

Up After Dark: The Silent Tsunami

When it comes to health and safety in the workplace, one of the most crucial topics is understanding mental health and psychological disorders in the workplace. The signs of mental health concerns in workers aren't always obvious but the numbers don't lie: Mental health and psychosocial disorders are now considered the third largest healthcare cost below heart conditions and cancer. This important topic will be the focus of discussion during one of our late-night sessions at AIHce EXP in May, led by Mr. Bernard Fontaine, CIH, CSP, FAIHA.

During "[The Silent Tsunami: Understanding Mental Health and Psychosocial Disorders in the Workplace](#)," attendees can expect to discuss ways to increase awareness of the issues and management of change to improve the morale, culture, and human expectations. We spoke with Bernard about his background, involvement with AIHA, and his passion behind this important topic.

AIHA: Can you tell us about your personal and professional background?

Fontaine: Over the past 40 years, I have come to understand that industrial hygiene and, moreover, total worker health, extends well beyond the boundaries of traditional principles and practice. My early years of education were directed toward medical technology and laboratory science with the hope of aspiring to an oncology or emergency room physician. However, during my undergraduate years at Northeastern University, the Cooperative Education program introduced me to the world of industrial hygiene and occupational health while working for federal OSHA in Region I. Working with seasoned professionals made me realize the opportunity to help more diverse groups of people in all types of industry.

I decided to take my years of professional experience and credentials to establish a consulting practice so I could provide affordable answers to all types of business questions. Over the past 28 years, I've worked for federal agencies at Ground Zero and Staten Island landfill; emergency cases of anthrax; asbestos and mercury contamination of national historic sites; developed a risk governance model, medical surveillance and strategic business plan for Caribbean oil/gas producer; and performed many of the more traditional industrial hygiene, safety, ergonomic, indoor air quality, and other professional services.

AIHA: What's the extent of your experience and involvement with AIHA?

Fontaine: I have been a member of AIHA since 1982. The organization has inspired me to understand the complexities of industrial hygiene exposures and risk in different industries. During my tenure, I have supported AIHA through their initiatives to present topics about federal OSHA to a Chinese delegation; presented educational sessions and Professional Development Courses (PDCs) at the annual AIHce, and contributed to AIHA local sections by delivering presentations and supporting seminars.

I am an Executive Committee member of the NJ section of AIHA as Director of Membership Services and served as President-elect, President, and Past President. The experience has been wonderful and the relationships with other local sections and national have been even more inspiring because we all want to the right thing. The entire experience has allowed me to extend my volunteering capacity to Workplace Health Without Borders – U.S. as a member of the Board of Directors. I've also enjoyed collaborating with members of

the American Society of Safety Engineers, American Hazard Materials Professionals, Occupational Health Nurses, American Conference of Governmental Industrial Hygienists, and other local nonprofits in New Jersey.

Being a member of AIHA has been truly rewarding in the ability to network with peer professionals and construct business relationships. It also has allowed me the opportunity to collaborate with the membership and expand on the fundamental ideas and concepts to protecting worker health and provide business value to industry.

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AIHA: What are some of the most common mental health concerns in our industry and the workplace?

Fontaine: There are many personal and workplace risk factors associated with psychosocial disorders, but the main impetus is the cost to business. It is estimated that nearly \$300B are expended annually in direct and indirect expenses including lost productivity, increased cost for medical and healthcare, disruption to human performance, mishaps and near-miss incidents, absenteeism, presenteeism, management meetings, delays in customer service and poor workmanship.

The concern regarding psychosocial disorders is that they can manifest themselves in workers displaying a decrease in personal hygiene; frequent complaints of fatigue or unexplained pains; confused or distracted appearance; expressions of strange or grandiose ideas; hyperactivity; excessive talkativeness; displays of anger or blaming others; reported changes in eating or sleeping patterns; avoidance of social interactions or public presentations; and difficulty concentrating, making decisions, or remembering.

While this list is not complete, there are observable changes at work that might suggest difficulty such as frequent late arrivals, excess use of sick or personal time, patterns in the days of absence or ineffectual job performance, decreased productivity, disorganization, increased risk of accident or safety problems, workplace relationships, increased errors and missed deadlines, decreased interest or involvement in work, decline in dependability, and an untidy work space. While it is known that anxiety and depression are the most forms of psychosocial disorders, there are other concerns with deep roots that affect workers including, but not limited to, harassment - bullying, physical, sexual, racial, ethnic, cyber, etc.

AIHA: What are the biggest mistakes companies make when it comes to mental health in the workplace?

Fontaine: One of the biggest mistakes is companies fail to understand and address the issue. Typically, in small and mid-size enterprises there is no collaboration with human resources, healthcare providers, insurers, health and safety professionals, and other stakeholders to develop a corporate policy, written programs, and standard operating procedures for managers to use when encountered with a situation. Some organizations have policies on sexual harassment, racial intolerance, and other social issues, but most companies don't address all of the overarching considerations related to psychological disorders and mental health at work and at home.

Many managers and supervisors don't receive any training to understand the issue and what can be done to alleviate the problem. Oftentimes, workers need short- or long-term changes in their workload, changes in the number hours worked each week, more family time, time for rest and relaxation, team building, etc. Managers

should be provided with the training to recognize a potential problem, collaborate with the stakeholders, develop a personal performance plan to keep afflicted workers productive, and/or remove the underlying cause of the problem.

AIHA: What should attendees keep in mind as they walk into this late-night session at AIHce EXP?

Fontaine: Mental health and psychosocial disorders should no longer be taboo but rather more mainstream in conversations with stakeholders, and recognizing the added business value that industrial hygienists can bring to the management of business. We cannot ignore these issues as being unrelated, but how business needs to get done.

Field IHS are on the ground floor for field operations, manufacture, construction, maritime trade, and more. They connect with the workforce, understand the frustrations and concerns, and seen as trustees to the issues that face workers daily, both personal and professional. As industrial hygienists and occupational health professionals, we have the opportunity to interface with senior leadership and other stakeholders on how every organization can do better by harmoniously connecting with their workforce to drive understanding and guidance for greater productivity, profitability, and prosperity.

You can continue this critical conversation with Mr. Bernard Fontaine and fellow IH/OEHS professionals during the [late night session at AIHce EXP on Sunday, 5/20 at 8 PM](#).

What are Late Night Sessions? Every year, we make changes and improvements to the AIHce EXP program based on your feedback. This year, we're excited to continue the Late Night Sessions that debuted last year in Seattle. Starting at 8:00 PM, these sessions will have a more relaxed environment, informal but of course, still an educational session.