

HAVE A BREAK, BEFORE YOU BURN OUT

Impaired mental health in corporate executives can cost the global economy billions in poor performance and lost productivity. **Darren Atkinson** finds out more.



Working conditions and environments can impact mental health which subsequently impacts their job performance. As a large proportion of our time is spent at work, our experience in the workplace is one of the factors determining our overall wellbeing.

Stress at the workplace is expected but just how serious can it get? BT consults Consultant Psychiatrist **Professor Dr. Philip George** to explain.

Q: Is there a high percentage of workplace related mental health cases in Malaysia and how serious is it?

A 2013 online survey by Regus found 70% of Malaysian employees were afflicted with diseases which were caused by rising stress levels at work. Additionally, 33% of respondents worried about losing their jobs and 53% of respondents reported

their family and friends have observed that they are stressed by work.

Q: What are the common work place-related mental health scenarios?

Typically, it starts with stress and frustration. They can also be caused by factors which are unrelated to work. There are also genetic factors, childhood experiences, relationship problems and others. Combined with work-related issues, they can impact mental health. If these conditions are not controlled, they can lead to depression and anxiety disorders or other medical conditions.

Depression and anxiety disorders can impact our ability to work productively.

Globally, more than 300 million people suffer from depression, the leading cause of disability. More than 260 million are living with anxiety disorders. A recent WHO-led study estimates that depression

and anxiety disorders cost the global economy US\$ 1 trillion each year in lost productivity.

Q: What are the types of the workplace related mental health cases you have seen?

Many of my clients are working and seek treatment but often without their employer knowing. They fear being dismissed if their mental illness is known to their employer even though they may suffer from a treatable condition.

Q: Can mental illnesses trigger or cause other illnesses or medical conditions?

There is a close relationship between stress and chronic medical conditions such as Hypertension and Diabetes Mellitus. Depression and anxiety disorders are known to increase the risk of heart disease and stroke. Mental illness can depress our immune system due to the over active corticosteroid secretion leading to auto-immune disorders and frequent infections. Chronic pain especially low back pain can be triggered or worsened by depression and anxiety.

Q: Everybody may experience some level of stress, depression or anxiety in their work life but when does it become a problem?

Signs and symptoms of mental illness can vary, depending on the disorder and circumstances. It becomes an illness if, for example, depression persists longer than two weeks, or more than a month for some anxiety disorders. It is an illness if it is affecting social and occupational functioning and the individual is not able to get better on his or her own. The important thing to remember is

that, it is not a weakness and that this illness can be treated. Signs and symptoms of mental illness include:

- Confused thinking or reduced ability to concentrate
- Excessive fears or worries, or extreme feelings of guilt
- Withdrawal from friends and activities
- Significant tiredness, low energy or problems sleeping
- Detachment from reality (delusions), paranoia or hallucinations
- Inability to cope with daily problems or stress
- Trouble understanding and relating to situations and to people
- Alcohol or drug abuse
- Major changes in eating habits, sex drive changes
- Feeling sad or down, excessive anger, hostility or violence
- Suicidal thinking
- Extreme mood changes of highs and lows

Sometimes symptoms of a mental health disorder appear as physical problems, such as stomach pain, back pain, headache, among others.



Q: Nowadays, there is no such thing as leaving your work at the workplace as we are connected by our digital devices almost 24/7. What effect does 'staying connected to work' have on mental health?

As mobile technology evolves, the boundaries between personal and professional time have become blurred. People can now stay connected

to work whether they are driving home or in their homes. Employers must know where to draw the line. To keep a happy and healthy workforce, must ensure that employees maintain the right work-life balance.

A recent study suggests that remaining connected after work can lead to sleep problems, feeling more tired during the day and possibly working less efficiently.

The Journal of Occupational Health Psychology reports that many people who use their smartphones for work-related communications tend to have a difficult time psychologically detaching from their jobs. This, in turn, makes them vulnerable to work-related exhaustion.

Q: Are Malaysians now more open to seeking professional help?

Malaysians in urban areas are more open to seeking help but the problem is help may not be as accessible as they would hope. Long wait times at government hospitals and a lack of psychologists there, are challenges to accessing help. The cost of seeing a psychiatrist or psychologist in private can be prohibitive especially as the cost is borne by the individual with very few medical insurance schemes covering psychological treatment.

Ideally, treatment involves assessment with investigation by a psychiatrist/psychologist followed by antidepressant treatment and psychological therapies -- usually weekly -- for a set period of time.

Ways Corporations Can Help Reduce Workplace-Related Stress And Mental Health Issues:

CREATE A HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT

Most people spend approximately one-third of their time at work. A few simple ways to promote a healthy environment is to encourage exercise, allowing for breaks and offering stress reduction workshops. Hiring a mental health professional to teach mindfulness or offering free access to a yoga class are just a few creative ways to bolster mental strength and resilience. As reported by the National Health & Morbidity Survey in Malaysia, approximately one in four adults experiences a mental illness. Many suffer in silence or fail to recognize a mental health issue. Instead, they associate

their symptoms with aging or a normal part of stress. Helping employees recognize their risk factors and symptoms is one of the simplest yet most effective ways for employers to help.

POLICIES FOR SUPPORT

Mental health issues are very treatable, so it's essential that employees are supported in their attempts to seek help. Create policies that support emotional wellness and treatment. An organisation-wide mental health strategy is essential. Your organisation could institute clear policies about promoting wellbeing for staff and tackling the causes of work-related mental health problems. Mental health should be at the heart of policies such as: health and safety, working time, sickness absence and return-to-work.

AWARENESS AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS

In many workplaces mental

health is the elephant in the room. Too often, employees are scared to talk to their manager and problems can spiral. Employers need to raise awareness and promote discussion of mental health and wellbeing. In some cases, people find it easier to speak to someone who isn't their manager. Peer support allows colleagues to support one another outside of the line-management structure. Mentoring and buddy schemes can help staff to understand the organisation better and to gain confidence and new skills.

INVOLVING EMPLOYEES IN DECISION-MAKING

When staff feel involved and well informed with organisational matters, it increases motivation and helps people understand how their role fits into the bigger picture. It conveys a feeling of greater control and participation within the organisation.