The Signs of Struggle (SOS) Scale: A Tool for Managers

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Mental Health: What is it?

- Diagnosable illness
- Requires professional intervention or treatment
- Disrupts one’s life, work, and/or relationships
- Compromised health and wellbeing
- Distressing and cognitively taxing
- If recognized, can be alleviated through support and professional help
- Not just the absence of illness
- State of positive wellbeing
- Ability to perform, cope, and adapt normally

World Health Organization, 2012
Employee Mental Health

THE PROBLEMS

Prevalent
1 in 5 people in the EU will experience a significant mental health problem every year

Costly
Mental health problems cost the EU’s economy about €170 billion each year

Stigmatized
2 in 3 people don’t seek help due to the fear of being discriminated against

THE SOLUTIONS

Resources
- Human Resources initiatives
- Health and Wellness programs
- Access to medical/clinical care
- Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs)
- *Leaders, managers, and supervisors*

World Health Organization, 2019; Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2016
Problem with the Solution?

Poorly prepared leaders = Gross underutilization of resources

80% of managers believe it is part of their job to intervene if an employee is struggling

Only 30% of managers know how to intervene

Ipsos Reid, 2012; MHCC, 2012; National Behavior Consortium, 2013; Randstad, 2014
The Development & Validation of the “SOS”

**Purpose**: Develop and validate a tool that can be used by managers in a workplace context to recognize warning signs of stress or “struggle”.

- **“Signs of Struggle” Checklist**
  - Other-rated
  - Not diagnostic
  - Behavioral items—recognizable, visible warning signs of struggle
  - Captures the construct of “work impairment”
    - *A state in which someone is functioning at a limited capacity, who is struggling to accomplish work-related tasks, and who is otherwise compromised—mentally, emotionally, or physically.* (Al-hamdani et al., 2012)
For leaders to assist employees who are in distress, they must first be able to recognize **visible warning signs** that signal that support and resources are needed.
Hypothesis

Four factor scale representative of mental ill-health, as observed in the workplace by an individual without a clinical background (education or occupation) in mental health or mental illness.

**Factor #1**: “Emotional Outbursts” (e.g., angrily ‘telling off’ a co-worker)

**Factor #2**: “Social Withdrawal” (e.g., no longer grabbing coffee with coworkers)

**Factor #3**: “Inconsistencies in Attendance” (e.g., repeated sick leave)

**Factor #4**: “Performance Degradations” (e.g., missed deadlines)
Development of the SOS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase 1: Gather Information</th>
<th>Phase 2: Behavioral Items</th>
<th>Phase 3: Content Validation</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Literature review</td>
<td>• Second set of SMEs examined items and removed all non-behavioral items</td>
<td>• 25 items distributed to 450 full-time employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Focus group of SMEs (managers, occupational physicians, EAP counselors)</td>
<td>• Outcome: 25 items</td>
<td>• Employees randomly assigned to 3 prompt conditions</td>
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<tr>
<td>• <strong>Outcome: 37 items</strong></td>
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<td>• <strong>Outcome: See next slide</strong></td>
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Signs of Struggle (SOS)

Performance
- Did not perform to usual standards
- Missed deadlines
- Was slow to respond to emails

Attendance
- Was absent from work
- Was out sick
- Left work early

Distress
- Mentioned being stressed
- Cried at work
- Mentioned problems at home

Extreme Warning Signs
- Expressed intent to harm self/others
- Expressed thoughts about suicide
- Neglected personal hygiene

Social Withdrawal
- Withdrew from coworkers
- Was rude or uncivil at work
- Withdrew from social activities

Dimoff & Kelloway, 2018
Implications for the SOS

IMPLICATIONS

▪ People at work = show behavioral warning signs of “struggle”

▪ Others at work = can “see” these behavioral warning signs

▪ First other-rated tool designed specifically for managers in a workplace setting

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

▪ Additional validation is still needed

▪ Need to determine if the utility of the SOS is the same for leaders and coworkers/peers

▪ A short-form of the SOS may be valuable for practical considerations

▪ Piloting in virtual workplaces is much-needed
Thank You & Questions