

Mind matters

Corporates should integrate mental health programmes into their employee wellness initiatives

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Only a few months into her new job, Sheetal Vyas (name changed) dreaded going to work. Two of her colleagues had started bullying her, and with every passing day, their attack was getting relentless.

Depressed, Sheetal reported the bullying to her line manager, who brushed it aside as a trivial issue.

Sheetal sought outside help – in a counsellor. When the counsellor intervened in the matter and sought to bail Sheetal out of the situation, it became obvious that the company had not given any thought to having a mechanism that would enable employees to counter mental distress resulting from work-related or extraneous issues.

Nitika Gupta, a psychologist associated with Mpower, a mental healthcare centre in Mumbai, says the majority of corporate wellness initiatives are lop-sided, focussing largely or entirely on physical well-being, to the exclusion of mental health.

Admitting that an increasing number of corporates have introduced policies to ensure the physical well-being of their employees, Anna Chandy, chairperson of The Live Love Laugh Foundation, says there aren't adequate programmes aimed at addressing the question of employees' mental well-being.

Employers should first know how to identify signs of a mental-health issue at the workplace and create awareness about it.

There should also be a proactive approach to mental health at the workplace, which includes weeding out factors that would create a negative workplace environment.

"With the implementation

of Mental Healthcare Act, 2017, there has been an effort to provide people with access to treatment for any mental illness, but we need to see how various sectors implement them," says Anna.

Nitika says companies need to introduce policy-level changes to destigmatise mental health issues.

"Why not start by introducing mental-health sick leave?" she says.

Psychologists say being productive at work can help people come out of depression, for which, companies have to offer the right environment, which includes a redressal system for victims of bullying or harassment and continual awareness programmes about these issues.

External help

Many companies tie up with an external service provider to offer Employee Assistance Programme (EAP).

"We have witnessed a gradual rise in the number of companies that recognise the benefits of having an EAP for their employees and their family members.

EAP utilisation has increased from less than 0.20% in 2011 to over 3%. Several blue chip companies are also making EAP de-brief a part of their new hire induction, town halls, leadership talks, sales gatherings and family-day events," says Amber Alam, chief growth officer, Optum International.

According to the "2018 Working Mother and AVTAR Best Companies for Women" in India study, 70% of corporates enable employees to have professional support in dealing with mental-health

issues (up from 53% in 2017).

Invest in training

What can companies do to ensure their offices are safe for employees to discuss mental well-being?

"For workplaces to recognise early signs of depression and anxiety, line managers must be trained periodically," says Nitika.

Alam says that corporates should accord priority to "privacy and confidentiality" while drawing up mental-health programmes for their employees. "Their message should be - 'It is okay to go to a therapist, it is okay to speak up, it is normal to seek professional advice, and it is okay to call EAP,'" adds Alam.

ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH RAVIKUMAR



HIGH COST

Depression and anxiety disorders cost the global economy US\$ 1 trillion every year in lost productivity, says a study by the World Health Organisation that was released in 2017