

Poor business practice to ignore employees' psychological well-being

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MENTAL illness is common and affects people from all socio-economic backgrounds. Rates of mental illness are high among persons living under conditions of poverty and inequality.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that worldwide the number of people with depression exceeds 300 million, with a similar number affected by a range of anxiety disorders.

Depression is ranked as the single largest contributor to global disability. In South Africa as many as 30% of people will develop clinically significant symptoms of a common mental illness during their lifetime.

Symptoms of mental illness have an insidious and pervasive impact on many domains of functioning, negatively affecting quality of life, inter-personal relationships, and people's ability to flourish.

Mental illness can prevent people from working. It is appropriate that this year's World Mental Health Day (October 10) focused on mental health in the workplace.

South Africa has limited data detailing the prevalence of mental illness in the workplace. But there is evidence that teachers, police officers, and health-care professionals have high rates of psychological distress and burn-out.

There are reports that suicide rates among police officers are more than five times higher than the national suicide prevalence rates.

A study has found that 36.7% of health professionals working in one tertiary hospital reported significant symptoms of burn-out. Nurses were worst affected with more than 90% reporting burn-out.

Another study focusing on people who work in the construction industry found that harassment and discrimination were significantly

associated with increased levels of work-related stress.

Mental illness has a deleterious impact in the workplace, affecting absenteeism, productivity and people's capacity to enjoy and take pride in their work. Workplace stress is also a significant contributor to mental illness.

Factors such as unrealistic workloads, lack of control, poor leadership and incompetent management, and hostile interpersonal interactions at work, all serve to contribute to poor psychological health.

Employers have a responsibility to create conditions at work that are conducive to good psychological health, but unfortunately this is not always a responsibility they are willing to assume.

Employers need to be sensitive to the fact that mental health issues are a legitimate concern and that they can support people's recovery. Mentally ill people are often



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excluded from the workplace, not only because of stigma and ignorance but because employers are not willing to make reasonable accommodations in the workplace.

There is growing evidence that poor mental health and stressors at work can be a contributory factor to a range of physical illnesses like

hypertension, diabetes and cardiovascular conditions. Poor mental health can cause burn-out among employees, seriously affecting their ability to contribute meaningfully at work and leading to high rates of staff attrition.

Aside from any humanitarian arguments, it is not good business practice to ignore the psychological well-being of employees.

There is much that we can do to promote our own mental health such as eating a balanced diet, getting adequate sleep, exercising regularly, and learning to manage our thoughts, emotions, behaviours and interactions with others.

Regulating our levels of stress and maintaining a support system and good interpersonal relationships goes a long way to inoculating us against mental illness.

Honing our problem-solving, time management, and communication skills are also important for

building psychological resilience.

But mental illness is not only caused by factors within our control. There are powerful social, cultural, economic, political and environmental factors that contribute to poor mental health.

Factors such as unemployment, inequality, working conditions, community support, and national policies all exert an influence on people's psychological functioning.

Other situational and contextual factors such as food insecurity, living in violent communities, and being exposed to environmental hazards also contribute to mental illness.

It is possible to prevent mental illnesses and effective treatments are available. But people do not always have access to effective and affordable mental health services.

In South Africa, as few as 10% of mentally ill people will receive appropriate treatment. In other

low- and middle-income countries, it is estimated that between 76% and 85% of people with mental disorders receive no treatment, while in high-income countries between 35% and 50% of people in need of mental health care are left untreated.

As individuals, we clearly have a role to play in doing what we can to look after our psychological health. This requires self-care, self-awareness and knowledge about mental health. But mental health is not only a personal responsibility – it is a collective responsibility and a political issue.

Those in power, including governments, employers, school principals, and university management have a crucial responsibility to actively create conditions which promote people's psychological well-being.

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