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THE LEARNING BRAIN

Each week in BCPVPA eNews, we share tips, links and self-assessment tools that will help our members to better understand the mental health continuum, and to use the resources that are available.

bcpvpa.bc.ca/thelearningbrain

Friday April 17th, 2020

EARLY WARNING SIGNS OF BRAIN INJURY

It's not just all in your head!

It seems an obvious statement to say that your brain and body are connected. But it is worth bringing this concept to the forefront for our discussion, because your thoughts, which drive your emotions, often have a physiological impact at a cellular level in your body. So often, early warnings signs of mental illness first show up **physically**. Then often, our ability to emotionally regulate is challenged. We may notice **emotional** signs as well.

 We may also experience challenges in our **personal well-being** and then in our **intellectual abilities**. When our executive functioning is strained, we find ourselves concerned, even scared, as we angst about our inability to think straight, our increased frequency of losing our keys, or forgetting appointments. We wonder if we will ever return to the level of concentration, clarity and memory we had only months before. This increased angst feeds an anxious cycle of worrying and concern, which then exacerbates our symptoms.

PHYSICAL

- Muscular tension/headaches
- Upset stomach
- Grinding/clenching teeth
- Difficulty sleeping/fatigue
- Shortness of breath
- Cold hands and feet
- Trembling/shakiness 
- Frequent colds, flu, infections,
- Rapid loss or gain in weight

EMOTIONAL

- Anxiety
- Anger
- Irritability
- Depression 
- Hopeless/trapped 
- Out of control 
- Guilty/self conscious 
- Apathy
- Feeling of incompetence

PERSONAL WELL-BEING

- Questioning our own values
- Loss of purpose and meaning in what we do
- Isolating yourself from friends, family, and your community 
- Loneliness (which leads to other physical health issues!)
- Excessively busy 
- Low motivation, low energy
- Poor eating habits
- Self soothing behaviours such as eating carbs, drinking alcohol, drug use, increased screen time and other addictions

INTELLECTUAL

- Impaired judgment
- Inability to concentrate
- Easily distracted
- Memory loss
- Excessive worry
- Difficulty in making decisions/procrastination
- Confusion

Sometimes those who are driven and successful may struggle from what is called **high functioning depression**.

[Here is a quick video](#) that explains high functioning depression.

As leaders we are regularly high functioning individuals who have been able to cope well up to this point through strategies unique to each of us. Now, these strategies may or may not have been healthy. Regardless, you may reach a point where these strategies no longer work, and you find yourself struggling. Try as you might, you are unable to keep up with your regular demands – and the harder you try, the more frustrated and distraught you become.

Bethany Szentesi - unsplash.com

How may this show up at work?

- You may notice that your quality of work is slipping
- You are missing appointments and deadlines due to increased forgetfulness
- While at work, your productivity is down considerably. You are physically 'there' but it takes you three times as long to complete what used to be regular tasks; your processing time has slowed.
- You have a shorter fuse and find being patient, controlling your emotions and practicing decorum with staff and parents very difficult.
- You may withdraw from some activities or meetings; you just do not feel up to participating;
- You struggle with a negative attitude when normally you are a pretty positive or at best, a neutral person
- You feel your confidence is low and you question your own judgement and decisions
- You have really low energy and drag yourself through the day
- You don't really care about aspects of your job which used to motivate you and contribute to your feeling of being valued.

BURNOUT

The **World Health Organization (WHO)** recently updated its definition of burnout. WHO now refers to burnout as "syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed," in the organization's International Classification of Diseases diagnostic manual.

Three symptoms included in the list are:

- feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion
- increased mental distance from one's job or feelings negative towards one's career
- reduced professional productivity

Look for the three part series on burnout in Principi(E)d starting this Fall in our November issue. Are you struggling with Emotional Burnout?

This video describes the 10 signs of emotional burnout.





Dario Valenzuela - unsplash.com

GETTING HELP



If you find yourself experiencing some of the Early Warning Signs listed above, rest assured, with the right support, you can bounce back to the Healthy side of the Continuum. It is important, however, that the sooner you get help, the faster you will feel better and the less chance your condition becomes chronic.



You may reach out to a family member or colleague to voice your concern in how you are feeling.



Often, however, the response from others, who feel they are trying to help, may be saying “Yeah, we are all stressed. Hang in there” or “You will be ok, this will pass”. Although these individuals are well meaning, their own stigma’s may delay you from seeking more direct help.



Do NOT let your own stigma (or that of others) get in your way. Reach out for help!

- **Make an appointment with your physician** to rule out any physical challenges and to lay out a treatment plan. E.g. often thyroid problems or even hormone imbalances can mimic these symptoms, so it is always a good idea to have a thorough review with your doctor.
 - Ask your doctor about the [Bounce Back program](#) that provides free support for patients who have been referred.
- **Talk to a professional.**
 - As a member of the BCPVPA, you have access to humanworks through the [Early Intervention Program](#). They can provide you with confidential coaching and support, as well as direct you to the right resources based on your situation.
 - You can reach out to your School District’s **Employee Assistance Program (EAP)**. Through the EAP, you can access direct counselling as well as other resources specifically designed to help you build back your coping skills. Counselling is a very personal process, so if you do not feel comfortable with the counsellor assigned, you can absolutely ask for another one that may be a better fit. EAP is intended to be a short form modality of counselling and may work well when you are just noticing early warning signs. However, if you have been struggling for awhile, you may need a longer term option.



- You can get funding for counselling through your **Extended Health Benefits**. To understand your level of funding, click here: https://www.bcpseabenefits.ca/en/SelectDistrict_BCPSEA.asp
 1. Find your District and scroll to your *employee group*
 2. Then click *My Plan* in the top left corner
 3. Then click *Extended Health*
 4. Then click *Details*
 5. Then scroll down to *Paramedicals* and then to *Psychology* to see your annual amount available.
- This way, you can pick your own therapist and develop a longer term relationship that may be more applicable to your level of “mental injury”.
- You may also find speaking to your church or spiritual leader helpful as well.



Emma Simpson - unsplash.com

Here is also a listing of **community supports** that you can access as well:



- **Canadian Mental Health Association, BC** <https://cmha.bc.ca/>
- **BC Government mental health support** <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/mental-health-support-in-bc>
- **heretohelp BC** <https://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/factsheet/getting-help-for-mental-illnesses>
- **Mood Disorders Association of BC** <http://www.mdabc.net/bc-resources>
- **HealthLink BC's list of resources** <https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/mental-health-substance-use/resources>



WHAT OTHER WAYS CAN YOU PREVENT BRAIN INJURY?



We'll be posting this question on Twitter and Instagram this week! Follow **@bcpvpa** to read, engage, share and comment!

Next week:

Rethinking Depression

Get in touch! If you have any questions about The Learning Brain series, contact

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