



Announcer

It is time for the *IHSA Safety Podcast*.

Enzo Garritano:

Welcome to the *IHSA Safety Podcast*. I'm Enzo Garritano, president and CEO of Infrastructure Health and Safety Association, or otherwise known as IHSA. In today's episode, host Ken Rayner speaks to Kathy Martin, IHSA's Mental Health and Wellness Specialist. This episode will be our first in a series of podcasts focused on mental health. Ken and Kathy, over to you.

Ken Rayner:

Thanks, Enzo. It's a pleasure to welcome to the *IHSA Safety Podcast*, Kathy Martin. Today's podcast is the first in a series that we'll be conducting focused on mental health. Kathy, don't think there's a better time where people's minds are open and receptive to discussing mental health based on what we've gone through in the past two years, and certainly hoping that this series on mental health will help those that either they're hurting themselves through again, what we've gone through or a loved one. So Kathy, this is going to be our first, as I said in a series of podcasts. Maybe we can start first with introducing our listeners to yourself and your background.

Kathy Martin:

Ken, thanks for having me. My background's varied and I'm very fortunate to have had really a great career working with employees and employers around workplace mental health issues for some time now. So for I guess about the past 20 years or so, I've helped employers and employees learn to better manage issues surrounding supporting someone who might be struggling with a mental health concern within the workplace. But more recently, I guess in the past decade or so, if you call that recent, I've been encouraging employers to take greater effort in creating psychologically healthy, safe work environments. That way all employees can thrive in a safe environment. And I guess the bulk of my career in this space really took place with the Canadian Mental Health Association, where I was supporting workplaces across Canada as the national manager for a program called Mental Health Works. And Mental Health Works was really talking about this stuff long before others and really brought the topic to the forefront in Canada.

So that work led me then to become a technical committee member, which created the first ever standard on psychological health and safety in the workplace with CSA [Canadian Standards Association] and BNQ [Bureau de normalization du Quebec], which are our national standard bodies. And it's really been an exciting decade watching the national standard become this gold standard, not only in Canadian workplaces but internationally as well. Some of our listeners might not be aware, but just recently in 2021, the International Standards Organization or ISO released a new guidance document on the topic. So it's great to see this becoming a normalized business practice for many. And for those who are interested, those standards are the ISO 45003 and the CSA Z1003 standard. And as many already know, it really does make good business sense to address workplace issues related to mental health and addictions. And the research is overwhelming and the benefits are both social and cost-wise, and these benefits are really undeniable.

So you also asked, I guess a bit about my role here at IHSA, and it's similar to my past roles in that I'm helping to support workplaces to better address workplace mental health and addiction and related issues within the sectors. And this is really exciting to me as there's some really unique challenges faced by the sectors we serve, and they would really benefit from some further guidance and tailored supports and resources. So for many, the opioid crisis in the construction is an area that people are really starting to buzz about and wanting more support. So I'll be helping to support that effort as we move forward. And one of my key responsibilities really is to engage with our sectors, learn what they need, and then to help guide and support them in the process of addressing hazards that impact worker mental well-being.

Of course, part of this role will be to coach and then train workplaces and supervisors and peers also to better support individual workers who might be struggling with mental health and addiction issues. But we know that the latter there is really more the downstream approach to supporting people who might be struggling. We need to really ensure that we're addressing those known psychosocial hazards as a way of preventing mental harm in the first place. So just like we do with physical safety, we need to start doing this more with our psychosocial hazards. So that will be a real focus of some of the work I'm going to be doing.

Ken Rayner:

So Kathy, from a layman's perspective, I believe there's been some change in the past couple of years. You're a health and safety expert and a professional. From your perspective, what's changed regarding our views in mental health over the past couple of years? I mean, did it start before the pandemic or has the pandemic really accelerated everything?

Kathy Martin:

Just as I mentioned, it's become more normalized to talk about mental health at work for workplaces. And workplaces are starting to put in planned efforts around managing risks, as I mentioned. And so yes, of course the pandemic has brought in this topic to be top of mind for most workers and workplaces. It's really been hard for those who weren't talking about it pre-pandemic to just stick their head in the sand and ignore that this is happening, that there's issues in the workplace. And so this has certainly affected us all, and the pandemic really did disrupt many people's working lives as well. So workplaces were left dealing with those impacts and those employers that were already prepared and managing these issues prior to the pandemic, I'm sure they still struggled, but at least they had policies and processes and programs in place which would help to support their workers. And so my goal is to make sure that all workplaces are better equipped for the next pandemic.

Ken Rayner:

Oh, no.

Kathy Martin:

Hopefully we won't have one, but we want to make sure that we are all ready for the next decade.

Ken Rayner:

Okay, I'm knocking on wood here. There's the next pandemic. Yeah. So Kathy, IHSA supports the transportation, electrical, utilities, and construction industries. How do you believe that mental health has impacted the industries that we support?

Kathy Martin:

Well, one thing I'm pleased to see growing in our industries we serve here at IHSA is, and more broadly I guess too, is that there is a greater understanding that employees have a key, or that employers I should say, have a key role in supporting workers. That goes beyond just providing benefits, supports like the employee family assistance programs and psychological services like our benefit programs, although these programs are really valuable and certainly something we should continue to offer. What I'm noticing is that the employers are starting to understand that they also need to tackle those workplace factors that I mentioned that are causing undue mental harm really through managing it through more of a risk management approach. So this could be in part, I guess the change that we've had the standard now out for a decade and the word starting to get around that workplaces should be doing more.

But like I mentioned earlier, the pandemic certainly has highlighted how physical safety in the workplace or the lack of it can cause significant worker stress. So we know the safety issue was around catching COVID. So that was a real stress for many folks. And so just like with physical safety or not having it, that's one of the hazards, psychosocial hazard that impacts workers' mental well-being. So there's other factors as well, like workload and trust and management that play a significant role. So really, risk management is something IHSA is certainly familiar with, and we promote COR to help employers with this when it comes to physical safety. And we also have the, like I mentioned, the CSA standard, which promotes risk management and psychosocial hazards known to affect the mental well-being of our workers. So one of my goals will be to help employers who are using COR to integrate the two.

So integrating psychosocial hazard management into what they do, which goes beyond just the legislative requirements like violence and harassment, which are in our program to date. And I guess it's probably also worth noting that heavy regulated industries are slower usually to pick up on voluntary standards in general, because really they're so focused on meeting current regulations and our industries are very regulated, but we know that this also adds to the stress of the workers. So it's really vital that heavily regulated industries be responding to workplace stress in a strategic manner and reduce the risk associated with high work stress. And I guess lastly, managing psychosocial hazards only makes good business sense given the huge costs of unwell workers on the workplace bottom line and for our society. And really, let's face it folks, it's also really the right thing to do as well.

Ken Rayner:

Yeah, Kathy, I'm really glad you mentioned physical safety first before addressing mental health. Because I guess if the physical safety isn't addressed to the point where it's alleviating fears in the workplace, you're never possibly going to get to be able to address those mental health issues unless the physical safety is addressed first.

Kathy Martin:

Absolutely, absolutely. It's chicken or the egg. Yeah, we absolutely must be doing more in the space of physical safety as well.

Ken Rayner:

So Kathy, what tools does IHSA offer that can assist employers, assist supervisors, joint health and safety committee members to have discussions on mental health in the workplace and start those conversations if they haven't started them already?

Kathy Martin:

Well, good news, we've recently released eight new safety talks on a variety of workplace mental health issues that are impacting workers. And you can find those on the website. You just need to scroll down to the bottom of the home page there to the tools and resource section, and then look for the safety talk section and you'll find them there. And these talks were designed to be delivered either individually or you can use it as a little mini mental health series as well if you'd like. And because we know people often feel a bit nervous talking about mental health, especially if it's new to you, you're a new supervisor or foreman or this is a new initiative in your workplace, it's the first time you've ever really talked about workplace mental health, we've created a facilitators guide to help increase the facilitator skills and competencies to have these talks as well.

And so the facilitator can be a supervisor, it could also be a peer to peer. These talks don't necessarily have to come from a top down approach. They can go peer to peer. You might be wondering, "Oh, what are these eight safety talks?" Well, we have one that really just frames the topic of workplace mental health and then one on opioid in the trades, which folks are really starting to talk about. So that might be something some of our listeners might be interested in. And of course, we have one on challenging stigma and preventing mental harm. And one that has been getting a lot of conversation around and getting people really talking is one on toxic masculinity or this concept of hypermasculinity.

And if you don't know what that is and how it relates to mental health and in the workplace, I really encourage you to go have a look. It's a great one. And then of course, people are still struggling with knowing what to do or how to recognize when someone might be having mental health challenges in the workplace. So there's one on declining mental health, how to notice when someone's mental health might be declining and what suicide risk might look like and what to do.

And then of course, we're always encouraging folks to assess their own mental health. We can't just wait for folks to notice when we might be struggling, we need to notice ourselves. So there's one on assessing your own mental health and of course, work stress and burnout are one of the top hazards, psychosocial hazards in the workplace, so we have one on that. And then I talked a lot about this concept of psychological health and safety, and there is one there that really unpacks what that is and how it's a joint responsibility. So using that internal responsibility system, how everyone plays a role in making sure that the environment is psychologically healthy and safe. And so I guess shortly we'll also be adding some additional resources to help the facilitator with some pre and post-session support. So it'll be a one-page resource that will have various articles and videos and research on each of those topic areas that I just mentioned to help further the conversation and further the understanding for the facilitator.

Because we really want to make sure that the facilitator can feel confident, like I said, to have these questions and feel equipped to answer the common question and answers that might come up or Q&A and where they can go if they can't answer things as well. But of course, we always encourage folks to

reach out to IHSA if they need more support. So if you do start going through these eight safety talks and you're saying, "Hey, I need more support." Just reach out to IHSA at info@ihsa.ca, and that'll get passed along to me and I'll do my best to support you.

Ken Rayner:

Well, that's great. Thanks, Kathy. So again, it's on the tools and resources page on our website, and we're also going to have the link on the *IHSA Safety Podcast* site attached to this podcast so listeners can access it both ways. And Kathy, so it's great to have you on board full-time as IHSA's Mental Health and Wellness Specialist as our first one. We're looking to provide resources not only to the industries that we support, but only also our own staff, but you can't do everything. So there's other partner organizations out there that I think that you would probably feel comfortable recommending to our members in terms of where they can go for information, not only to the IHSA website, but what other partners would you recommend?

Kathy Martin:

Of course, there's so many great resources out there, and certainly some of our occupational health and safety system partners have some great resources. So I would definitely guide people to Workplace Safety and Prevention Services, WSPS, and also Workplace Safety North and the Public Service Health and Safety Association, those for sure I would recommend. And OHCOW [Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers] as well. They've been at this a little longer than us at IHSA, so they have some really great resources already up online and ready to go. So it would definitely worth checking out.

And a really great joint project called Think Mental Health at thinkmentalhealth.ca is full of great information for your employees and for yourself as employer. If you're an employer listening and there's even a widget you can use on your website to link to the mental health website. So it's worth checking out. And when I mentioned it's a joint project, it's a joint project with our health and safety partners across Ontario, including IHSA. So definitely worth looking at. And of course, check back often to the IHSA website as there'll be more and more added to our site as we begin to develop more tools and resources tailored to our sectors.

Ken Rayner:

So Kathy, what suggestions do you have for our members, for organizations who have a desire to begin workplace discussions regarding mental health? Where do they start?

Kathy Martin:

Well, first, if you're going to start these discussions, it's really important to listen, to understand, not just to hear, and there's some really great tools available to help supervisors with this concept. And they're in the supervisor prep guide that I was mentioning, the Supervisor Safety Talk Prep Guide. So definitely I would encourage folks to read the guide and learn about the concept of listening to understand. It is a little different than just active listening skills. That would bring me to, I guess number two, you got to be prepared if you're going to be talking about this stuff. So again, use the guide and review the resources suggested prior to delivering your talk. And maybe most important is to recognize that in some

workplaces it might not feel safe for workers to speak up or have open conversations about mental health or sensitive stigmatized issues like addictions or harassment.

It really does take trust on a fundamental level. Where there might be trust among peers, there's not always from that quote, "organizational perspective". So let me simplify this, for some telling your best buddy that you've had a bad day and went home and had few too many and feel a bit rough today is a bit different than going to your boss with the same information and letting them know that you might not be fit for duty because of it. We just need to be sensitive of the level of trust within our organization as we begin talking about these issues. And then I guess too, particularly for the facilitator is overcoming our own stigma and our own sort of self-stigma is huge. And then we must navigate the stigma of others and systemic barriers as well. So this gets a little technical. We'll be talking a little bit more about this concept in some of our next podcasts, but talking about these issues, like I've mentioned, can feel a little bit threatening to some, especially if they've had a bad workplace experience in the past.

And so this is really the pickle here. How do we build a level of trust for those who do step forward with personal concerns or support them in a way that they feel valued in coming forward, as well as get the supports that they need, something workplaces need to consider. We need to keep stigma reduction, I guess, and good policies and practices in place to support workers. We also need to manage those psychosocial risks and we need to build ongoing trust at all levels. Those are some of the key takeaways hopefully you'll, from that. And like I mentioned in the upcoming mental health series of podcasts, I'm hoping to be able to help guide employers just how to begin some of this work and how to advance the work you may be already doing. So I look forward to continuing our conversation.

Ken Rayner:

Thank you, Kathy. So do I. And I thank you for starting the conversation on mental health. So thank you again. This has been a terrific start to the conversation and we will keep it going. So thank you Kathy Martin for being with us today.

Enzo Garritano:

Thank you for listening to the *IHSA Safety Podcast* and our important series on mental health. Be sure to subscribe and like us on your podcast channel and visit us on ihsa.ca for a wealth of health and safety resources and information.

Announcer

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