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MENTAL
HEALTH
Stigma
IN THE
WORKPLACE



MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS



The 10th of October was mental health awareness day and October is mental health awareness month, however every month should be aimed at bringing awareness to mental health and why awareness is important. Mental health is often overlooked and not taken seriously among many people, but the long-term effects are deeply prevalent, particularly from a workplace perspective.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), more than half the world's population are currently in work and 15% of working-age adults live with a mental health condition. In a global context, the state of South Africa's mental health is astonishing. In 2022, South Africa was ranked one of the worst countries regarding mental health, according to the second Annual Mental State of the World report. In addition to this report, on the mental health wellbeing scale, South Africa scored the lowest average alongside the UK.



Also, looking at the state of South Africa's mental health within a local context. Research by the Wits/Medical Research Council, Developmental Pathways for Health Research Unit (DPHRU) revealed that 25.7% of South Africans are depressed with more than a quarter presenting moderate to severe symptoms.

Another note that is exacerbating this issue is that from the total South African health budget, only 5% of it is spent on mental health. Resulting in South Africa falling at the bottom of international benchmarks of country public spending on mental health, according to an article written by William Gumedde (Associate Professor at Wits University).

These stats are astonishing and highlights the lack of knowledge and acceptance, along with the level of inattention with regards to mental health in our country. Mental disorders such as depression result in extensive loss of productivity each year due to employee absenteeism stated by EAP Association of South Africa.

Without effective support, education and resources, mental health conditions can affect a person's confidence and identity at work, as well as capacity to work productively.

So, increased attention and focus needs to spotlight how organisations can create a workplace that prioritises employee emotional wellbeing and mental health? Every individual has the right to work, and all working individuals have the right to work in a healthy environment that is psychologically safe.

On one hand the workplace can be a protective factor for mental health sufferers, as it can act as a distraction for the individual. Conversely, it can contribute to aggravating and worsening an individual's mental health.

In most cases observing the high-pressure industries, the latter is way more prevalent which is massively due to stigmas around mental health in the workplace. The aim of this article is to shed light on this issue because it is imperative to understand the impact it has on individuals and society, and how we can improve our support.

Stigmas around mental health in the workplace can have significant negative consequences for both employees and organisations.

These stigmas often stem from misunderstandings, stereotypes, and societal attitudes about mental health, leading to a lack of support for those who need it



WHY IS MENTAL HEALTH STIGMATISED?

An article published in 2023 by Ahad et al., explains that stigma is deeply embedded in societal norms and is a multifaceted issue leading to delays in treatment and a poorer quality of life for individuals suffering from mental health issues. A delay in seeking help and treatment exacerbates mental health conditions, often leading to worse outcomes. Stigmatisation is not a rigid issue but varying across cultures and influenced by beliefs, values, and norms.

Essentially, understanding these cultural variations is pivotal for creating effective and supportive working environments. According to Ahad et al., mental conditions in some southern African cultures are attributed to spiritual causes including curses or possessions.

This understanding plays a part in high levels of stigma and discouraging individuals from speaking up. The internalisation of mental health stigmas significantly shapes an individual's emotional well-being, acceptance, and willingness to seek help.



WHAT ARE THE STIGMAS SURROUNDING MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE?

- ***Weakness Perception***

Challenges with mental health can be perceived as a sign of weakness, particularly in high-pressure industries where there are high expectations to perform. This sparks the fear seeming less capable.

- ***Fear of Career Impact***

There could be intense worry that it might lead to job insecurity or reduced opportunities for promotions. Especially, in competitive working environments where performance is highly evaluated.

- ***Self-Stigma***

One could internalise negative beliefs around their mental health issues and could feel ashamed or guilty. This prevents individuals from seeking help or discussing issues and opening up to supervisors and managers.

- ***Judgement***

Fear of being judged by colleagues or leaders increases a concern that others will treat them differently or unfairly.

- ***Lack of Awareness and Education***

A huge part of the stigma originates from the lack of understanding or education. Individuals may not know how to appropriately support someone, leading to inadequate responses. Additionally, inadequate mental health policies in the workplace that create an uncomfortable or unsafe environment with little resources or support.

- ***Societal Influences***

The societal norms that prioritise productivity and performance over well-being contribute to the hesitation in addressing mental health in a professional environment.



According to William Gumedde (Associate Professor at Wits University),

“Before the Covid-19 pandemic, only 15% of South Africans with mental health receive treatment. This is due largely to the fact that many do not seek help because of the public stigma attached to mental illnesses and because in many cases mental health support is just not available in public medical facilities. ”



HOW CAN WE ADDRESS MENTAL HEALTH STIGMAS?

In 2023, the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) revealed that just one in six employees are likely to disclose their mental health issues to their manager. However, through exposure to people as a professional coach working in Professional Services, I believe this figure is way less as individuals are hesitant to discuss their mental health conditions with their superiors because of the associated stigmas that come with it (mentioned above).

Often this fear is informed by having witnessed the responses that others have received previously due to their disclosure of their Mental Health issues. Seeing first hand why people do not want to speak about their struggles with mental health, clearly indicates the negative influence of these stigmas.

As a result, EAP Association of South Africa explains that firstly, employees do not want to ask about taking time off to manage their depression or anxiety or other conditions.

Understandably so, particularly for those working in a highly competitive environment that will reflect “badly” on them and their reputation due to the deeply driven stigmas surrounding mental health. Secondly, a few employers may not consider depression or anxiety or other mental conditions as a viable reason to take leave, due to the fact that it is not a routinely talked-about matter, according to EAP Association of South Africa.

Now is the time to begin to shift our focus on how we can address the stigmatisation of mental health in the workplace. Organisations need to start regarding emotional well-being and mental health with the same priority and attention as physical health.

Adopting a proactive approach on how to manage employees who are dealing with mental health struggles is critical. I believe the fundamentals on how to address this issue is to SPEAK.

S P E A K



Support – Organisations should implement policies that ensure confidentiality, whilst finding supportive solutions for mental health needs and offer work options that are flexible.

Providing Access to Resources – intentionally providing access to assistance programs, effective mental health days with no judgement and counselling services from professionals with easier access.

Encouraging Open Conversation – Leadership can set the tone and create a culture by normalising discussions and conversations around mental health, encourage others to prioritise emotional well-being and not only having a task focussed approach to individuals, but also the health of their employees' mental state during a project. This tone and culture will filter through all levels, from C-suite to entry level.

Awareness – by offering training, workshops, conferences, and other resources to educate employees and leaders. This will increase understanding, knowledge, and facilitate empathy for everyone in the workplace.

Keep Yourself First! – on an individual scale, the most important message to note during this journey is to trust the process, seek professional help and speak to those you trust to receive support and understanding. You are not alone and there is no shame.

Making mental health a priority in the workplace will create a psychologically safe environment for those working within it. Simply, if there is a lack of psychological safety then those in that environment cannot operate at their optimal level.

Organisations must take a step back and examine how their working environment and culture may be contributing to the issue, stated by EAP Association of South Africa. Which I firmly agree with. There are rooted issues that cause significant changes in a working space, take note of them because they will not disappear by themselves.

From a coaching perspective, our main focus is the individual sitting in front of us. Assisting them to learn how to cope with work stressors and how they can function to the best of their ability in the space they are in. It becomes incredibly challenging to learn how to deal with these matters when you are struggling mentally and emotionally. That is why it is imperative to provide a working space for all that is accommodating, accepting, adaptive and diverse.

Researching and finding these stats reiterated the severity of this problem and how extensive it actually is. Initially, I made my own conclusions on the problem just by observing certain behaviours in a professional environment, but the facts are the facts, and it is a national if not global issue.

In conclusion, the challenges individuals with mental health issues are facing in the workplace are attributed mainly to these two factors; 1. that the majority of South African employers and organisations simply do not regard this as a priority and 2. the stigmas surrounding mental health are fuelling an ongoing lack of understanding and empathy.



Routes
[more than]
Coaching



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