

# More can be done to tackle mental health biases, say experts

## Continual HR training, adjusting workplace culture can help prevent discrimination

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Despite boasting an impeccable track record, impressive qualifications, and consistently meeting or surpassing his key performance indicators for sales while maintaining an exceptionally low absenteeism rate, a worker with depression found himself repeatedly overlooked for promotion.

When he asked for feedback, his manager expressed concern about his ability to handle stress, despite his diligent management of his condition through regular therapy and treatment.

His therapist, Ms Joylynn Tan, a certified therapist and co-founder of mental wellness service BRB Selfcare, said that another of her clients was probed at a job interview on the specifics of the medications she was taking for her mental health condition. The intrusive questioning left her feeling highly uncomfortable and exposed.

“Such practices are symptomatic of a broader and pervasive issue of stigma that continues to shroud mental health within the workplace,” Ms Tan told The Straits Times, adding that a common misconception is that having mental health conditions is linked to poorer job performance.

Even though awareness about mental health and the importance

of fair workplace practices is growing, experts say more can be done to prevent discrimination against jobseekers and workers with mental health conditions.

Ms Tan said she has met many people who, despite grappling with formidable mental health challenges, have shown great resilience and dedication to their work.

“They have not only excelled but have often surpassed their peers,” she said.

Tackling such discrimination requires a multi-faceted approach, including continual training, fostering open conversations, and creating a culture of acceptance and understanding, said Singapore Human Resources Institute (SHRI) executive director Alvin Goh.

“Here in corporate Singapore, there must be more emphasis on the need to balance the financial health of our organisations as well as the physical and mental health of our workforce,” he said.

The prevalence of mental health discrimination faced by local resident employees and jobseekers rose in 2022, from the year before, according to a survey report released by the Manpower Ministry in July.

Some 4.7 per cent of employees said they faced mental health discrimination at work in 2022, up from 3.2 per cent in 2021.

Meanwhile, 5 per cent of jobseek-



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tackle biases against people with mental health conditions have gathered pace in recent years.

The Interagency Taskforce on Mental Health and Well-being, set up in 2021, will develop a national strategy for mental health and well-being by the end of 2023. Among its 12 interim recommendations last year was to amplify success stories of inclusive employment and showcase employers that put in place support for people with mental health conditions, in order to address stigma in the workplace.

It also recommended equipping employers, HR practitioners, supervisors and colleagues with knowledge on supporting people with mental health conditions and creating inclusive workplaces.

New workplace fairness legislation, expected to be enacted in 2024, will require companies to put in place grievance handling processes to deal with cases of discrimination, including mental health discrimination. It will also provide a framework for workers to seek remedies from discriminatory employers, and will set out penalties for egregious employers.

Professor Jochen Reb of the Singapore Management University's Lee Kong Chian School of Business said that beyond incentivising organisations to try harder to avoid biased practices so as not to be penalised, legislation can express a society's values by signalling what it cares about.

“This can lead to organisations incorporating these values as part of their cultures, thus leading to less discrimination,” said Prof Reb, who researches organisational behaviour.

According to a guide on the Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices' (Tafep) website, people who face unfair treatment at the workplace can raise the issue through the grievance handling channel in their organisation, or their union.

If this is not possible or not effective, they can use the contact form on Tafep's website (tal.sg/tafep/contact-us#reportdis) to report discriminatory job advertisements, hiring or workplace practices.

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ers said they were discriminated against during their job search in 2022, on the basis of mental health. This rose from 2.9 per cent in 2021.

Experts said challenges to rooting out mental health discrimination include insufficient training for human resources (HR) professionals in this specific area, a lack of understanding about mental health conditions and the prioritisation of productivity by firms.

Mr Goh noted that although the specific nuances of handling mental health discrimination may not be a primary focus in traditional curricula for HR professionals, institutions and HR bodies – including SHRI – are increasingly offering training that delves into the complexities of mental health in the workplace.

“We actively encourage our members to partake in these programmes to ensure that they handle such cases with sensitivity, professionalism, and fairness,” he said.

To promote inclusiveness, Insti-

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tute for Human Resource Professionals senior professional Kathleen Tan said that companies can hold talks to raise awareness among workers that mental health is as important as physical wellness, and have leaders send the

message that mental illness, like any illness, can happen to anyone.

Such talks can even be held in schools so that destigmatisation begins early, among students, she added.

BRB Selfcare's Ms Tan also suggested that human resources departments introduce initiatives such as comprehensive training programmes to equip managers and colleagues with skills like empathy, self-compassion, and how to navigate sensitive conversations around mental health.

Employers need to foster an environment where people feel genuinely at ease in broaching their mental health concerns, she said.

She added: “It's vital for companies to recognise that addressing mental health discrimination is not only a moral imperative but also an opportunity for them to harness a wealth of diverse talent. Employees who have overcome mental health challenges often bring unique perspectives, creativity, and resilience to the table.”

At a national level, efforts to