
Management

Minding It Right

COMPANIES ARE TAKING STEPS TO ADDRESS THE ISSUE OF MENTAL HEALTH. WILL THEY BE SUCCESSFUL?

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ILLUSTRATION BY RAJ VERMA

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In

2009, a 24-year-old employee of Singapore-based software-as-a-service (SaaS) customer engagement firm Capillary Technologies went on a holiday and didn't return. It was found that he had a break-up and had committed suicide. Two years on, a similar incident occurred in the company. "He was 23, looked happy and was doing quite well in the organisation. In fact, we had moved him to Mumbai," says Aneesh Reddy, Co-founder and CEO. The firm is still not sure what happened in this case

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.....>
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.....>

Source: GOQii

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though. “Generally we hire a batch of 5-10 freshers from campus, but no one from his cohort knew,” adds Reddy.

The incidents were an eye-opener for Reddy. “I realised the extent of stigma around mental health and how important it is to ensure that people have access to someone to talk to and lean on.” So, when one of his former employees launched online counselling and emotional wellness firm YourDOST, Reddy became one of their early angel investors and also their first corporate client.

According to the government’s National Mental Health Survey 2016, over 10 per cent of Indian adults, approximately 150 million people, suffer from some form of mental health disorder. It also found that nearly one in every 20 people suffer from depression.

The country was already at a tipping point. Covid-19 only added to the problem and brought the issue out in the open. According to a study of 10,000-plus individuals by smart-tech healthcare platform GOQii, almost 49 per cent of Indians are struggling with depression. Of these, 26 per cent are facing mild depression, 17 per cent face a more strenuous kind and 6 per cent are severely depressed.

Companies have started taking note as well. “Covid has brought the focus on mental health to the forefront and we are seeing openness in corporates to address it,” says Neerja Birla, Founder and Chairperson, Mpower. Counselling services, sensitivity workshops for managers and fixed working hours — India Inc is going all out to address such issues. But the question is, are they working?

The Right Values

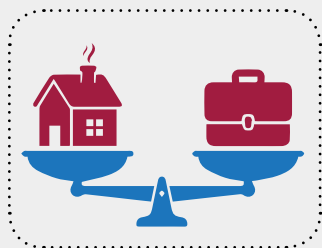
The pandemic has had its effect on most people. Work from home has been difficult, job losses and pay cuts have led to financial constraints, and families have lost their loved ones. “On top of that, social isolation for prolonged periods is making people anxious. Mental fatigue has set in, people are fed up and want to get on with their lives, but there is no end in sight causing depressive disorders in many,” says Birla.

Companies are rolling out programmes for mental well-being of employees, including roping in counselling support firms for delivering self-help workshops (online and offline), knowledge-sharing sessions and online counselling and therapy. From April to date, Mpow-

1
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(NMHS, 2016)

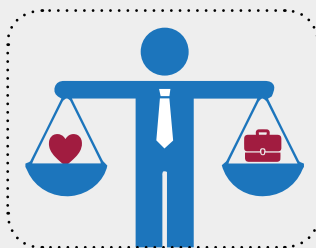
Lockdown Blues

Top three issues for which professionals sought support in 2020



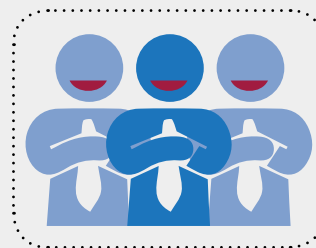
Work-life balance:

The distinction between personal and professional life was completely blurred. Many complained about work extending late into the night and increasing number of hours spent working



Relationship & Marital Adjustment:

A lack of work-life balance led to relationship issues for a number of couples



Confidence & Self-Esteem:

Many suffered job losses or pay cuts in 2020, which affected their confidence and self-esteem

Source: YourDOST



“

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NEERJA BIRLA

Founder and Chairperson, Mpower

er has on-boarded 30 corporates and its 24x7 helpline has received more than 65,000 calls from employees. YourDOST, too, increased its client’s base by 100 during lockdown.

But access to counsellors is not enough, it is important to call out the elephant in the room. Birla shares how her organisation gets requests from companies to remove the phrase ‘mental health’ from workshops. “The stigma is so high that people want to address it but don’t want to make it obvious that they are discussing mental health,” she adds. “This we don’t like to do because it defeats the very purpose of de-stigmatising it.”

Pidilite Industries Chief Human Resources Officer (CHRO) Rahul Sinha says the company conducts general awareness sessions on mental well-being every week on its communication platform Facebook@Work hosted by occupational experts on topics such as managing stress, distancing work and life etc. Law firm Trilegal, too, has conducted six such workshops.

But conversations around mental illness still remain largely stifled due to the stigma associated with it. An employee, who works as a digital marketer, says he lost out on a number of job opportunities whenever he disclosed to his manager that he was suffering from schizophrenia. At times, he adds, companies would increase his work load. The result: He has stopped sharing about his condition for the last seven-eight years, and now, he is gainfully employed.

Very often, companies don’t make concessions on targets or workloads, despite knowing that stress is a common trigger for several mental health ailments, says another employee. “My manager is okay with my anxiety issues as long as I continue to perform.”

The Trust Factor

For mental health programmes to work, the fundamental values of respect, dignity and non-discrimination have to be in place. “People need to be reassured that seeking mental healthcare, which the company has made available, will be strictly confidential. And that, under no circumstances, any disclosure will affect the concerned person’s employment,” says Vikram Patel, Professor of Global Health at Harvard Medical School. “One has to begin with these values otherwise there is no way that any employee will seek mental healthcare.”

Capillary, says Reddy, keeps a track of monthly aggregate data on top stressors for employees. “When we onboarded YourDOST, 3-4 per cent of employees went and got a session. I was worried that we were doing something wrong, but the counsellor said that at any given point in time, 5 per cent of the population will always have issues.” The only time the company has made a request to be made aware of someone’s situation is when they are at the risk of harming themselves.

An employee in a media firm who spoke on condition of anonymity says he doesn’t use the services of his corporate therapist because of the requirement of sending a mail to the HR before seeking an appointment.

Another adds she will never use the service because of trust issues. “While my organisation has a great culture, it is still a corporate house where everything is driven by economics. I can’t trust the therapist they provide with my deepest and darkest secrets that I don’t want even my family to know.”

Tanmoy Goswami, Founder of mental health journalism platform *Sanity by Tanmoy*, suggests giving employees mental health allowance, which they can use as and when they deem fit.

Culture Issues

Mental health programmes can’t be relegated to a one-time workshop or session, an overall strategy needs to be put in place. “For its communication to be effective leaders have to be involved, otherwise it will remain another unread HR email in the inbox,” says YourDOST Co-founder and COO Puneet Manuja.

“They have to be treated very much like cultural initiatives,” says Ira Gupta, HR head, Microsoft India. It would start with training leaders, making them talk about mental health issues and demonstrating those values to their teams. Sriram Rajamani, Managing Director, Microsoft Research India, heads the mental wellness community at the firm. The employee group focusses on creating systemic capability to support employees and destigmatise the issue within the organisation.

Work-life balance, too, plays a crucial role in minimising stress since long work hours over sustained periods can be demoralising. During an internal survey among employees at Mondelez, the management found that people were



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RAHUL SINHA
Chief Human Resources Officer,
Pidilite Industries

What Organisations Can Do

Tanmoy Goswami, founder of mental health journalism platform *Sanity by Tanmoy*, on what companies can do for well-being of employees

not taking breaks as they were working from home. The company decided to institutionalise a culture to enable work-life distancing. “Earlier the conversation was about work-life integration, but we realised it was important to create work-life distancing,” says Mahalakshmi R., Director, HR, Mondelez India.

The maker of Cadbury Dairy Milk, Oreo and Tang, among others, created a five-point Leadership Pledge, which was taken by Mondelez India President Deepak Iyer, along with the country’s leadership team on remote work commitments. The leadership has been encouraging others to follow it as well. The five-point agenda includes setting 30 minutes of digital detox time, taking care of oneself through an exercise/meditation routine, setting a time limit to switch off from work, expressing gratitude, and the last, but most important, the ‘Do Nothing Days’.

“We realised people were not taking leaves, so we created ‘Do Nothing Days’ where we encouraged people to take breaks and utilise their leaves, to spend time with themselves and their families,” adds Mahalakshmi.

Sinha of Pidilite says the company has created digital etiquette guidelines, one of those is to ensure all meetings happen between 10 a.m. and 5.30 p.m., with the exception of lunch time from 1.30 p.m. to 2.30 p.m. “We are now sharing data with leaders on the number of times meetings happened outside designated hours,” he adds. Almost 30 per cent of the meetings were spilling outside earlier, now it has reduced to 8-9 per cent.

Training Sessions

A company may have the best of poli-



The agenda of well-being programmes should be to make employees feel good and well, not more productive



Use language sensitively. Phrases such as war for talent give the impression to employees that there is no leeway to slow down



Reward empathetic leadership traits, incentivise managers who listen and take care of their teams



Create safe spaces within organisations for people to have radically honest conversations

cies, but without participation from the workforce, it is just an initiative on paper. That is where training can play a critical role.

Harvard’s Patel says one of the most important strategies to ensure employee well-being is to have a zero-tolerance policy on workplace harassment and bullying. “This means those in positions of power are the ones who are going to have to change their behaviour towards those who are reporting to them,” he adds.

He shares how at Harvard University all the senior faculty have to undergo not only a regular training on aligning with the policy of zero harassment, but are also made aware that there is a system for their staff to report.

Training can also help in overcoming the bias that mental illness is a personal failing, that the person is not capable of handling stress and therefore may not be the right person for the company. “It is a scientific fact today that mental illness can be treated like any physical ailment, and this needs to be conveyed that it doesn’t have any association with the capability of the person to work harder,” says Patel.

Pidilite has been conducting sensitivity training for leaders for the last seven months on managing and identifying stress for themselves and their team members. Microsoft does ally-ship training where the focus is to teach people how to be an ally, how to communicate with the person on how he/she is feeling and the right language to use.

It is still early days for mental health advocacy in India. It is a positive that everyone is talking about it, but there’s still a long way to go. **BT**

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