



Safety talk

Mental health and wellness in professional truck drivers

Mental health is the capacity to feel, think, and act in ways that enhance our ability to enjoy life and deal with the challenges we face.* It includes how we feel about ourselves, about our life, and about other people.

Mental health is part of our overall health. Poor mental health—such as low self-esteem, feelings of stress or loneliness, and relationship problems—can eventually lead to mental and physical illness.

Explain dangers

Some factors that can negatively affect a professional truck driver's mental health and wellness are:

Social isolation. The lifestyle requires drivers to work, live, and eat alone most of the time, which can lead to feelings of social isolation. Time away from family and friends can also make it difficult to maintain meaningful relationships.

Occupational stress. This can be caused by job-related factors such as heavy traffic, perceived rush loads, bad weather, etc.

Disruptive sleeping patterns. Drivers often deal with staggered delivery times and irregular sleep schedules.

Health issues. Professional truck drivers are at increased risk of developing sleep apnea and diabetes. Sleep disorders are often unrecognized and undiagnosed and can be life-threatening.

Lack of exercise. Truck cabs have limited room for storing exercise equipment. As well, fitness centres often have no place to park large trucks. This can make it difficult for drivers to exercise while on the road.

Obesity. In the US, the obesity rate of professional truck drivers (69%) is more than double the national average (31%).†

Drug and alcohol use. This can include personal use (e.g., weekend binging) or using stimulants to stay awake while driving.

Identify controls

- During off-duty time, try to get at least seven hours of sound sleep and keep to a regular sleep schedule/routine.
- Plan your trip properly to maximize work time and limit downtime in traffic or heavily congested areas. (Technology such as the Ontario 511 website or app may be helpful.)
- Use technology to stay in touch with family and friends (phone calls, video chats, etc.).
- Learn more about planning healthy meals to avoid fast food and unhealthy options.
- Take regular breaks while on the road to do some stretching exercises or go for a walk.
- Limit alcohol intake when at home as it can disrupt sleep, lead to dependency issues, and contribute to health problems.
- Practice safe defensive driving techniques and avoid getting angry with other road users.
- If permitted, bring an emotional support animal with you while working.
- Where possible, travel with a companion. It will help change your routine and provide emotional support while away from home.
- Travel with some personal comforts from home (tablet, books, family photos, etc.).
- Listen to some calming music while driving.
- Have a conversation with your supervisor or dispatcher if you need some help or guidance. Make use of any employee assistance programs (EAPs) that are available to you.

Demonstrate

Review the mental health services offered by your company through the EAP. Remind drivers that these services are confidential and can help them get the help and resources they may need.

Encourage drivers to have open and honest conversations. Questions like: *You don't seem yourself lately, are you okay?* and *Is there anything you would like to talk about?* indicate that a person would like to help and is open to talking.

* According to the Public Health Agency of Canada.

† According to the National Center for Biotechnology Information (US).