

The facts about injured worker stigma



Many individuals report being treated differently - stigmatized - after they've been injured on the job. They are made to feel ashamed of their physical limitations and reduced income.

This sense of shame isolates people from their co-workers, friends and family. It can also lead to clinical depression, other mental health problems and even slow the injured worker's physical recovery.

Many myths exist about injured workers that contribute to injured worker stigma. These myths impact the way they are treated in workplaces, the health care system and in their communities.

Myth: Injured workers are lazy. They just want to sit at home and get paid.

Reality: Injured workers don't want to be off work. They want to recover from their workplace injury or illness and get back to work where they can earn their full wages and interact with friends and colleagues. Sometimes this takes awhile. And for some workers, a return to full-time work isn't possible.



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Myth: Injured workers have a sense of entitlement. They think they are owed something for being hurt on the job.

Reality: Injured workers are entitled to benefits and services for an approved Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) claim. In 1915 - when the compensation system was established - they agreed to give up the right to sue for negligence in exchange for the right to fair compensation in a non-adversarial system.

Myth: Injured workers *take* from the system while employers *contribute* to it.

Reality: When they're healthy, workers contribute to the system through their labour, which benefits employers and supports the economy.

When they are injured, workers receive a reduced income to replace their lost wages. This not only impacts their livelihood and family but also the businesses in their community through reduced purchasing power.

Myth: Claims fraud is widespread.

Reality: The WSIB has the expertise to make sound entitlement decisions and also has a zero tolerance strategy to respond to fraud. As a result, of the 250,000 claims a year that the WSIB receives, fewer than 20 individuals are convicted annually of claims offences.

It's not easy being an injured worker.

Following a workplace injury, a number of changes take place:

- ▶ loss of gainful employment
- ▶ challenges to the worker's own internal sense of well-being
- ▶ a difference in the way friends and family regard them.

These changes – along with the necessity of dealing with health professionals and claims adjudicators – serve to reinforce the sense of having a new and less socially-valued identity to get used to: the identity of being an injured worker.

From "Workers without Work"
by RAACWI Researcher Sharon Dale Stone

Ending injured worker stigma

The WSIB has partnered with the Research Action Alliance on the Consequences of Work Injury (RAACWI) to help eliminate prejudice and discrimination against injured and ill workers. Initiatives to address this problem include:

- ▶ Raising awareness about stigma and its effects with all WSIB employees – especially frontline Operations staff – who deal directly with injured workers
- ▶ Examining our systems and procedures to address those that reinforce stigma
- ▶ Identifying and removing stigmatizing language from WSIB publications and websites
- ▶ Examining the values and behaviours we expect from WSIB employees

We're also bringing the issue of injured worker stigma to the forefront of our outreach initiatives and making sure that our contracted service providers understand and share our responsibility to treat injured and ill workers with courtesy, dignity and respect.

Our service commitment extends to providing fair and equal access to the programs and benefits workers are entitled to, at times and in ways that are convenient to them and that support their diverse and unique needs.

Feedback on the WSIB service experience is welcomed at customerexperienceoffice@wsib.on.ca

We believe it's important to help make a difference – not judgments.

"We can all do our part to end injured worker stigma by raising awareness and offering support to workers as they recover and safely return to work after injury."

**Thomas Teahen,
WSIB President and CEO**

**Getting injured on the job
is nothing to be ashamed of;
stigmatizing injured workers is.**

How you can help

- ▶ Evaluate your own attitudes and behaviour towards injured workers
- ▶ Look beyond the stereotypes and value the individual
- ▶ Alert and educate people who demonstrate stigmatizing attitudes and behaviours
- ▶ Remember that not all workplace injuries are visible. Just because someone isn't using a cane or other assistive device doesn't mean that they're not injured
- ▶ Understand that healthy activity – such as walking and gardening – can be an important part of an injured worker's recovery

**Produced by the WSIB/RAACWI
Stigma Working Group**

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