

Corporate Mental Health

– the new paradigm in mental health

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The World Health Organization defines positive mental health as “a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.”

Positive mental health can be promoted and maintained by various ways. It requires a health living, supportive environment, good health, sound working environment and several other little things that are a part of our daily lives.

Similarly, positive mental health is also affected by several factors which belong to our daily living as well. Workplace is one of the crucial factors among many.

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, “Work is at the very core of contemporary life for most people, providing financial security, personal identity, and an opportunity to make a meaningful contribution to community life.”

The workplace of an individual has a significant impact on his or her mental well-being, and there is a growing awareness about this fact. In his book “Work, Unemployment, and Mental Health,” Peter Warr has stated that gainful employment provides five categories of psychological experience that promote mental well-being:

1. Promotion
2. Time structure (an absence of time structure can be a significant psychological burden)
3. Social contact
4. Collective effort and purpose (employment offers a social context outside the family)
5. Social identity (employment is an essential element in defining oneself)
6. Regular activity (organizing one’s daily life)

Even as we keep the above points in mind, it is important to note that mental health problems are among the most important contributors to the burden of disease and disability worldwide.

It is estimated that five of the ten leading causes of disability around the world are due to mental health issues. Unfortunately, the impact of mental health disorders on employee productivity has long been underestimated, even though the workplace is where one spends most of their professional life. We live in a world where

appraisals, feedback, competition, meeting deadlines and constant improvements are only some of the enormous pile of stressors that we encounter at the workplace. The working space, context of work, and interpersonal relationships are also unavoidable factors that impact the mental health of employees.

In today’s global economy, mental health is an essential driver for successful business, and there are many reasons why employers should make the promotion of mental health in the workplace, a priority. In the share of the cost of occupational and work-related diseases, mental illnesses have a share of 7% on a global level. Therefore, mental health is a pressing issue in its own right.

An oft-discussed topic is that of work-life balance. It emphasizes the need for individuals to create a healthy balance between work (career and ambition) and lifestyle (health, pleasure, leisure and family).

It is a fluid concept and a very individualized balance that one creates for themselves depending on a lot of factors like — personality, profession, family demands, along with other environmental factors. A sound health (physical and mental) plays a very crucial role in determining one.

Globalization and the advances in workplace technology have resulted in rapid changes in the nature of work across different fields. This affects the content, organization and intensity (quality and quantity) of the work of an employee, which increasingly requires more skills and competency regarding innovation, communication and social intelligence. While these changes are rewarding for employees, they can also mean that employees experience more pressure and stress. The increase in workload demands upon their cognitive, social and psychological skills which have a direct impact on their mental well-being.

Therefore, mental health is crucial: both for the formation of these skills and their efficient use in the workplace.

Mental health problems can affect anyone, of any age, culture, socio-economic status and background. However, with adequate support, most people can and do recover. By making changes to the workplace environment, and offering support to employees, the duration and severity of mental health issues can be

reduced and recovery can be accelerated. The well-being of employees ensures constant performance, less absenteeism, productivity and success for the employee and the organization, and in the larger picture, for an economy.

Unfortunately, it is not an issue that is addressed by the Mental Health Care Act 2017 and nor are there any policies that account for the same. Nevertheless, workplace mental health is an important aspect of a working individual’s life and overall well-being. With time larger number of companies are getting open to the idea of accommodating to address mental health within the working place. Although it is difficult to quantify the impact of work on personal, social and psychological well-being, it is agreed. Workplaces can offer several measures to promote psychological well-being and positive mental health, such as:

1. Flexibility in working hours and giving employees the option to work from home, as and when possible
2. Introducing and encouraging breaks from work that are conducive to social interactions
3. Making employer and employee relationships more open and friendly
4. Advancing career development and career mapping for freshers and old employees to keep steady growth
5. Offering in-house counselling for employees — addressing both personal and organizational problems
6. Involving employees in the process of decision-making
7. Recognizing and rewarding the contribution of employees

With the increasing prevalence of mental disorders, workplace mental health is an essential need in the time of increasing stress.

Additionally, the stigma around mental health can be reduced by employer support to employees that can start a discussion around mental health. Organizations have slowly taken up the responsibility to support individuals with mental disorders at the workplace. There have also been questions where the question of a ‘mental health leave’ (parallel to sick leave) has come in the picture. Though it does not form a uniform policy privilege, the debate around it has begun. The culture of talking about mental health is slowly taking place

and the momentum that needs to be maintained. We all play a critical role in the advocacy of mental health, including the workplace.

The Need for Mental Health in Corporate Wellness Programs

Incentives often include lowering healthcare premiums, reducing co-pays, and increasing costs for smokers. Often missing from corporate wellness programs, however, is a focus on mental health and emotional wellness. While mental health is not as easily measured as blood pressure or cholesterol, it deserves equal attention especially when considering the costs associated with poor mental and emotional health.

Productivity loss, absenteeism, job abandonment, and higher turnover are often directly linked to poor mental health. For example, research shows that people with symptoms of depression have a fivefold or greater increase in time lost from work compared to those without symptoms of depression.

Employers can begin to focus on mental health by ensuring that employees have access to mental health benefits including an employee assistance program (EAP). EAPs are useful in that they can provide referrals to mental health professionals and other services while maintaining strict standards of confidentiality.

Employers with mental health benefits are at a significant advantage over those who do not supply such benefits in that they are likely to have lower incidents of job burnout, onsite violence, and workplace injury. Employers should complete an assessment of their organizational culture before implementing any mental health programs. They need to acknowledge when there are cultural drivers that are influencing people's resiliency and their ability to be emotionally well at work.

At the onset, companies need to be certain that their culture and work practices can support the mental health and emotional needs of its employees. They must communicate that they care about each employee as a person and that they are committed to providing the best working environment possible. Employers can suggest that their employees complete a health risk assessment (HRA) which often includes questions pertaining to mental health.

Wellness leaders can launch awareness and education campaigns of these illnesses using the latest social media and other tools to help people find helpful resources. When employees experience symptoms such as the desire to isolate, withdrawal from normal activities, physical aches and pains, irritability, and low tolerance of others, having a resource to turn to for help can likely defuse a potentially serious situation.

By providing educational opportunities and enhancing awareness of mental illnesses through discussion, organizations

are de-stigmatizing those very illnesses which keep employees silent in their pain. Wellness programs may offer peer-to-peer support groups for mental health conditions. One recent study suggested that for lasting behavior change, people are best served to not only set attainable goals but to participate in small groups.

When people come together with similar experiences, they are less likely to feel so alone. In small groups, people are more likely to openly discuss topics such as how to cope with the pressures of work, how to improve job performance, or how to deal with a demanding boss. Peer support groups are not to be therapy sessions but they can be therapeutic for participants.

There are risks associated with corporate wellness programs giving equal attention to mental health. First, employees may not attend educational sessions or other such gatherings for fear of being "outed". Unfortunately, shame is often associated with mental illness in the workplace. Employees may be fearful that others will not perceive them to be competent, capable, or a solid performer.

The best way to mitigate the risk of low participation is regularly and visibly offer sessions which signals that the company is interested and open to the topic. Another way to mitigate risk is to ask organizational leaders to talk about mental health issues in public forums. Second, employees could find the discussions about mental health to be too intrusive. Mental health is an intensely personal topic for some people.

It can be even more private than some physical health topics. To mitigate the sensitivity risk, wellness leaders can set rules of engagement at events. For example, rules around not judging others, not interrupting when someone is speaking, and no cross-talk may help establish a feeling of "emotional safety" for the sensitive employee.

Third, there is a risk that once attention is paid to mental health, an organization will incur costs associated with the use of mental health services and pharmaceutical usage of psychotropic drugs increase. Employers need to be mindful that when people seek treatment, they are less likely to have more costly hospital stays, and are less likely to experience other chronic conditions that could drive increased costs in the long term.

Corporate wellness programs will continue to evolve. Our hope is that more attention will be paid to employee mental health and that the stigma associated with it will dissipate. By addressing mental health issues and emotional wellness, employers are addressing the total health of an employee when combined with programs for clinical measure achievement. That makes everyone stronger, more productive, and happier.

Some illnesses including depression, anxiety and stress disorders could

definitely be triggered at the workplace. They could stem from an unsupportive work environment with no space for voicing concerns, working with an uncooperative manager, or people practices/policies such as overworking employees, leading to exhaustion, and unfair distribution due to heavy workload. These triggers contribute to distress, giving rise to mental health issues. It is important that the managers balance the workload fairly, and that HR also has enough checks and balances to receive continuous feedback or monitoring.

Mental health issues are still perceived with a lot of stigma, not just at workplaces but also in common society and neighbourhoods. People are afraid to talk about it as they are scared they will be looked at differently by a lot of people who matter to them - their friends and colleagues may start avoiding them due to any conversations that may sound negative, depressing or critical. Therefore, they start getting into a shell to avoid being branded as negative or boring.

Empathy is a very essential and integral part of functioning at any conscientious workplace. It is the management team's responsibility to ensure that the welfare of the employees comes first, and they will respond by contributing with complete dedication, trusting that their welfare, reward and recognition are taken care of. This is the reason some companies have core values that make employees stick to the same workplace for their lifetime.

HR practices have a great role to play to ensure the mental health of the organization is good.

1. Having a transparent, open culture and allowing fearless communication between employees and management is critical.
2. Creating infrastructure including facilities for employees to relax, like recreational areas with various activities: physical and others like music, or those that unleash creativity/inspiration play a good role.
3. Providing space for a creche, to ensure childcare and other such responsibilities are taken care of (which could be a huge cause of concern/anxiety for young parents) and place for worship could be some things organisations could do to support employees.
4. A lot of good organisations also provide healthy and nutritious meals throughout the day and night to support employees, which is also a great way to ensure that the basic needs of eating right and on time are taken care of.
5. Besides this, creating recreational communities to support fitness campaigns, gym, zumba, yoga classes, adventure activities, etc. help build a healthy work environment and also work on the long term, cross-functional team building and community feeling throughout the company. □