

The Invisible Illness

Often undetected or dismissed and left untreated, mental health issues at the workplace can lead to physical health and social issues as well as impact business bottom lines *By Lim Hong Meng*



Prof Dato' Dr Andrew Mohanraj, president of the Malaysian Mental Health Association

With rising work stress and the uptrend of mental health conditions, supporting employee mental wellness at the workplace has become increasingly important. According to the 2019 National Health and Morbidity Survey, one in three Malaysians struggle with a mental health condition at any one time in their lives with an average of 29 per cent of workers suffering from poor mental health.

Studies have long shown a correlation between mental, emotional and physical health. According

to Prof Dato' Dr Andrew Mohanraj, president of the Malaysian Mental Health Association (MMHA), depression and anxiety are closely associated with cardiovascular conditions like ischemic heart disease and hypertension and can lead to neglect, obesity and poor nutritional status. Meanwhile medical conditions like cancer, dementia and auto immune diseases, eczema and irritable bowel syndrome are strongly associated with mental health conditions like clinical depression. Conversely, medical conditions

like hyperthyroidism, hypothyroidism, metabolic and hormonal disorders, electrolyte derangements and chronic use of certain medications like steroids can mimic psychiatric disorders like anxiety and depression.

Without effective support, mental disorders and other mental health conditions can affect a person's confidence and identity at work, capacity to work productively and the ease with which to retain or gain work. This negatively impacts the economic output of corporations. A white paper released by Relate Malaysia revealed that the cost of mental health issues at the workplace was conservatively estimated to be RM14.46 billion or 1 per cent of GDP. This figure is projected to reach RM100 billion by the year 2030 if the issue in working adults is not addressed.

PROVIDING SUPPORT

"Nurturing a culture of transparency and support for health and well-being issues is the first step to combating the negative associations of mental health problems in the workplace," says Mohanraj. "Employees need to feel safe to be open about their health and well-being, without fear of disciplinary action. It is important to build trust between leaders and staff. Boosting morale and resilience at the workplace positively impacts productivity."

He advised organisations and companies to play their part in protecting and promoting mental health at work through appropriate training that empower line managers to detect mental health issues at the workplace as well as offer appropriate support to those affected so they may participate fully and equitably in work. He added that training should also encompass having workplace policies that do not discriminate against workers with mental health issues but rather, support them. High-performing staff too are susceptible to burnout and companies should have support pathways in place for such individuals as well.

For smaller companies that are unable to enlist external training or support, improving mental health literacy among the workforce and practising non-discriminatory policies in supporting workers who seek mental health treatment could be the first step towards creating a humane and inclusive work environment.

BENEFITS OF A MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAMME

Among the advocates of employee mental wellness that have employee wellness programmes in place include Omnicom Media Group (OMG) and AIA Bhd. Both reported positive outcomes. OMG saw its highest growth in the last two years with increased



Penelope Gan,
chief human
resources officer
of AIA Bhd

employee positivity and improved engagement. There was no drop in productivity despite challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Their employees showed commitment to the company and continued to deliver during their most challenging years in the decade.

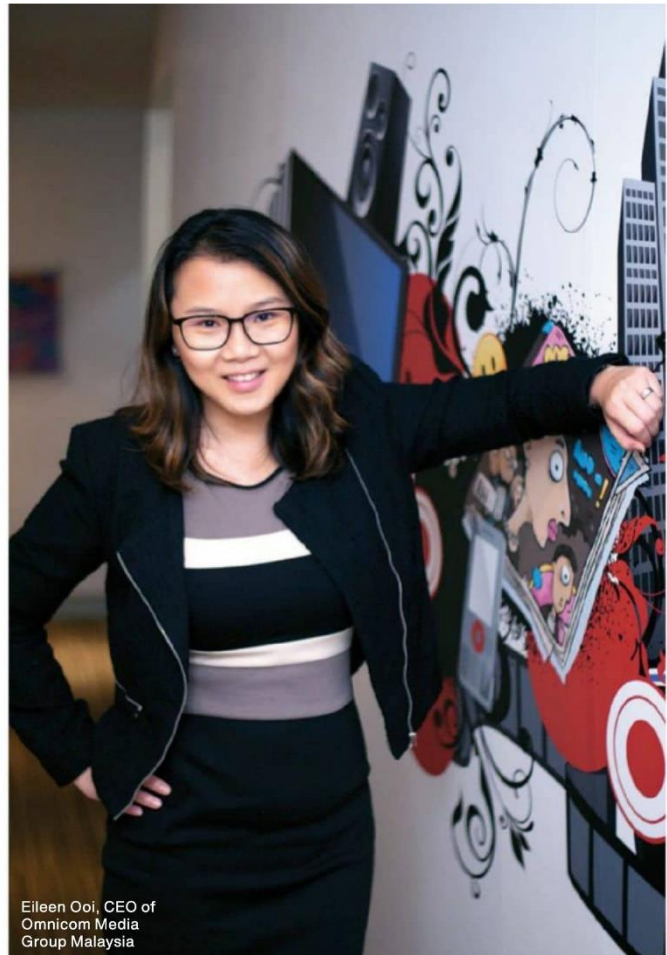
According to Eileen Ooi, chief executive officer of Omnicom Media Group Malaysia, the support they received from their clients, who understood their cause and respected their employees' needs, was a significant achievement. Their example has led leaders in the industry to join in on the conversation to break the taboo around mental health discussions, which, in Ooi's view, is their most important achievement.

AIA employees too thrived under the company's WorkWell with AIA proposition, an offering under its Total Corporation Solution business. A mental health programme is part of this WorkWell proposition. Through this programme, they saw promising trends of improvement, with employees reporting a 43 per cent average reduction in depression, anxiety and stress levels. Additionally, employees who engaged with a certified mental health professional through the ThoughtFull digital coaching support app—which offered employees convenient access to one-on-one confidential coaching with certified mental wellness professionals—reported positive changes in their outlook and behaviour.

According to Penelope Gan, chief human resources

“It’s time to take mental health conversations seriously and do our part to create a supportive workplace environment”

—EILEEN OOI



Eileen Ooi, CEO of Omnicom Media Group Malaysia

officer of AIA Bhd, 90 per cent of their employees who utilise the digital coaching support shared that they would otherwise never have experienced engaging with a mental health professional. The company was awarded the 2022 Gallup Exceptional Workplace Award and named the #9 Company in *Fortune's* 2022 Change the World listing, a testament to the effectiveness of their wellness programme and the healthy mental state of their employees.

REMOVING THE STIGMA

The 2019 National Health and Morbidity Survey revealed that only 20 per cent of people with a mental health condition actually seek professional help, in part, due to a lack of resources and the stigma attached to mental health conditions. Mohanraj says that organisations can incorporate mental health awareness to create a healthy and productive work environment that reduces the stigma associated with mental illness, increase mental health literacy and teaching the skills to safely and responsibly respond to a co-worker's mental health concerns.

Among the ongoing efforts to remove the stigma by OMG and AIA include normalising conversations on the subject. In 2021, OMG Malaysia rolled out the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) in partnership with Intellect to provide its employees with webinars plus tips and tricks on managing their mental health. Employees were also provided free access to

coaching sessions with professional therapists.

To ease conversations on mental health and break the taboo around the subject, OMG organised a fireside chat session with its leadership team as panellists, which included leaders from its agency brands. The session, *Creating a Mentally Healthy Workplace*, included a personal sharing of their mental health struggles, which were featured in OMG APAC's book, *Mind Over Media*, and shared with their regional teams. Team leads were also equipped with the right skills to manage conversations on mental health by conducting a Mental Health First Aid training for OMG leaders. A series of mental wellness webinars for their employees were also conducted to drive awareness on the importance of prioritising mental health.

Similarly, AIA sought to eradicate any potential stigma by conducting virtual webinars and in-person health talks that include mental health-related topics throughout the year. It also launched AIA Wellness Week, a week-long affair that consist of various activities to support its employees in all aspects of their wellness. These helped normalise discussions about mental health in the company, allowing people to initiate conversations at the workplace on mental health in a comfortable and non-threatening way.

MAKING MENTAL HEALTH A PRIORITY

“It’s time to take mental health conversations seriously and do our part to create a supportive workplace

environment,” says Ooi of OMG. “Mental health is not a seasonal or trendy topic. It does have an impact on business results, productivity and quality of work. As employers and leaders, we need to improve by providing a supportive environment for our people so that we may continue to raise more empathetic and supportive leaders every day. Malaysia is far from breaking the taboo around mental health, and thus I hope that many more organisations will step forward and join us on this mission to normalise this topic.”

As such, OMG has taken the first step by launching a Mental Health Guide in their employee policy and included mental wellness leave as part of medical leave. Due to the growing number of meetings, the company has implemented Focus Fridays, an initiative to free employees from meetings to provide them “focus” time for work delivery; clients are encouraged to join the cause and respect their employees’ focus time on Fridays. Meanwhile, Family Fridays are off-time for employees from 1pm onwards every second Friday of the month, to encourage employees to spend time with their families.

For Gan of AIA Bhd, she believes that when organisations make mental health services more accessible and provide various interventions in the workplace, they are making investments towards improving employee well-being and company performance. “Enough studies have demonstrated that mental health does not just impact employees’ emotional well-being but also the nation’s productivity. It’s our hope that other employers can see the importance of addressing mental health and know that there are assisted programmes in the market to support them as they help their employees achieve a better quality of life while navigating the post-pandemic world that we all live in,” she says.

Having witnessed the first-hand benefits that a mental health programme can bring to companies, AIA has launched a first-in-market Mental Health Solution in collaboration with ThoughtFull for corporate employers nationwide enabling them to better support their employees’ mental well-being. Through this platform, employees are provided access to ThoughtFull’s mental wellness app that enables them to track their levels of stress, anxiety and depression in real time, read science-backed learning resources and use mood trackers and guided thought journals. It also provides digital access for one-on-one confidential coaching with certified mental wellness professionals based on their personal needs. The mental health coverage also covers the cost of consultation, medication and treatment by physicians and psychiatrists due to mental health conditions.

What Do the Employees Say?

Four individuals under Omnicom Media Group and AIA share the benefits of having access to mental wellness programmes or initiatives

Mandy Law, buying manager, OMD Malaysia: I am grateful for OMG’s Mental Wellness Day. Scheduling time to attend mental health talks, health screenings and wellness activities provided me some stress relief. It helped me cope with the feelings of isolation and burnout, especially during the pandemic. I truly believe that employees whose mental well-being are prioritised are more productive with better mind clarity.

See Ying Lee, manager, PHD Malaysia: While one day might not solve heavy underlying problems that lead to burnout, the wellness programme helped me to recharge and de-stress and provided me the time to focus on relieving stress, relax and have fun to prevent burnout. By staying mentally healthy, I am a happier and healthier person not just at the workplace but also in my daily life.

Shelvei Yong, director, Annalect Malaysia: I initially intended to utilise the consultation sessions for parenting my teen. But in the process, I was made aware that I could be the one who needed attention instead. The programme helped me overcome hurdles to self-discovery and diagnosis for improved mental health. It drastically changed my perception and awareness of my mental health and well-being. I think this awareness changed my social dynamics and how I prioritise mental health.

Anonymous, AIA Malaysia: Most importantly for me, the programme indicates our management’s understanding and support, acknowledging that employees may have issues surrounding mental health. Having an external party to reach out to when facing overwhelming circumstances, competing priorities and multiple deadlines have been useful to me as a sounding board and provided me with ideas and methods to deal with my challenges. Many of us may not have the luxury of being able to spend a straight hour for a face-to-face consultation. The chat app makes consultation possible in a simpler way. It is great to have some support rather than having to deal with things on my own.