

WORK-ABLE NEWS

May 2016

Profile on: Barb Cortens

Barb has been an occupational therapist for over 34 years and has worked in a variety of practice areas, including acute hospital care (medicine and surgery), home care, outpatient services and vocational assessment. Barb has established herself as a leader and mentor in mental health practice and psychosocial rehabilitation, working 17 years in that field. She is knowledgeable and experienced in working with the Manitoba health care system and with community resources for persons living with mental illness and adults with physical challenges.

Throughout her career she has established a rich knowledge of administering a variety of standardized assessments and has been a leader in establishing assessment and treatment programs for complex situations. She has been a direct care provider, supervisor and consultant. Barb also has over 12 years of experience in teaching and student evaluation at the University of Manitoba, College of Rehabilitation Sciences (OT).

There has been extensive involvement in several clinical research projects throughout her career, and Barb has had articles published in professional journals. She has vast experience in public presentations, individual and family education. She has further developed these skills through a variety of volunteer positions in the community. She also has successfully undertaken some private contracts with a variety of agencies.

Her passion for occupational therapy and her rich, positive experience has made Barb a leader in occupational therapy practice and a highly regarded clinician.



Happenings

Work-Able Solutions has launched **ERA MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES**. A continuum of community and workplace mental health services aimed at supporting personal recovery, return to work, and mental health wellness. ERA is a structured, goal-oriented rehabilitation program that focuses on personal recovery and the development of mental health resilience to assist in returning to an optimum level of function.

For details click here: [**ERA MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES**](#) 

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Spotlight on: RTW after struggling with mental health issues

Case Study: *Rebecca has been a reliable, responsible employee at her company for 15 years and she was excited to move to the new worksite. After a few weeks she began to feel overwhelmed and anxious. She felt that coworkers did not like her and supervisors did not listen to her. She was stressed by the new computer system and found herself crying at times, not sleeping at night and phoning in sick to work. She saw her physician who prescribed some medication and provided her with some handouts on stress management. Rebecca knew she needed more help and asked her employer if a professional could come to the workplace and help her to be more productive at work. Fortunately, she was able to collaborate with an experienced occupational therapist that was able to work with Rebecca and her employer. The occupational therapist was able to identify Rebecca's phase of recovery and implement appropriate, timely strategies. Reassessment and follow up were essential. The result was a proactive prevention of an anticipated stress leave and the incorporation of work restructuring and personalized strategies that Rebecca could use in the future.*

One in five Canadians will suffer a mental disorder in their lives, with anxiety disorders and depression being the most common. (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2015). When persons are employed, these struggles lead to decreased work productivity, time loss, short and long term disability, and decreased quality of life for the employee. An individualized approach is necessary to ensure an optimal return to work (RTW) and stay at work (SAW). It is essential that the professional involved understands occupational demands but also has a rich experience in assisting persons who struggle with a variety of mental health issues.

At Work-Able Solutions this expertise is recognized. Our staff includes occupational therapists that have specialized in psychosocial rehabilitation, mental health rehabilitation and recovery, in addition to having a broad experience in a variety of workplaces and knowledge of mental health community resources.

Our services follow best practices for mental health interventions including the recovery model or recovery oriented practice, which is widely utilized by the Canadian Mental Health Association and promoted by the Mental Health Commission of Canada. Our occupational therapists are able to conduct a structured workplace evaluation with the individual and the employer to develop an individualized action plan with specific, time limited goals. The worker is *activated*, as the occupational therapist remains involved with frequent reviews to prevent relapses and work towards a healthy recovery as symptoms are monitored and strategies to manage these (such as task specific approaches, relaxation techniques, cognitive retraining and work accommodations) are taught and implemented in the individualized plan. The employee is engaged and empowered as they work towards personal recovery and increasing productivity in their workplace.

The benefits of occupational therapist involvement are to the worker, the employer and to coworkers. A successful plan results in increased quality of life for the employee, decreased costs to the employer and a speedier RTW for the employee as they have strategies to implement which can decrease absences at work and increase productivity.

How to help a co-worker with mental illness

If you notice changes in a person's mood, their behaviour, energy, habits or personality, a mental illness may be a possible reason for these changes. However it is important not to make assumptions; only a trained professional can diagnose someone with a mental illness. Different mental illnesses have different symptoms, and people experience the same mental illness in very different ways. If a co-worker is experiencing a mental illness, it's best to let them decide what and how much they tell others in the workplace. However, you can still offer support. You can let your co-worker know that you're there to listen without judgement, and make your co-worker feel like they're still part of the team. Here are more tips for supporting a co-worker:

Approaching a co-worker:

- You may decide to approach a co-worker if you have noticed changes. Let the person know that they do not seem themselves lately, and specifically state what you see. "I have noticed that you don't look as well as you usually do." "I have noticed you seem upset and distracted. Are you feeling okay?"
- Resist making any judgments or conclusions about what is going on. Instead, invite your co-worker to talk about what they are experiencing.
- Resist giving advice about what to do. Instead, listen and ask what you can do to help. Respect your co-workers wishes.
- Remember that you are not a therapist. Do not allow your days to become filled up with discussion about problems. Offer to help find other resources and help your co-worker to focus on solutions for the workplace issues. It is honourable that you want to help your co-worker. Remember, however, to protect your own health and well-being at the same time.

Steps you can take:

- Continue to include your co-worker in the workplace's usual activities.
- Depending on your relationship, you can still keep in touch with a co-worker who takes time off.
- When a co-worker returns to work after time off due to a mental illness, make them feel welcome and appreciated. Saying nothing because you're worried about saying the wrong thing can make your co-worker feel worse.

(Sources: Canadian Mental Health Association; Great West Life Centre for Mental Health in the Workplace; Mental Health First Aid Australia)

Work-Able Services **Enhancing Function. Preventing Injury.**

- Office and Industrial Ergonomic Assessment
- Ergonomics Workshops
- Employee Training and Wellness Workshops
- Physical Demands Analysis
- Cognitive Demands Analysis
- Workplace Accommodation Assessment
- Functional Capacity Evaluation
- Return to Work and Stay at Work Programs
- Community and Workplace Mental Health Services
- Cognitive Assessment
- Brain Injury Rehabilitation
- Chronic Pain/Functional Restoration Programs and PGAP
- Personal Care Assistance Needs Assessment
- Home / Activities of Daily Living Assessment

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