

# Fighting the stigma: Where to start

Organisations can create a positive cycle of increased productivity, improved outcomes and happier employees with right measures, writes Reji Varghese

**Reji Varghese**

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Mental Health Awareness Month has been observed in May in the United States since 1949. Over the years, it has become internationally recognised, with corporate houses hosting events throughout the month for employees.

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In the 1800s, green colour was used to label people 'insane'. The mental health community decided to continue using green with a different focus— symbolising new life, growth and beginnings. The green ribbon is now the international symbol of mental health awareness.

This year's theme, "Where to Start: Mental Health in a Changing World," recognises the daily challenges and their consequences. While corporates are getting more comfortable discussing mental health, it can still be hard to know "Where to start".

## Mental health and productivity

In India, a 2023 study by MPower, an initiative by The Aditya Birla Education Trust, has revealed that nearly 48% of corporate employees are struggling with mental health issues, with women being more prone to high mental health risk at 56% versus men at 41%.

Rukmini Iyer, a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) expert, says, "It is incumbent upon business leaders to foster an organisational culture that prioritises mental well-being so that people can perform to the best of their abilities in a supportive environment."

While investing in mental health programmes may seem costly initially, the long-term benefits outweigh the expenses. Reduced turnover, lower healthcare costs, and increased productivity result in significant savings. Companies prioritising mental health recognise that it's an investment in their most valuable asset—their people.

"Letting your team know that you recognise that their mental and emotional health is just as important as their physical health can motivate them to pay attention to their mental health," says Deepa Agarwal, a mental health and DEI specialist.

## Mental health initiatives

Mental health is often considered to be about mental illness or extreme anxieties and stressors created by obstacles and problems. But often, the inability to cope with everyday issues depletes one's energy and sense of fulfilment.

Deepa Agarwal says, "Sound mental health requires that we pay attention to how we live our lives. An organisation can play a crucial role in helping individuals not only manage this but also help create preventive measures."

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Here is what an organisation can do to help employees.

**Employee assistance programmes (EAPs):** Companies can leverage their EAPs to create awareness by inviting counsellors and psychologists to speak on stress management, anger management, etc. "Organisations should help employees understand that reaching out to a counsellor is a sign of strength, not weakness. Assuring them of confidentiality would help many to come forward and speak about the issues. If the organisation doesn't already have an EAP, this will be a good time to consider instituting one," says Deepa Agarwal.

**Mental health training for leaders:** Leaders must be trained to recognise the signs of mental distress and respond appropriately. Empathy, active listening, and understanding the resources available are critical skills that must be developed. Deepa says, "Fireside chats with senior leaders to share their wellness stories would be very beneficial. These leaders could share what they are doing to manage their emotional and mental health and areas they could do with additional support. When leaders share their personal stories, it suddenly becomes real for the employees."

**Employee resource groups (ERGs):** These peer support groups can be instrumental in breaking the stigma around discussing mental health issues. Rukmini Iyer gives the example of Palestinian ERGs in several organisations focusing on psychological safety for needy employees since the Gaza war began. "By sharing experiences in a safe and supportive environment, employees can find solace and solutions among their peers. ERGs are formed by various groupings, including nationalities, sexual orientations, etc., giving people a sense of safety for specific aspects of their identity."

**Regular assessments:** Just as physical health screenings are commonplace in many organisations, mental health assessments should be regularly conducted. These can help in early identification of potential mental health issues and prompt timely intervention.

**Arts-based therapy:** Art therapy is a technique rooted in the idea that creative expression can foster healing and mental well-being. People have relied on the arts for communication, self-expression, and healing for thousands of years, but art therapy didn't start to become a formal programme until the 1940s.

"Arts-based therapy allows a practitioner to use various modalities to communicate in a session and allows a client the freedom to go beyond the limitations of language to discover and express themselves and their conflicts and often also to find resolutions," says Dr Nivedita Chalil, a mental health professional and founder of an arts-based therapy organisation.

**Wellness programmes:** Many enterprises, SMEs, and startups have taken steps to improve their employees' mental health and well-being. "Activities like yoga, meditation, tai chi, qigong, and workshops on stress management can be integrated into the work schedule to help employees manage stress better. These programmes should be accessible and encouraged for all employees," says Rukmini Iyer.

Deepa Agarwal suggests playing short guided meditation recordings at a dedicated time in either the recreation room or a meeting room. "Companies can help employees recognise the body-mind connection. The benefits of activities such as yoga, taichi, a fitness regime, qigong, etc, can be highlighted through sharing articles and videos. Experts can be roped in to discuss these topics and teach short sessions," she says.

Many state governments, such as Maharashtra, Gujarat, Goa, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh, and organisations like ONGC, Mahindra & Mahindra, ESD Software, and others, offer annual paid leave for their employees to attend Vipassana meditation courses. Business management schools have included Vipassana meditation in their training.

**Boundaries matter:** Encourage employees to establish clear boundaries between work and personal life. "Leaving work at work means employees should be encouraged to avoid checking work emails outside work hours. Employees should be encouraged to take breaks during the day to recharge mentally. By respecting the boundaries between work and leisure, employees can disconnect, recharge, and maintain better mental health," says Deepa Agarwal.

**Digital detox:** The purpose of a digital detox is to allow ourselves time to experience real life without distractions. It's a way to reconnect with individuals personally rather than through a screen, de-stress, and avoid the devices and social media sites that have become such an integral part of life—smartphones, laptops, tablets, televisions, etc.

**It's okay not to be okay:** Use communication materials to highlight points such as 'It's ok to not be ok'. "The message to be sent to employees is that not only is it okay to not feel 'okay'. We cannot cherry-pick emotions. Feeling anxious when we think we might lose something we care about is normal. It's normal to feel scared when we don't know what to expect next. We should let ourselves feel these things as they come up. Remember that no emotion is permanent. We must experience painful feelings to let them truly pass through us. And we must assure employees that their colleagues and organisations are there for support whenever needed," says Deepa.

**Sponsor/raise funds:** Partner with a local NGO dedicated to this space. Either sponsor them as a company or start a fundraising activity that involves your employees.

**Decluttering hour:** Get employees to clean up their desks, papers, and laptops to reduce clutter. Encourage them to consider the impact of their surroundings on mental health.

Companies that address mental health issues fulfil their ethical responsibilities and gain a competitive edge. By fostering a mentally healthy workplace, organisations create a positive cycle: increased productivity, improved business outcomes and happier employees. More companies are realising that prioritising mental health is no longer an option—it is a strategic imperative.

(The author is an entrepreneur)

## How mental health impacts Indian workforce

- 1 out of 2 corporate employees are 'at risk' of poor mental health today.
- They feel job/work life is key to their mental health. The E-Commerce sector was the most affected.
- 50% of the employees strongly agreed that stress impacts their work productivity.
- 9 out of 10 employees say they lack work-life balance.
- Close to 80% agree they had taken two weeks' leave from work in the last year because of stress/anxiety/ poor mental health.
- About 90% of employees agree they are expected to work on their leave days.
- Among 'at risk' employees, close to 67% agreed that they are expected to work every time they are on leave.
- A majority feel that the remote working policy impacts their productivity and hinders professional growth.
- 80% of female employees say they face stereotypes at the workplace by male colleagues over maternity leave, etc.
- Nearly 50% of employees felt the need for an alternative source of income and a better financial wellness programme to empower them.
- About 50% faced insufficient salaries, followed by pay cuts, which further added to their financial woes.