Singapore

Rise in firms offering mental health support for staff but more can be done, say experts

The Social Space is a social enterprise that hires people with mental health conditions. (Facebook/The Social Space)

By Rachel Phua@RachelPhuaCNA
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SINGAPORE: After graduating from university in 2015, Ann (not her real name) joined a non-governmental organisation (NGO) as an events executive.

Her supervisor, she claimed, was prone to mood swings.

"One moment she can be very upbeat and jolly with you, and the next moment she will scold you and be very moody - once or twice she shouted at me in front of everybody. So you have to adapt to her mood, which is very stressful and toxic," said Ann, who is now 27.

"When I first joined I thought it was because I had done something wrong that's why she was treating me like that."

Towards the end of her four-month stint, Ann started to see a counsellor.

"When you're in your job from nine to six, it's the biggest part of your life, so whoever you interact with most would definitely affect you," said Ann, who left the company because she was beginning to feel depressed.

Communications executive Mary, 27, who has depression, generalised anxiety disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder, is somewhat in a better position as she can be open about her conditions at her workplace.

But she feels this is only because her condition does not affect her work output and she is able to look after herself.

Even then, Mary sometimes faces what she calls "colour-blind" comments - words that are hurtful, considering that her colleagues know about her illnesses. Once, during a review, her boss told her "you need to learn to relax".

"And I have to tell them, 'well, it's because I have an anxiety disorder'," Mary said. "They make such remarks often so you have to remind them constantly."

Both Ann and Mary declined to reveal their identities for fear of reprisal.

In recent years, awareness about mental health at the workplace has grown, both in the public and private sector.

Mental health advocate Anthea Ong said she has seen more large organisations taking workplace mental wellbeing seriously in the last two years.

Citing the WorkWell Leaders Workgroup which she is part of, Ms Ong said that the group has grown from having 25 C-suite professionals to more than 40 today. The circle, which includes executives from DBS, Aviva and the public service, meets quarterly to discuss inclusive practices and the need for mental health insurance.

The group published an e-guide in May that offers companies and workers tips on adjusting to work-from-home arrangements that could take a toll on some people due to the change and social isolation.

COUNSELLING INCLUDED IN WELFARE BENEFITS
More companies have also adopted an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) as part of their welfare benefits. This typically involves access to individual counselling sessions that employees can claim for, as well as other services such as mental health workshops.

Two EAP providers said there has been an uptick in the number of companies signing up to offer counselling to their employees.

Counselling and Care Centre, for instance, has seen the number of client organisations double from 10 in 2017 to 20 in 2019, said the centre's partnerships manager Anu Cherian.

Meanwhile the Singapore Anglican Community Services (SACS) has seen a tenfold increase in the number of client organisations since it launched the EAP in late 2017, a spokesperson said.

Sometimes an individual has family and grief issues to talk through. Very often, employees want to deal with what is happening in the workplace such as the long hours, stress or when the company undergoes restructuring, said Ms Cherian.

Companies which have adopted EAP know that social and psychological wellbeing affects productivity, said the service providers.

A National Council of Social Service (NCSS) study in 2017 found that for every S$1 invested in a "workplace adjustment" like flexi-work arrangements and means to get counselling, a company is able to generate an average of S$5.60 in returns as workers were more productive and made fewer medical claims.

In the public service, some of the latest efforts to address mental health include iWorkHealth, an online tool that allows employers and workers to identify factors of workplace stress. It was piloted last October and the aim is to launch the programme later this year.

In January, the Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices announced that people with mental health conditions no longer need to declare this information in job application forms.

And in March, the Ministry of Manpower said it will be issuing an advisory to help employers take steps to improve mental wellbeing in the workplace by the end of 2020.

The advisory will lay out what companies can do, which could include access to anonymised external counselling services, or training supervisors to identify mental health symptoms early.

CHANGING MINDSETS, MENTAL HEALTH-FRIENDLY CULTURE NEEDED
While observers in this field lauded the progress made, they said there is still room for improvement in changing mindsets.

"Mental healthcare in Singapore is not culturally supported and integrated into communities as with other developed nations," said Dr Tracie Lazaroo, a clinical psychologist at Inner Light. "Our main goal should be to develop a more open and accepting culture."

She noted that despite the initiatives, most of her clients who struggle with work-related burnout said that their firms do not prioritise mental health.

The stigma against mental health issues creates a belief that they will be judged as weak if they were to voice their distress openly, Dr Lazaroo added.

What needs to be done, she said, is to create a "mental health-friendly culture", where employers go for mental health awareness training, conduct workshops to manage burnout, provide avenues for workers to seek help, as well as create non-discriminatory policies.

They could also look at improving the office environment, for instance, by having a well-stocked pantry and rooms where employees can use for work discussions or for time-outs, said Yvonne Low, the head of Singapore Association for Mental Health's MINDSET Learning Hub.

Companies stand to lose much from neglecting employee mental healthcare, Dr Lazaroo added, as it could result in negative behaviour in the office like resentment between colleagues, shouting matches and unnecessary tension. These could lead to early resignations.

Similarly, Ms Ong listed other actions employers can take, such as allaying fears that career progression and performance are linked to one's mental health, or have managers share their struggles so that it normalises mental distress.

Ann, for one, wished she had access to mental health services like the EAP at her previous company.

"I think it's a top thing," she said. "If the person on top actually understands what mental wellbeing at work is, makes it known and introduces official policies as evidence, then I actually feel like it is a safe place.

"Rather than say, harping on the fact that you are so mental health-oriented when you don't have procedures in place for people to talk about workplace mental health issues in confidence."

One company that has put in place measures to deal with mental health is social enterprise The Social Space, which operates two lifestyle stores at Chinatown and Marina One. It decided to make flexible work hours a given when it started in 2018.

"We knew the individuals we hired came with their own unique set of challenges that would require flexibility," said co-owner Daniel Yeow. The cafe it runs has 15 employees, five of whom have mental health illnesses.

Daniel Yeow and his wife Cheryl Ou started the business in 2018, which now has two outlets - one in Chinatown and the other in Marina Bay. Mr Yeow said that flexible work hours were very much in place since the beginning to meet the needs of the people they hired. (Facebook/The Social Space)

The medication they take to manage their conditions like obsessive compulsive disorder, depression and bipolar disorder makes them tired easily and impossible to work regular working hours, he said.

Workplace policies aside, Mr Yeow said he has had to spend time reaching out to his employee's support network - family members, doctors and social workers - to make sure they are taken care of.

Once, they closed for half a day on a Saturday - their busiest day of the week - to let employees resolve disputes they had among themselves.

These measures have affected productivity and consequently profits, he said. But Mr Yeow believes that "by doing the right thing, we will attract customers that appreciate what we stand for and … continue to support us".

POLICIES TO NORMALISE NEED FOR MENTAL HEALTH CARE
More policies that normalise mental wellness should be legislated, said observers.

Ms Ong pointed to laws in other countries that Singapore could follow. In Germany, employers are legally required to carry out workplace risk assessments - with countermeasures in place - that account for psychosocial hazards, not just physical ones.

In Australia, workers can make claims for psychological injuries or mental disorders that are work-related.

In Singapore, mental illnesses are covered under the Work Injury Compensation Act if they are linked to a work accident, according to Mr Zaqy Mohamad in Parliament last year during the debate on the Work Injury Compensation Bill.

The Government could also provide grants for companies to carry out mental health programmes and present awards to those who promote mental wellness at the workplace, said Porsche Poh, the executive director of Silver Ribbon (Singapore).

The COVID-19 crisis has made the need to address mental health struggles all the more pertinent, added Ms Ong.

She referenced a study done by Qualtrics between end-March and early-April across Australia, France, Germany, New Zealand, Singapore, the UK and the US, which found that 41.6 per cent of more than 2,000 respondents said that their mental health has declined since the outbreak.

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In Singapore, EAP providers also said they saw interest in their programme go up at the start of the COVID-19 "circuit breaker". SACS saw a 67 per cent rise in enquires on the EAP service in April, it said.

"Presumably (with) the work-from-home situation and the changes a lot of employees had to get adapted to … more employers might be looking at taking care of their employees," said Ms Cherian.

Ms Ong said it is urgent for employers and government leaders to prioritise mental health, especially during the time of pandemic.

The United Nations had warned in May of a global mental health crisis due to COVID-19, as millions of people face death, disease, isolation, poverty and anxiety, and urged governments to put the issue front and centre as they tackle the pandemic.

"Social isolation, employment uncertainty, and the virus itself have combined to shock the health and wellbeing of employees around the world," she said.

"In a time of COVID-19, mental health is (what) contributes to our social and psychological resilience as a people."

Editor's note: This story has been updated to reflect the number of staff members with mental health conditions employed by The Social Space, which has clarified that as of August, they have five such employees, not 12.

Source: CNA/rp(gs)