



*Affiliated with the Centre for
Addiction and Mental Health*

200 King Street West, Suite 1702
Toronto, Ontario M5H 3T3
Direct Line: 416 598-5790
bill.wilkerson@gpcinternational.com

“Is Government Driving Us Crazy?”

***Notes for Remarks by
Bill Wilkerson, Co-Founder and CEO
Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health
To The Inaugural Meeting of
The Alberta Alliance for Mental Health and Mental Illness
Edmonton, Alberta
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I am pleased to be here this evening. It's my first visit to the West Edmonton Mall. What an incredible place – and what a hotel – Fantasyland. Some might suggest a hotel with this name is a very appropriate spot for one of my speeches.

I will try not to disappoint.

It is not a fantasy, though, to salute this Alliance for Mental Health and Mental Illness. I congratulate you for it. As I do Phil Upshaw and his associates for their leadership in forging the National Alliance.

Unity, consultation and common cause among those of you dedicated to the mental well-being of Albertans and Canadians is so very important. We are all in your debt for the wisdom of this coming together.

My remarks this evening will touch upon the Roundtable's principal mission – making the business and economic case for mental health and mental illness. And making it stick.

I also propose to reflect on the role that public institutions – not just corporations – can play in defending Canadians against the early onset and disablement of mental illness.

First, a quick word on the Roundtable, now in its fifth year. We are a network of business executives, health professionals and educators.

We are affiliated with the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health and enjoy active relationships with the Canadian Mental Health Association here, in Alberta, and other provinces including Ontario and British Columbia.

We are not a voice for business, but a voice to business. We profess no ideology and tend to argue the business case for mental health and mental illness in dispassionate terms.

Business decision-making may involve the gut. But seldom the heart. We must remember this in calling on business to act.

That said, the business and economic case for mental health and mental illness is not just words and numbers. It is names and people.

Not household names?

Maybe not – but the companies they lead across the country and in their home regions certainly are to many millions of us –

The Royal Bank, Scotiabank, CIBC, Bank of Montreal, Royal LePage, Canadian Chamber of Commerce, Torstar, The Toronto Blue Jays, Nortel, Brascan, Noranda, Dofasco, IBM, Syncrude, Surrey Capital.

I could name more.

These are the emerging voices of the business case for mental health and mental illness – and I genuinely believe that one day – one day soon – they will herald fundamental change in the way we perceive and respond to mental health and mental illness within the labor force.

Let us not be timid to foresee that day. Once foreseen, its arrival is assured. George Bernard Shaw says so.

Some people see things as they are, he writes, and ask why – others see things as they might be, and ask why not. It is they who change the world.

So, why not a world of work where the early detection and effective treatment of mental health problems is routine not rare;

Why not a world of work where the prevention of the disabling effects of serious mental illness is routine not rare;

Why not a world of work where stigma and discrimination against those living with mental illness is wiped clean away;

Why not a world of work where screening for depression is as routine as a flu shot;

Why not a world of work where the employment of persons living with mental illness is customary – and the nature of the work they do has value and meaning – to them and to their employer;

Why not a world of work where the courage to come back from mental disability is routinely not rarely recognized as a sign of strength – like a gutsy comeback in sports and politics;

Why not a world where the recovery from mental illness – like life itself – is understood to be a journey not a destination – an expression of individual worth not the opposite.

I spoke to Audrey this week. On a call-in television show.

She used to be a manager in a technology firm. She’s been off work for two years with depression. She has the courage to come back to work. But not the opportunity. Or now, even the job.

My message to Audrey – exercise your rights concerning your old job. But look beyond that horizon. Look well beyond it. You will find your employable self there.

My message to Audrey – dust off your resume, you bet, and update it. You’ve got a lot to say. A story to tell. Someone to market – you.

My message to Audrey – you are not damaged goods. You are someone’s new co-worker, new employee, a real live candidate for a job you are qualified to do.

Audrey’s message is my message. It prompted me to write this letter of reference for her and others whose journey of recovery takes them back to work. It reads as follows:

To Whom It May Concern:

“Like three million other Canadians each year, Audrey has experienced and successfully managed a common health problem commonly known as depression.

“This condition – in layman’s terms – is as physical as a broken leg. And, like a broken leg, with time and proper treatment, it can heal. Audrey has healed well.

“Audrey is just as productive as she ever was. She has job qualifications and even new management skills she learned during her achievement of recovery.

“We advise you, as a prospective employer, to give her a meaningful interview, to give Audrey a hard look and a good listen. It could really pay off – for both of you. The Roundtable’s membership is attached.

While, recovery and return to work are one expression of the victory for mental health over mental illness, so is prevention.

In this room are copies of the Roundtable's Charter for Mental Health in the Knowledge Economy – endorsed by top-level Canadian business executives last November 14th. It will be a poster this spring.

The Charter sets out four objectives – but its principal purpose is sounding an anthem for the actual prevention of mental disability. This is something we know now that we can do now.

The Canadian Chamber distributed this among its membership. I will take it to Texas, New York and Mexico between now and the fall.

Meanwhile, the World Health Organization through its collaborating centre at McGill University is publishing it later this year. Our march is underway.

My confidence is rooted not in sunny optimism but in the appeal of our prevention agenda to the legitimate self-interest on the part of business. This is a pure power.

The prevention of mental disability means major operational dollars savings for employers; new income for insurance companies through liquidated reserves; reduced and stabilized disability insurance premiums for employees; and industrial and economic productivity gains achieved not through cost-cutting but through higher outputs.

Business knows that unhealthy and unproductive employee behavior, attitudes and performance are a three-year advance warning of trouble ahead for corporate sales and profits.

Conversely, we must make sure business knows that healthy employees can predict the opposite. There is shareholder value in that.

The plan to implement the Charter will include governance guidelines for publicly-traded companies to raise the matter to the level of boards of directors.

It will feature an articulated CEO mental health mandate to galvanize and mobilize companies coast-to-coast.

It will include a delineated role in the prevention of mental disability for each party to the insurance disability contract.

It will incorporate a 12-point Framework For Action to guide HR directors and operating personnel to quantify the impact of mental disorders in their own places of work.

It will encompass management practices especially relevant to mental health concerns.

It will promote mental health and early detection strategies in workplaces, subway cars and television ads.

We live in an economy of mental performance. In this new place, the thought content of products outstrip the commercial value of the steel, aluminum or plastic which houses them.

This is an economy where business investments in employee health are justified on business grounds. Consider this.

Three quarters of the new jobs coming on-stream in the United States require cerebral not manual skills.

This defines the economy of mental performance – an economy of thinking and doing, not lifting and doing – an economy, therefore, where the human mind – through innovation – does the real heavy lifting for competitive business organizations.

I invite Alberta and National Alliances to join the Roundtable in moving this Charter across the country city-by-city, sector-by-sector and company-by-company.

I also invite you to join the Roundtable in the inauguration of the Business Year for Mental Health in 2003-04 as a stepping-stone to the cultures and practices of business needed to achieve the prevention agenda set out in the Charter.

Let me close on the second theme I mentioned earlier.

From time to time, I am asked what role can government play in the advancement of the business and economic case for mental health and mental illness.

We are hopeful a private-public sector partnership between the Government of Ontario and the private sector will materialize this year.

Mental health reform is unfolding in my home province. I believe a similar private-public partnership could be forged in other provinces.

That much is clear. But the question runs deeper than that.

It is inarguable that we live in stressful times. Pervasive job insecurity and deep budget cuts are now permanent fixtures on the national scene. Life has intensified. More than that, it has compressed.

The stress of a nation is as much about the lack of space to breathe as it is the time to think. We are pounded by information and “pitched to” from all sides. Dr. Paul Garfinkel cites the “commercialization of existence” as one of the factors driving the national epidemic in depression.

The kids of stressed-out parents are stressed out. The average age of onset for anxiety disorders in this country is now 12. The number of teenagers who commit suicide in this country is a national disgrace.

We are a society, it seems, preoccupied with age – getting older. I worry we are self-absorbed about that. And we are forgetting the kids. Eating disorders are climbing among teenage girls and boys alike.

Meanwhile, 80 per cent of psychiatric hospital emergencies in the United States occur among younger adults in their prime working years. Depression and anxiety attack the heart of the workforce.

Low detection rates promulgate high rates of mental impairment among young people exiting their adolescence for the world of work – when and if they can find a job.

Where are public institutions in arresting these trends? Nowhere in sight, I am afraid. Where might they be? My comments do not touch the prerogatives of public policy. Or go in a different direction.

For one thing, our politicians must arrest their own public displays of anger and vicious partisanship. This takes a toll on public sensibilities day-in and day-out. Televised question period is an emotional downer to watch.

I worry that the increased isolation that growing numbers of people experience in their everyday, middle-class lives is contributing to the rising tide of depression especially among breadwinners – and further to this –

That the noise level of politicians screeching at each other on television deepens this sensation of “nowhere to turn” and turns us away in large numbers from our elected advocates who seem less and less to represent our own interests and more their own.

Our collective voice – and sense of self – are thus drowned out by the expressed anger and rage of our political representatives.

I am concerned that many public institutions have long since abandoned even the pretense of public service – in the real sense of providing a real service.

I sense that high levels of national angst are fuelled by the inability of masses of people to get a straight answer from government officials and their own MPs on questions that seem simple and necessary to ask.

Does government de-hassle Canadians or make things worse?

Why is there such a profound blind spot in Ottawa with respect to mental health and mental illness – and not just in terms of research, healthcare or money for the provinces – but in terms of the effect that government bureaucratic and political behavior has on the levels of stress and distress taxpayers endure.

The Kirby Inquiry will help. As will the Stats Can survey to be released very soon.

As an employer, the public sector needs to look deep within itself.

The Assistant Deputy Minister of HRDC told me last fall his department certainly “couldn’t open that can of worms.” He was talking about the mental health of his employees and specifically my suggestion they open internal discussion about it.

Federal civil servants call me off the record and only from home. They feel gassed by the office politics and leaderless disposition of the departments of government in which they work.

They talk openly about abusive bosses and chaotic management. They speak in desperation. And they suffer alone.

A role for government in the quest for the better mental health of a nation? Absolutely, there is such a role. Several, in fact.

We need governments as employers who lead by example in the promotion of mental health and prevention of mental disability.

We need political representatives to stop enflaming our national life and to help each other with the likely levels of distress, depression and excessive behavior in their own ranks. And they must become less angry with each other. I plead with them to do that.

In their attitude toward customers and taxpayers, as participants in a democratic system, as employers, public institutions will do great good if they lead by example in our war on mental illness in the defence of mental health.

Let the Charter for Mental Health in the Knowledge Economy be an anthem for that as well.