



Announcer

It is time for the *IHSA Safety Podcast*.

Enzo Garritano:

Welcome to the *IHSA Safety Podcast*. I'm Enzo Garritano, president and CEO, and in today's episode on assessing your mental health, host Ken Rayner and IHSA's Mental Health and Wellness Specialist Kathy Martin continue their discussions on mental health. Ken and Kathy, over to you.

Ken Rayner:

Thanks, Enzo. Kathy Martin, we're back once again to do another podcast on mental health. I believe this is the fifth one that you and I have done together, so it's great to have you back. Thank you for joining us once again. The title of this particular podcast is "Assessing Your Mental Health". So Kathy, my first question is why are we discussing assessing mental health as opposed to assessing mental illness? Don't the two essentially mean the same thing?

Kathy Martin:

Well, Ken, thanks for having me back. And yeah, that's a really interesting question. The short answer is, well, it depends on who you are, as every person's really going to view this differently. And my hope, of course is that people start to think of their mental health in the same way that we do or most of us do with our physical health. So for example, Ken, if I were to ask you how do you assess your physical health, what would you say?

Ken Rayner:

Oh, Kathy, asking me questions now. Okay.

Kathy Martin:

Turning the tables.

Ken Rayner:

Okay. So if I assess my physical health, I guess I do it two ways. One, am I in pain? Am I hurting? And then on the flip side of that, do I feel good and am I functioning as I feel I need to on a daily basis? So in terms of when I'm feeling good, I probably don't take as much notice of it as opposed to when I'm feeling bad and then it's more recognizable and I'm trying to do something reactive to address it. I probably don't spend enough time as to making sure that all those things that I should be doing, whether it's getting enough sleep or exercising or if I'm working all day at my computer per se, making sure that I get up and ergonomically I'm set up properly and I'm getting up for stretch breaks and I'm moving around enough.

So yeah, I mean I think I assess it two ways. Unfortunately, I probably don't give enough credit to the days that I feel good and say, what did I do that day? That was really good. I'm more so taking reactionary measures on the days that I don't feel good. I think that's how I would assess it.

Kathy Martin:

Yeah, that's pretty common for most of us. I think especially as we age, Ken, you and I are getting there. We're feeling the aches and pains a little more, so we are looking for those problems. But yeah, no, it's really important that we assess our physical health in both, like watching for the signs of perhaps an illness or something that might be creeping up on us. But also as you just really mentioned, was that taking note of the positive and those good days and making sure that we're doing more of that so that we maintain our health, because I think that's the end goal. Most of us want to be healthy and we strive to have health in our life. So if we were to view assessing our mental health in similar way, we can look for gaps that are keeping us both from feeling mentally healthy and thriving, as well as those things that might be triggering us to maybe look at...Maybe there's a problem, but we really need to assess for our mental health and find out ways to make ourselves thrive as well.

But let's just step back for a moment, and I just want to define for our listeners what mental health is because some people really get confused between mental health and mental illness. And they use them interchangeably and really they're not the same thing. So the World Health Organization says that mental health is a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community. So mental health is more than the absence of mental disorders. When we're looking at or assessing our mental health, like I said, we need to look beyond if we're sick or not to how we can improve our mental well-being. Now, our mental health exists really on a complex continuum which is experienced differently from one person to the next. So it's important for each of us to self-monitor and self-assess where you might be on this continuum at any given time with regards to your mental health.

Some days of course, we're thriving, we're functioning well, and I think you mentioned that, Ken, you don't give that too much thought. But other days we might be barely able to function at all because our ability to cope at that moment is being challenged in some way. Now of course, we can bounce around on the continuum and slide up or down. Yet when our ability to cope starts to diminish more frequently and we find ourselves struggling emotionally, maybe a bit too often, and we're in greater general pain, and that pain's lingering longer than usual, it is this emotional pain that we should really be paying closer attention to. So let me just try to explain this a little bit more. When you think of physical pain, it's a cue that something is putting stress on the body. Now, we can also think of mental pain or mental distress as a cue that something is stressing our mind or emotional limits.

So luckily we know we are very adaptable creatures as humans, and we can usually deal with a lot of physical and emotional stressors and pain. But what do we do when we find we're not coping? When in physical pain, like I said, sometimes we know the cause of the pain. For example, you know where the pain comes from, Ken, after you trip and you sprain your ankle. And you can treat this pain. And at times we understand also the cause of our emotional or mental pain that we're experiencing. Like for example, when a family member dies unexpectedly, we can expect that we're going to be feeling grief or sadness. We also know that these pains typically are temporary, be it the grief or the sprained ankle.

And we can trust that we can cope and manage because we perceive them as temporary pains and we have a reasonable hope that they'll typically heal in time.

However, what about those times when we don't really know the cause of our pain? So Ken, I'm going to turn the tables again and ask you another question. If you had physical pain and it's making it really hard for you to cope with your daily living, for example, let's say your leg is really in a lot of pain and it's keeping you from being able to go to work or maybe to the hockey game. And I guess the question is would you go to a health professional for some kind of physical assessment if you didn't really know the cause of this leg pain?

Ken Rayner:

Yes, if it was impeding my ability to enjoy life, absolutely.

Kathy Martin:

Yeah, most of us would say, well, that's a stupid question. Of course you would go to the doctor if you've got such pain in your leg that you can't function and you don't know the cause. We would definitely dig deep and go to our doctors and find out what's going on. Well, if your pain is affecting your ability to go to work, like I said, I expect you to all go get it checked out. So Ken, I'm going to ask you another question. Why don't we do the same for emotional distress or emotional pain, especially if it's impacting your ability to work?

Ken Rayner:

Well, if you'd asked me that question before we started doing podcasts together, I may have had a different answer, but I've learned a lot from you over the past four podcasts that we've done together. So I'm going to say to a degree, probably embarrassment for the person that is feeling it, that they should be able to cope with it themselves, maybe lack of understanding as to what's causing it. And so again, maybe a bit of hesitation to go because there's not clarity in terms of what you're going to tell the doctor. And I guess going back to one of the podcasts we've done before, Kathy, I guess the stigma of everything in terms of...

It's very simple. You have a physical pain, you hurt your leg, your knee, your back, most people understand that. If you're feeling blue and you can't get out of a funk, does everybody understand that? And do you even really feel comfortable going to explain that to a doctor? I'm feeling more comfortable now after all the discussions that you and I have had together, but I'd say that in most cases, or if you rewound my life going back a bit, no, I probably wouldn't go.

Kathy Martin:

You're right, Ken. I think you hit it the nail on the head there with the stigma piece, I think that's a really big piece. And it's funny because most of us know when we're struggling with emotional pain and when we're not coping well with our stressors, but society gives us these mixed messages and tells us we should deal with it because after all, we're all stressed, right? Well, stress has almost become a badge of honour in the workplace. And feeling frazzled and overwhelmed for some just means that you're busy and productive, which I would argue you're likely not all that productive. Because we know if you're

stressed too long or too often, that's going to affect your productivity, not just your mental health. And so you're really just busy. We also know that acknowledging when you're in emotional pain, not just stressed, is really difficult for many people. There's still way too much needless stigma and misunderstanding around mental health and mental illness today.

The biggest issue in my opinion, by the way, which is toxic masculinity, which we talked about in our last podcast, is that people and men in particular still think it shows weakness to admit to emotional or emotional pain and to seek help for those concerns that they might be having. So let's be honest for a moment, Ken, like I said, most of us know when we're feeling emotional pain, but how many of us actually go and seek guidance or professional supports and treatment to manage this type of pain? Ken, I'm just wondering, do you have any idea what a stat might be around this? How many people do you think would actually go and seek that professional support and treatment when they know that they're struggling?

Ken Rayner:

Oh, less than half.

Kathy Martin:

Less than half. Yeah. So the stats would say, yeah, about 50 per cent of those with clinical level mental health risks do not seek help. And the major reasons actually for this is not knowing what kind of help to be seeking, thinking that perhaps the help won't make a difference, and some just prefer to try to do it themselves and take care of things on their own, so try the self-help approach.

Ken Rayner:

Kathy, that's a big number. 'Cause I remember, I think in other podcasts we've talked about that mental health affects, what, 40 per cent of Canadians by the time they're a certain age? So this means that of that 40 per cent, only 20 per cent are going to get help. So I mean that's a big number.

Kathy Martin:

It is. And I'm going to talk a little bit further about that because you just mentioned one of the stats. And I think the stat you're thinking about is one out of two—by the time you reach 40—individuals will have had a mental illness or mental health challenge in their life. So that's one in two, that's pretty huge. And if only half of those people are going to seek help, yeah, that's an important thing to keep and consider. And a couple other interesting points is that women between the ages of 15 and 44 are twice as likely to visit their GP as men of a similar age. So this has a lot to do with how men are viewing help seeking in general. There is that old cliché, you can't get your husband to go to the doctor unless he was six feet in the ground, right?

It's been difficult to get men to see the value in seeking that professional support, not just for mental health issues, but for physical health issues over the years as well. That's certainly changing and we have a lot of work to do. So if 50 per cent of both men and women who seek help might seek help, but the women are outnumbering two to one those who are seeking the help, then my question to men is what's going on? This is significant because by the time Canadians, like I said, reach 40 years of age, one

in two have had a mental illness. So that's a lot of men in that one in two, right? But disproportionately it's women seeking the help in that 50 per cent bucket more so than the men. And we know a lot of people, like I said then are, if it's only 50 per cent, are going untreated for their mental health issues, which in my opinion is really sad as there really are many safe and effective treatment options available out there.

Yet when it comes to self-treatment, you can do it in a positive way. There's lots of great self-help books and strategies to improve. And I encourage people to look at those, certainly if they're hesitant to go and see their doctor, but unfortunately many people would rather self-medicate the pain away. And maybe turn to these more quacky, kind of do-it-yourself self-help treatments that are on the internet, which full of weird things that you can do to try to improve your mental stability on the internet. Or perhaps I just ignore it completely and think it's normal. Or even worse, people may just decide life isn't really worth living because it's too painful and never seek treatment. So it is vital back to the topic of this podcast, it really is vital for all of us to be assessing our mental health, especially when you're experiencing mental distress and seek treatment if needed.

But you can also assess as part of just your annual checkup. Most of us or many of us will go to the doctor for an annual check-in to make sure we're doing all right, especially as we age. I think it's an important thing we do. And we can also do that with our mental health. So the Moods Disorders Association of Canada has a need assessment and it's aptly named Check Up From The Neck Up, and we can post that for our listeners and some other assessment tools that they can explore. So I think my message is please don't be afraid to check in when you're feeling not quite yourself to determine where you might focus to feel a bit better. Self-help tools and resources are a good starting point, but further help might be in order, especially if dealing with a significant, painful or debilitating issue. Why wait until there's so much pain you're barely coping before you go and seek some help?

Ken Rayner:

Absolutely. And Kathy, you've mentioned some resources that you can find on the internet. You've created some safety talks. There's a safety talk associated with each one of the podcasts that you and I are doing together. So in the IHSA safety talk on assessing your mental health, you mentioned that for staying in top physical condition, it takes work, exercise, diet, sleep, healthy eating, etc. Well, how would somebody create a mental workout plan to keep them in top mental condition and what would it include?

Kathy Martin:

Most people intuitively know we're all different when it comes to personal physical resilience or physical fitness and that there's many factors that weigh into someone's physical resilience. Things like genetics, lifestyle habits, your personal experiences, plus things we don't often think about like access to good food or stable employment and shelter and so much more. So physical resilience is impacted not only by one's personal traits and behaviors, but also by the social and economic influences around them. And well, guess what? Mental resilience is the same.

Ken Rayner:

Kathy you mentioned a term that I'm not familiar with, you said mental resilience here. Mental resilience. What exactly does that mean?

Kathy Martin:

Well, according to the American Psychological Association, mental resilience is the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands. So basically it's about flexibility and adjusting to life's challenges and adapting and being able to bounce back ultimately is what mental resilience is talking about. And there's a number of factors that contribute to how well people adapt to adversities. Predominantly among them are the ways in which individuals view and engage with the world around them, the ability and the quality of social resources and their specific coping strategies. And there's been lots of research and psychological research demonstrates that resources and skills associated with a more positive adaptation or greater resilience can be cultivated in practice. So good news is resilience is learned and it can be learned at any time and at any age.

So I really encourage folks to consider how mental resilience fits into their daily life and how they might build that just like they might try to build their physical health, like building a muscle, right? Increasing your mental resilience takes time and intentionality. And the APA tells us that focusing on four components, that's connection, wellness, healthy thinking, and meaning, that these can empower you to withstand and learn from difficult and traumatic experiences. So back to your question, if I were to give viewers a mental workout, I would encourage listeners to increase their capacity for resilience to cope with and also grow from the difficulties life throws at them.

Ken Rayner:

Okay. So you mentioned the American Psychological Association, the APA, and you mentioned that they have four core components. So connection, wellness, healthy thinking, and meaning. Can you tell us a little bit more about each one and how they might be involved in what you just mentioned in building up a sort of mental workout plan?

Kathy Martin:

Sure. So the basics I kind of go over, but I would encourage viewers who are listening to learn more about mental resilience and set up a tailored plan for themselves. Like I said, just like a physical plan. There really is not a one size fits all, and we'll make sure that there's resources posted with the podcast for listeners. So hopefully they'll take a look at those and that'll help get them started. Now, there are different approaches and different models out there, but the building blocks are similar regardless of the model you choose. But the APA, which I referenced, tells us to do these few things, and one is to build connections and to build connections through prioritizing our relationships. So connecting with empathetic and understanding people can remind us that we're not alone in the midst of difficulties. So focus on finding trustworthy and compassionate individuals who will validate your feelings, which will be a support for you as you build your resilience.

Ken Rayner:

So that's interesting. So I take it the opposite could be true as well. So if you have an unhealthy relationship or you have a tendency to discuss all the pain and what you're going through with somebody else and they do the same for you, maybe that's not helping. It's just mirroring in your pain as opposed to helping somebody or connecting with people that can help to pull you out.

Kathy Martin:

Well, yeah, I mean I think it's okay to have peer-to-peer conversations of shared lived experience. We do mirror ourselves in each other, but I think there's a time when we need to be a listener and then there's times when we need to do the talking. So we need to sort of dump our stuff and share our stuff and find a good empathetic, understanding person to listen. And that is different than just like what you're mentioning, the mirroring back. So there's some really good tools out there around how to listen for understanding.

Ken Rayner:

So I guess could we say then, Kathy, in terms of if you're going to connect with somebody and prioritize a relationship, if at the end of the talk that you have with them, you feel good, you talked about feeling and trusting your emotions, if you're feeling good, that's probably a positive connection with somebody?

Kathy Martin:

Yeah, yeah. So I mean the key is looking for individuals who can validate those feelings. Okay, we all have relationships that some are healthier than others. Maybe you have a brother or a sister who don't validate your feelings at all. Maybe if you shared a personal experience, they're like, "Oh, well suck it up, cupcake, that's life." And on they go, that's not going to help you feel very validated in your feelings.

Ken Rayner:

That's not connecting with an empathetic or an understanding person.

Kathy Martin:

Exactly. Exactly. So it's not saying we don't have those relationships or we need to get rid of those relationships. It's just saying when we're looking at relationships, prioritize those ones, those relationships that are giving you the empathetic and understanding stuff that you need. Right?

Ken Rayner:

Sure, yeah. Makes sense.

Kathy Martin:

And it's good to have those people in your back pocket and in your corner prior to the challenges so that when the challenges hit in life, you have someone you know can go to. And many people have that go-to person that they go to when life gets hard. A lot of us are fortunate enough to have that in our lives. Some people don't. So if you don't have that in your life, it's really important to prioritize relationships

then, when you're looking at building resilience, to find that. And I can talk about that in just a minute. I think that would be things like joining a group. So even if you don't have that in your life, if you join a group, maybe you can build some of those relationships along the way, one-on-one relationships. Some people find that being active in civil groups or a faith-based community or other local organizations provide what we call social support and can help you reclaim hope when needed. So it doesn't always have to be a family member or close friends.

Sometimes it's our affiliations in the groups that we belong to that help us in those times as well. So research groups in your area that could offer you support and a sense of purpose and joy when you need it. And studies have been well established that the value of social support is real. So we're social creatures, we need people in our lives and we need people in our corners. So another thing would be fostering wellness, and we talked a little bit about this already. But taking care of your body. Self-care may be a popular buzzword, but it's also a legitimate practice for mental health and building resilience. That's because stress is just as much physical as it is emotional. And promoting positive lifestyle factors like proper nutrition, ample sleep, and hydration, and regular exercise can strengthen your body to adapt to stress and reduce the toll of emotions like anxiety and depression.

There's many books and information you can read on mindfulness. But at the end of the day, it's finding a way to as the title says, mind your mind, be mindful of who you are and where you are in the world and what's going on with you. And one of the good ways to do that is by pausing and reflecting. So some people like to pause and reflect by doing things like mindful journaling. Sometimes yoga can really ground a person or other spiritual practices like prayer or meditation can also help people get to that sense of being mindful of what's going on and help build connections and restore hope within themselves, which can prime them to deal with those situations that require resilience.

So when you journal or you meditate or you pray, really you need to ruminate on the positive aspects of your life and recall the things that you're grateful for. Even during personal trials, this will help build your resilience. So to me, practicing mindfulness is more that internal work and really making sure that you're being mindful of the things that you put in your brain and the things you tell yourself and staying present in the moment as much as possible.

Now, another thing which is important to do is to avoid negative outlets. We talked about this earlier. Many of us are tempted to mask our pain with things like alcohol and drugs and other substances, but that's like putting a bandage on a deep wound. So focus instead on giving your body resources to manage stress rather than seeking to eliminate the feeling of stress all together. I think that's really important. Important enough that I'm going to repeat that. It's really important for us to, like I said, give your body resources to manage stress rather than seeking to eliminate the feelings of stress all together. How many times do we hear, "Oh, that was a rough day. I'm going to go home and kick back and have a couple beers or get blotto that night"? Pretty common. It can take the edge off the stress, but it's just masking it. If you drink enough, it can totally eliminate it as well, but it's not helping us really manage what's going on.

Now, another key area of building resilience is finding purpose. And there's many ways we can do that. One way is helping others, whether you're a volunteer with a local homeless shelter or simply supporting a friend in their own time of need, you can garner a sense of purpose and foster self-worth and connect with other people and tangibly help others, all of which can empower you to grow in resilience and in others to be proactive. It's helpful to acknowledge and accept your emotions during

hard times, but it's also important to help you foster self-discovery by asking yourself what can I do about a problem in my life? Don't wait for the problems to overwhelm you, but if there's a problem happening, start taking more of a proactive approach. What can I do about this? If the problem seems too big to tackle, then break it down into more manageable pieces.

And this really helps us to which I think the next part is move toward your goals. Develop some realistic goals, and do something regularly, even if it seems like a small accomplishment, that enables you to move towards the things you want to accomplish. Instead of focusing on tasks that seem unachievable, ask yourself, what's one thing I know I can accomplish today that helps me move in the direction I want to go? For example, if you're struggling with the loss of a loved one, you might want to move forward. Sorry, and if you want to move forward, then you can perhaps join a grief group in your area.

Ken Rayner:

Yeah, I like this one, Kathy, because you talk about enabling you to move forward with things you want to do. And even if it seems like a small accomplishment... I know I've heard a saying that says people tend to overestimate what they can get done in say a week or a couple of weeks, but then they completely underestimate that if they're consistent about doing something, even if it's small steps every day, how much they would accomplish in an entire year. So it's about, listen, small steps, but small steps over a period of a year add up to a lengthy journey, right?

Kathy Martin:

Exactly. For sure. And I'm sure many of the listeners can think of many things, myself included. Oh, going to start that diet. It seems overwhelming when you want to drop, let's say a hundred pounds, but you just keep chiseling away at it, keep doing one thing at a time, it will slowly happen, right? And I think there's goals. We all have various goals in our life and got to just keep working at them. And another part of building resilience is looking for opportunities for that self-discovery. People often find that they've grown in some aspect as a result of a struggle. You often hear that, right?

It doesn't kill you, it'll make you stronger, I think that's a cliché for this. After a tragedy or hardship, people have reported better relationships and have had a greater sense of strength even while feeling vulnerable. So look for those opportunities in those hard times for that self-discovery. What is actually helping me here that can increase your sense of self-worth and heighten your appreciation for life? Now, another area of building resilience is embracing healthy thoughts. This is hard for many of us, but it's work that we all do and we all need to continue to do.

Keeping things in perspective is probably one of the best ways to build emotional resilience, in my opinion, helps you get through those times when you can keep perspective on things. So how you think can play a significant part, we know in how you feel and how resilient you are when you're faced with obstacles. So try to identify areas of irrational thinking such as the tendency to catastrophize difficulties or assume the world is out to get you or adopt a more balanced and realistic thinking pattern. For instance, if you feel overwhelmed by a challenge, remind yourself that what happened to you isn't an indicator of how your future will go and that you're not helpless. You may not be able to change a highly stressful event, but you can change how you interpret and respond to it.

Another part of this is being able to accept change. Accept that change is a part of life. I think change, what is it? Change, death, and taxes. Certain sties in life. Certain goals or ideals may no longer be attainable as a result of an adverse situation in your life. But accepting circumstances that cannot be changed can help you focus on circumstances that you can alter. It frees up that space in your mind and the energy to then again, move forward. And of course, I think this is so, so important, this next one is maintain a hopeful outlook. It's really hard to be positive when life isn't going your way. An optimistic outlook empowers you to expect that good things will happen to you. Try to visualize what you want rather than worrying about what you fear. Along the way note that subtle ways in which you start to feel better as you deal with these difficult situations.

Ken Rayner:

Kathy, we've covered a lot of ground here, right? So we've talked about the difference between mental health and mental illness. We've talked about overcoming some of that stigma, particularly if you're in pain or you're not feeling well and looking to get a mental distress evaluated by a medical practitioner, someone that can help you. And then we've gone into categories in terms of the four areas that we can get involved in to better help with your mental health. So now, how about an employer who wants to assist the workers within the workplace? How about an employer who's concerned about the mental health of their employees? What recommendations would you make to them in terms of what they can do?

Kathy Martin:

Well, first, we must be looking at mental health beyond the illness lens in workplaces. We don't think much about positive mental health, when everyone around is this happy and coming to work, thriving. It's when things are going south for a person that workplaces tend to stop and take notice. So now workplaces can have a definite influence on positive mental health, but they can also be the cause of mental distress or workplace stress we call it, which can lead to poor mental health outcomes. So employers that are working towards creating a psychologically safe and healthy workplace will be creating space where positive mental health can flourish. And in my opinion, should all employers should be actively working to assess and manage psychological health and safety through controls and helping to manage workers work-related to stressors. Now, of course, even when workplaces do this, there will always be a need for mental health support in the workplace as not all stressors are work-related.

And many issues that overwhelm workers' ability to cope can and often do, come from external stressors beyond the control of the employer. There is just one caveat, however, in 2019 survey, a survey of working Canadians, 75 per cent of respondents said that they'd be reluctant or would refuse to disclose a mental illness to an employer or co-worker. So does this mean we shouldn't bother talking about this stuff or offering support? Well, simply no. It just means we have a ways to go to get workplaces to be more psychologically safe enough for workers to open up and for workers to see the value and the support offered through workplaces in their co-workers. So employers can train their workers at all levels to recognize when someone might be struggling and how to reach out and offer emotional support. This is a good step to take, but I can't stress it enough that if workplaces are not strategically looking at how to improve psychological health and safety, this just falls flat.

As many will not feel safe to speak up, right? We've heard the stat there, 75 per cent don't feel safe to speak up. And in some workplaces, this is really for good reason. So I guess I'll recap today's podcast. We'll wrap things up by just saying, notice when you're not coping well with life stressors. Assess what might be going on and seek help when you need it, and better yet, be proactive and build resilience so that when life stressors do hit you, you're able to cope and bounce back quicker. And also don't forget to support others along way because we all need support from time to time. And with one in two as the stat next time might be your time.

Ken Rayner:

Well said.

Kathy Martin:

Thanks, Ken.

Ken Rayner:

Well said, Kathy, thank you so much and thank you for all the information you provided. This was a massive topic to cover today, assessing your mental health. So thank you for all the guidance and wisdom you provided to us today and to the listeners. So thank you Kathy, again for joining us on *Assessing your Mental Health* on the *IHSA Safety Podcast*.

Enzo Garritano:

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