs of mental health distress in their non-union employees. During the pandemic, the OT was available virtually for consultations with employees. They also offered virtual conferences that provided additional training to managers and employees on mental health awareness and steps they could take to support their own mental health.
- **Offered education and training.** VIA Rail leveraged the free, online manager mental health training modules available through Sun Life's mental health strategy toolkit. The five modules were mandatory training for managers of the Maintenance Center. Customer Experience managers also went through Queen's University Leadership in Mental Health training.
- **Put virtual care in place.** VIA Rail engaged with Dialogue to offer virtual care as a first line mental health strategy. This included initial assessments, virtual internet-based cognitive behavioral therapy (iCBT) and unlimited online therapy with a mental health practitioner. All these supports have no out of pocket expenses for employees. Employees benefit from one integrated experience across the Dialogue platform.
- **Created a disability toolkit.** VIA Rail created its own disability toolkit to help guide employees and managers through the disability claims process. They partnered with Sun Life to streamline content, simplify language, and harmonize with the Sun Life disability process. This ensured that employees who went on leave had an easier experience, with a single source for information. It also made it easier for managers to support employees and ensure a smooth return to work.





## About Sun Life's Workplace Mental Health Risk Assessment

A key support that we offer organizations is assessing the mental health risks that their employees face.

Our Workplace Mental Health Risk Assessment aligns with the 13 Psychological Risk Factors of the [National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace](#).

- The assessment is comprehensive. It relies on both qualitative and quantitative measures. Quantitative responses are based on organizational data, such as turnover, short-term disability, Employee Assistance Program use and casual absences.
- Comprised of carefully designed questions, it provides a detailed view into your organization's strengths and opportunities for improvement.

Following the assessment, you are provided with a detailed report and debrief. This includes recommendations for next steps. From there, our team is available to help you develop the best strategy for your organization.



## The results

In the Fall of 2021, VIA Rail was awarded Excellence Canada's Silver Certification for Mental Health. They now have a road map to attain a gold certification in 2023.

Despite the pandemic, VIA Rail has experienced positive mental health outcomes over the past two years. Prevention steps have increased, with usage rates for online mental health supports increasing. While mental health continues to be the top driver of disability absence, preliminary results are encouraging:

- The volume and approval rates of mental health claims across all disability plans had decreased by mid-2021.
- The percentage of mental health-related short-term disability claims dropped from 53% in 2020 to 35% in 2021 for the non-union group – the group that had been VIA's most high-risk employee segment for absences related to mental illness.
- For those on leave, Via Rail remains committed to facilitating return to work accommodations and/or modified duties. This is reflected in their data, as the percentage of return-to-work recoveries remains high and above the industry benchmark.



## Next steps

VIA Rail is currently working on mapping their absence management processes. This is to ensure that they're aligned with best practices in every step all along the health continuum.

The company will also be expanding its focus on diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I) initiatives and strategy. They recognize that DE&I is a critical pillar of their organization, and an important contributor to good mental health.

As operations resume to full capacity, VIA Rail is ensuring a healthy return to work for all employees. They are:

- holding health and wellness information sessions
- setting up on-site information kiosks, and
- ensuring that managers are accompanying their employees to these sessions in preparation for their return.

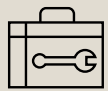


# Take your next step towards improving workplace mental health.

## You don't have to do it alone!

The pandemic has made having a mental health strategy that much more critical. This case study shows how you can make a difference and improve workplace mental health with the right approach.

Get started with our free Mental Health Strategy Toolkit.



### [Use the Free tool kit now](#)

It was created based on our:

- years of experience working with Clients to create healthier workplaces
- extensive testing within our own organization to find solutions that work

It's a great resource to help organizations get started, as well as to guide employers already on their journey.



## Need more support?

### We're here to help.

Connect with your Sun Life Group Benefits representative to discuss which [Organizational Health Solution](#) may be right for you.



*This report provides you with general information only. It doesn't provide you with employment, legal, health, or financial advice. Consult with the appropriate professional advisor to meet your organization's needs.*

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