

## Recommendations for Employers: Mental Health at the Workplace

On 8 October 2024, Asia Society India began the fourth season of its conversations on mental health, with 'Policies of Care: Mental Health and the Workplace.' This session aimed to assess the state of mental well-being at workplaces, across size and sector; the unique experiences at the government, institution, and employee level; and the role of employers in creating inclusive mental health policies. This series is supported by the Raika Godrej Family Trust.

The session revealed a lack of policy regulation in India, in the absence of which individual employers play a critical role in employees' well being. Drawing on insights from the session, Asia Society India and the Centre for Mental Health, Law and Policy jointly present seven tips for employers to ensure employee mental health and well-being:

### Shift from the individual to the institution

Rather than asking the employee to cope with stress and other related problems on their own, mental health should be a concern of the organisation. A shift is required from framing mental health issues as a personal weakness or lack of resilience, to addressing organisational and systemic issues. Conversations are always centered on "helping individuals cope with stress, pressure and boost productivity, ignoring the systemic factor and the organisation culture that shape workplace experiences for employees... we must shift the focus from individual resilience to the role of organisation culture and systemic factors," said Lakshmi Sreenivasan during the panel. This narrative implies that stress and burnout are results of the employee's own lack of resilience. While individual interventions such as stress management and mindfulness may work in the short term, they do not address the root cause of the issue. Therefore, a holistic approach that prioritizes prevention and promotion is needed. This includes addressing mental health challenges as a collective and systemic concern, rather than individual responsibility which, as suggested by Rachana Iyer, should involve all stakeholders in the overall work environment.

### Training managers to help during mental health crises

We must train managers to recognize and respond to the symptoms of poor mental health by creating a positive feedback loop. According to Rachana Iyer, managers and peers can be trained to become first responders in times of mental stress and provide psychological support, to prevent burnout at the initial stage. Symptoms of mental health problems at the workplace may include fatigue, physical health problems, inability to work, disinterest in work, low engagement with peers, and "presenteeism" - when one is present at work but cannot contribute due to mental health struggles. According to Dr Soumitra Pathare, these are just some of the indicators of mental distress and should be looked out for. Moreover, Lakshmi Sreenivasan highlighted the need to shift from the medical perspective on mental illness to a holistic approach of emotional and mental health challenges such as loneliness, grief, and other non clinical issues among employees.

By training managers to recognise mental health indicators, informal peer driven initiatives can be used to foster genuine well-being among employees. Helping senior management unlearn biases can also improve company culture, explained Rachana Iyer. Mental health is pushed to the side when it comes to project targets and productivity; in order to stop this, leadership must recognize that employee welfare is not simply a supplementary concern, but also a safety issue. By framing mental health as a core safety issue, leaders can ensure that employee wellbeing is a key part of the organisation, benefiting both individuals and the organisation as a whole.

### **Regulating the informal sector**

Over 90% of India's workforce works in the informal sector often for vendors that then work with large companies. As Dr Pathare stated, employers need to take care of all employees - not just those on payroll, but those employed by vendors and who do work for them too. Companies in the formal sector closely engage with informal sector workers, and it is their responsibility to ensure that all workers are being treated fairly. Many informal workers do not have access to basic healthcare, and that is a good starting point towards bettering the mental health situation of the country. An example Dr Pathare presented was of the construction field, where some companies have started creches for infants with working mothers, as well as schools for workers' children. This can be replicated at the individual level too - most individuals in South Asia employ people from the informal sector to help with their housework. Even on the individual level, it is the responsibility of employers to meet the basic healthcare and mental health needs of informal employees.

### **Conducting an equity audit**

Equity audits can provide actionable, specific insights for organisations to ensure workplace diversity, avoiding tokenism. As Lakshmi Sreenivasan highlighted, while organisations engage with marginalised identities such as LGBTQI+, disability, and sexual orientation, caste is often overlooked. Privileged caste dominance influences policies, practices, promotions, and talent management, and becomes deeply rooted in the fabric of the organisation. Subsequently, when caste intersects with other identities such as gender, sexuality, or disability, challenges for marginalised employees can intensify. In order to address this, equity audits can identify and analyse demographics to provide insights on employee and leadership demographics at all levels of the organisations, specifically senior leadership and managerial positions. "It should begin with an equity audit, to see what the demographic is, what is the organisation's makeup, in terms of the resources that we have," explained Lakshmi Sreenivasan. An equity audit analyses the demographics of an organisation to probe at any overt or covert discrimination in the workplace. This can then lead to a reassessment of hiring practices, to ensure that people with mental health issues are not being discriminated against in the organisation, or during the hiring process. This can be done both internally and through an external consultant; preferably external, as internal audits can sometimes be mired with preconceived ideas and biases that might influence the findings.

### **Develop peer support networks**

Rachana Iyer brought up establishing peer-to-peer support systems within the workplace as a good starting point, a point that was highlighted by Dr Pathare and Lakshmi Sreenivasan as well. Specifically, by introducing conversations about mental health during the hiring recruitment processes, organisations can create an inclusive environment at the outset. Senior management can employ regular check-ins, boundary setting, and open communication to encourage mutual support and vulnerability.

This provides a safe space for employees to share their experiences and challenges, fostering a sense of community and belonging, and ensuring that they have actionable strategies in place should they need help. Peer support is understood as psychosocial support provided by persons with lived experience of a mental health condition or distress. According to reports, peer support “can increase mental wellness, self-efficacy and confidence” and can reduce “mental health stigma in the workplace.” Moreover, also Lakshmi Sreenivasan explained that training employees as first responders to mental health concerns helps them spot signs of stress or burnout. Peer support can take different shapes, from informal support groups to company hired peer support workers. In India, the lack of adequate mental health services and dearth of mental health practitioners means that peer support is one of the most immediate ways of creating safer workplace environments. Furthermore, peer support normalizes conversations around mental health in an informal manner, and encourages employees to open up about their concerns.

### **Encourage open conversations about mental health**

Creating a culture where employees feel comfortable discussing mental health without fear of repercussions is essential. Rachana Iyer emphasized the importance of knowing that confidential information and conversations will not be used against an employee during performance reviews, nor will they be ousted from the company due to mental health issues. According to Iyer, in many cases a top-down approach, in which senior management can bring up the topic organically can help reduce stigma and encourage employees to be open about their struggles. Whether this be with peers or with leadership, it is necessary for conversations to occur, as they help in destigmatizing mental health.

### **Build evidence from the workplace**

Currently, there is limited data available on workplaces and mental health in India. As Dr Pathare puts it, “every employer wants an evidence-based answer but does not want to be part of the evidence generating the evidence-based answer.” Taking part in generating data for studies, and research papers is important, as this data can then be analysed to find out the current mental health situation, and then to create viable mitigation strategies.

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