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Depression haunts teachers

Situation so bad educators almost 'uninsurable'
Illness causing major health crisis in sector: Study

[ROBIN HARVEY](#)
STAFF REPORTER

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Depression is hitting teachers at a "scandalous" rate, causing a major public health crisis, according to a leading expert on mental health and the workplace.

The "toxic workplace" created by more than a decade of education wars has left Ontario teachers feeling like political footballs being kicked from one end of the field — or political spectrum — to the other, says Bill Wilkerson, co-founder of the Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health. Wilkerson will present his findings, based on data from the Ontario Teachers Insurance Plan, at the Ontario Medical Association's annual meeting today.

Mental disorders, mainly depression, are the leading source of prescription drug use and long-term disability among Ontario schoolteachers, he found.

According to Wilkerson's research, the rate of stress-related, long-term disability among Ontario teachers is a third higher than in other professions, on average. Long-term disability claims processed have doubled since 1993.

"The joy of teaching has been sucked out of the classroom for many teachers," he said. "The impact of the education wars has gone beyond a fight over funding — it is now a question, in my judgment, of human rights and professional integrity. The rate of work-related ill health and disability among teachers is scandalous." Things are so bad that teachers as a group are almost uninsurable, Wilkerson said. He called on business and government to mark Mental Health Week, which starts Sunday, with a commitment to make all work environments healthier.

One 47-year-old Toronto high school teacher, who has suffered depression for the past seven years, told the Star the pressure on teachers today is "almost unbearable."

Art, who did not want his full name used because he did not want it to adversely affect his students and children, says he fell into a spiral of doubt and despair.

While the government was portraying teachers as "lazy and unmotivated," he said he struggled to cope with cutbacks, curriculum changes, increased paperwork, stressed students and concerned parents.

"The political fallout was so demoralizing," said the social-science teacher who has been teaching for 11 years. "I ended up feeling that I had to question why I started doing this at all."

Eventually he became suicidal and isolated himself to cover up his fear that he was not able to do his job. The stress affected his marriage, which eventually fell apart.

"One of the biggest problems was to teach and still have a family life," he says. "With all the changes to the system, I'd end up sitting home on weekends for six hours each day marking."

Five years ago, he was put on antidepressant medication. Although he feels better today, his job is still stressful, he said.

"I've had kids come and talk to me who are suicidal and there is no social worker, no psychologist to go to," he said. "We don't have control over anything. The buildings are falling apart even."

Wilkerson said the battles over education "have poisoned the workplace of teachers so as to produce a major public health crisis in the classrooms of our schools."

That sense of ever-changing demands, combined with a lack of control, are key factors in causing depression, he said.

Annie Kidder, spokesperson for People For Education, says the figures should provide a "wake-up call" for parents, educators and government.

The group has long noted the concerns about the impact of cuts to support staff — including social workers and psychologists — on the classroom. Kidder says she thinks most teachers are coping very well. But the disability figures show it's time to re-evaluate what is expected of teachers and whether they get the supports they need, she said.

Doug Jolliffe, president of the Toronto district of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, says teaching has always been stressful but the political changes affecting education since 1990 have made the stress levels "skyrocket."

Jolliffe says teachers have a "tremendous amount of hope" that their work environment will settle down since the Liberal party has been elected provincially.

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