



## **Healthy & Professional Knowledge Workers: Examining the gendered nature of mental health issues, leaves of absence and return to work experiences**

**The challenge:** Mental health issues experienced by professional workers are uniquely challenging because of their knowledge service role and potential impact on clients. Leaves of absence from work resulting from these issues are significant life events that can lead to negative consequences for workers, in terms of career advancement and potential loss of license, for relations with co-workers, employers and the broader public in terms of accessibility to services. Negotiating leaves of absence and return to work can be particularly difficult when potentially stigmatizing mental health issues are involved. Although accommodating leaves of absence and timely return to work by professional/knowledge workers experiencing mental health issues is an area of growing concern, it is seriously understudied. The role gender, plays, significant in the experience of illness, is also conspicuously absent as an explicit focus.

**Goal and objectives:** Our goal is to develop an enhanced understanding of the factors leading to the exit and re- entry of female and male knowledge workers who have experienced either personal or familial mental health issues.

Our research questions ask:

- Which knowledge workers are experiencing mental health issues to such an extent that they are leaving or contemplating a leave of absence from work?
- What are the key factors causing them to leave work – with a focus on personal, work and family context – and which of these factors helps foster their return to work?
- Reflecting an explicit sex/gender-based analysis, we also pose the following questions:
- How does gender influence the experience of contemplating and negotiating leaves and return to work?
- What interventions can explicitly mediate these gendered experiences?

**Our approach:** Our Partnership is the first comprehensive, comparative, multidisciplinary and collaborative research initiative on mental health, leave of absence and RTW issues for regulated professional/knowledge workers and their impact on the workers themselves, their families, their co-workers, employees, employers and clients. We bring together academic researchers, worker representatives, unions, professional associations, employers, service providers, insurers, policy-makers, and other stakeholders across the following domains:



- 1) healthcare, including dentists, midwives, nurses and physicians;
- 2) education, including professors and teachers; and
- 3) finance, including accountants.

In addition to cutting across labour sectors, these groups of knowledge workers also differ by work context and gender composition which likely impact their experiences. We take an explicit gender perspective in the collection and interpretation of the data gathered, which we will augment with a broader intersectionality lens and life course approach. The specific methods employed in the proposed study will be mixed, involving qualitative data – including the collection and analysis of documents, observations and interviews with the range of stakeholders – augmented with quantitative data from available administrative and newly developed survey datasets. These will inform a broader multi-method approach including targeted case studies and evaluations of ongoing interventions drawing upon the input from our participating stakeholders. Comparing across knowledge worker groups, locations and employing mixed-methods will allow us to address critical knowledge gaps in a truly ground-breaking partnership research program.

**Our approach to partnership:** We aim to ensure wide representation and participation by partners integrating them throughout the entire research process beginning with co-developing the research foci, accessing existing and collecting new data, interpreting the findings, and translating the knowledge into more effective and equitable leave of absence and return to work policies, practices and programs.

**Our goal:** We aim to contribute to the development, implementation, evaluation and scale-up of evidence-based and gender-responsive policy, program and practice interventions to foster mental well being among these knowledge workers more broadly and return to work after absences for mental health issues more specifically.

For more information contact the CLPNA's Research department [Ask CLPNA, \[info@clpna.com\]\(mailto:info@clpna.com\)](mailto:Ask CLPNA, info@clpna.com)  
or phone 780-484-8886 or 1-800-661-5877 (toll free in Alberta).