

Mental illness 'a tsunami of economic loss' in the workplace

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Michael Wilson knows the staggering personal and economic toll of [mental illness](#).

Sixteen years after his severely depressed 29-year-old son Cameron killed himself, the former federal finance minister, diplomat and Bay Street executive is calling on Corporate Canada to do its part to wipe out the scourge of mental [illness](#) in the workplace.

Mr. Wilson said embracing the cause is just good business as he wrapped up a dozen years of work with the Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and [Mental Health](#).

"The senior people, senior executive team have got to recognize that this is an illness, it's an illness that affects a significant percentage of their employees," he said in a telephone interview on Wednesday. "And I think what people have to realize and accept that it is an illness, it's a disease, it's not a weakness."

Having senior executives talk about it is a good first step, he said. Mr. Wilson cited one example of a bank that published articles in its newsletter about employees who were back on the job after being treated for mental illness – and who was not afraid of their co-workers knowing.

The roundtable's final report, which is being released Thursday in Toronto, calls for a 10-year, \$10-billion effort by companies and governments to find a cure for depression and improve workplace mental health in Canada, the United States and Britain.

The sobering new report paints a grim picture, characterizing the cost of mental illness in the workplace as "a tsunami of economic loss." The roundtable puts the annual toll at \$51-billion (U.S.) in Canada, or 4 per cent of gross domestic product, and a staggering \$1.1-trillion across North America and Europe.

Four per cent of GDP is roughly equal to the combined output of Canada's mining and oil-and-gas industries.

The financial toll includes workdays lost due to illness, missed wages, lower economic output as well as the added financial burden put on the health care and insurance industries, said roundtable founder Bill Wilkerson, who co-wrote the report with Mr. Wilson.

Making matters worse, waves of layoffs and relentless cost-cutting in recent years are helping to create "chronically stressful" workplaces, he said.

"There's a lack of fairness, a lack of opportunity in the workplace and a lot of insecurity," Mr.

Wilkerson said.

Mr. Wilkerson said [employers](#) have a strong self-interest to combat mental illness because the evidence is now compelling that it's hitting their bottom lines.

The report found that 18 to 25 per cent of Canada's working population likely suffers from depression, or between three million and 4.2 million people. That's far higher than current estimates of 5 to 10 per cent, according to the report and roundtable, which were funded by Great West Life Assurance Co., Bell Canada and Homewood Health Centre.

Depression is a contributing factor for roughly 40 per cent of workers claiming long-term [disability benefits](#). Cutting that to 15 per cent would save companies, and the economy, billions of dollars, Mr. Wilkerson said.

Georg Northoff, who holds a Canada Research Chair for Mind, Brain Imaging and Neuroethics at the University of Ottawa Institute of Mental Health Research and who was interviewed and consulted for the report, said in some cases, depression can be a vicious circle: People who are depressed are often plagued by self-doubt, which leaves them unable to sleep, which affects concentration at work, which leads to lower productivity, which worsens the depression.

"The earlier depression can be detected and diagnosed, the less vicious the circle becomes," Dr. Northoff wrote in an e-mail.

Anne Bassett, head of the clinical genetics research program at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, said she would like to see psychiatric illnesses viewed the same way as other diseases.

"I think in the ultimate sense, it would be [preferable] to treat major psychiatric illness just as one treats cancer," said Dr. Bassett, a psychiatrist who was interviewed and consulted for the report. "When it's treated the same way as another major health condition, we will know we are really there."

For Mr. Wilson, he is also providing a legacy for his son, championing an issue some would still rather ignore.

"When our son became ill and ultimately took his own life, that just reinforced the commitment that I had already made to deal with this," Mr. Wilson said. "Because I recognized that it was a serious societal problem, not just what was, ultimately, a very serious personal issue for us."