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BONNET



Mind Matters

What every HR Professional
needs to know about Mental Health



Introduction

We are all aware that Human Resource professionals are perhaps in the best position to develop a deep understanding about people. However, this “deep understanding about people” is not well understood!

For years, this understanding about people was limited to knowing things like what motivates them and drives them to perform better and knowing how adults, especially at the workplace learn the best.

Today, that understanding needs to extend to an area that was seldom given importance, at least within organisations – mental health and mental wellbeing. In our view this need is urgent and acute.

In this article we explore the meaning, taxonomy and indicators of mental health as well as some of the workplace strategies that can promote mental wellness and prevent illness. The objective is to create clarity regarding the causes, symptoms and long- term implications of mental illnesses, especially at the workplace and facilitate positive actions.

Why the focus on mental health?

When economists and analysts review India’s economic growth and attempt to identify potential road blocks, their focus and attention is almost always on India’s physical resources like infrastructure, the huge skill shortages, and the poor quality of education and so on. Very little attention has been paid to the sociological, cultural and psychological factors that could impact the growth of our economy and more importantly the mental health, well-being and the overall holistic development of our employees.

While our business and HR leaders keep telling the world that our human capital is our greatest asset, little do they seem to realise or acknowledge that this human capital is actually under immense strain.

The strong symptoms of this psychological strain are apparent to us and stare us in our face every day. Be it the alarming increase in life style diseases, the menace of substance abuse, growing concerns around clinical depression among executives, increasing divorce rates, increase in the rates of suicides, increased breakdown of employer-employee relationships, increasing number of senior executives searching for meaning and purpose in their work and of course the unbridled use of social media to ventilate and mobilise – they are all indicative of a society under distress.

The reasons or causes for this psychological distress and resultant mental health concerns can be traced to changes in the way we are now living and working especially as a result of globalisation. One specific fall out of these changes is the confusion or the lack of clear guidelines on how to live and interpret life experiences. This impermanence and lack of cultural certainty can lead to problems such as depression, suicide, and substance abuse.

The changing style of operating managers and HR managers

Despite the indisputable body of evidence about the merits of managers being helping or coaching oriented, the ground reality is that in the past decade or more, a large majority of managers are not able to help their employees in any significant way. When employees are hired at a huge cost, managers and Organisations are unwilling to grant them time to learn and settle down, leave alone spend the time to teach, guide and encourage. Many managers are grossly under prepared to shoulder managerial responsibilities.

It impacts the people who matter the most

Sadly, these changes impact the lives of the prime workforce segment in organisations – those between the ages of 25 and 45. This group of employees has so much happening in their work and personal lives and happening in such new and different ways that they need the most help. They get into relationships, get married, raise families, make long-term financial commitments, have demands to care for their parents, they are hugely ambitious, go through issues with their relationships and marriages, deal with huge pressures to perform, learn new skills and in addition, manage other people.

As a result, while the organisation relies most heavily on this group, and this group gives the impression that it is sure of itself, it actually perhaps runs the risk of suffering the most from mental illnesses and disorders of some kind or the other.

Hence the need for Human Resource professionals to understand mental health and develop strategies to tackle problems associated with potential mental illness caused by all these factors.

Against this backdrop, we will now try and understand some of the basics of mental health and the potential workplace strategies that can help promote overall wellness.

What is Health and Mental Health

Health has to be understood as integrated health - physical health + mental health since there is a strong link between them and one affects the other. To that extent mental health is an integral part of total health.

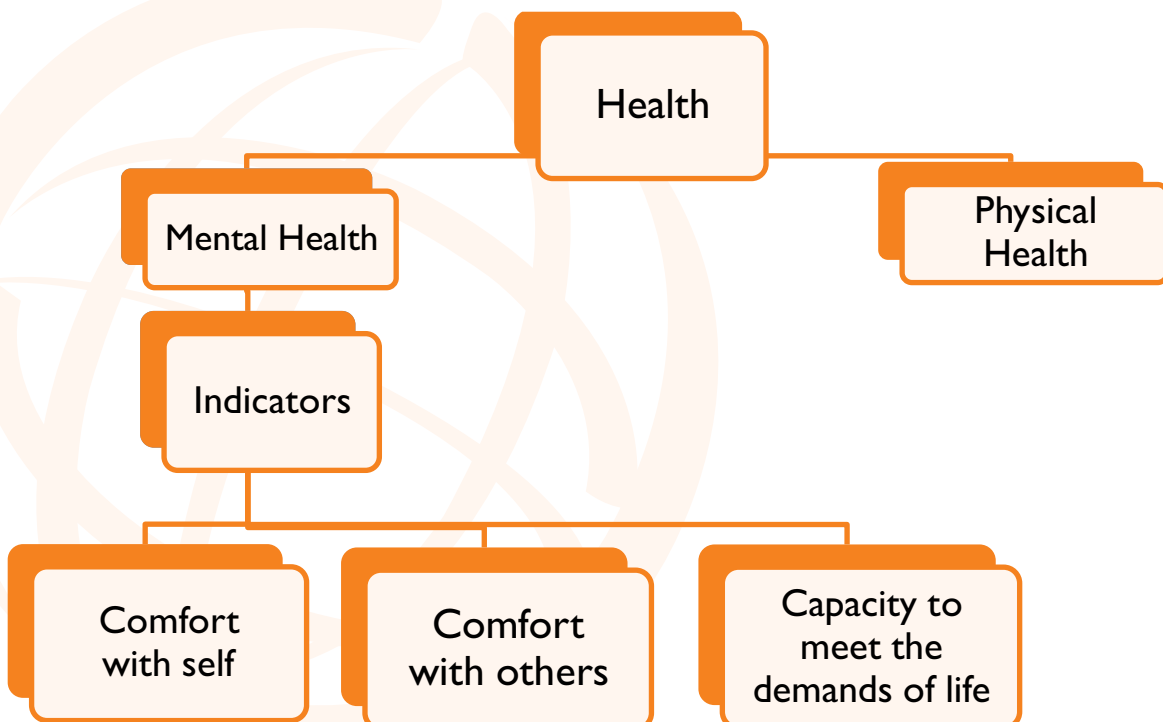
Mental health is defined as a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.

The positive dimension of mental health is stressed in WHO's definition of health as contained in its constitution: "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."

Mental health comprises the well-being of both the intellectual and emotional parts of the mind. The social health of a community mainly depends upon the positive mental health of its members.

Indicators of good mental Health

There are three basic indicators of good mental health as shown in the diagram – comfort with self, comfort with others and capacity to meet the demands of life. These are explained below.



Understanding mental illnesses

While the understanding and diagnosis and treatment of mental illness is a highly complex and specialised field, it does not prevent us from obtaining a basic understanding – a basic literacy about what it is. In fact such literacy is becoming increasingly important and even critical, especially for HR professionals.

Comfort with self	Comfort with others	Capacity to meet the demands of life
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• They know who they are and accept who they are.• Have relationships that are lasting and satisfying• They get satisfaction from simple everyday pleasures.• They neither overestimate nor underestimate their abilities and can accept their own shortcomings.• They have a tolerant and easy going attitude towards themselves and others.• They have a sense of humour and can laugh at themselves.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• They know they have to solve problems and keep solving them.• They accept responsibilities for themselves and their lives.• Do something about the problems as they arise and do not postpone or withdraw.• They do not fear the future and shape the environment where possible and adjust where necessary.• They enjoy what they are doing and make full use of their talent and potential.• They try to help other people and ask for help as and when they need.• Plan ahead by setting realistic goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Are able to give love and give consideration to others• Have self-respect and dignity• Respect differences they find in others• Do not push people; they do not allow themselves to be pushed.• Can feel they are part of a group and feel comfortable with various groups• Display a sense of responsibility towards others

Mental illness refers to the disintegration in the personality manifesting in abnormal behaviour, mental sickness, disease, infirmity, infections and debility. Mental illness promotes unhelpful thinking and mindsets.

In order to be able to assist individuals with mental illnesses we need to understand them better. We also need to understand how these illnesses can be diagnosed and the actions that HR professionals need to take.

For the purpose of our discussion, we can look at the Mental Illnesses / Disorders as part of a hierarchy in a descending order as follows:

1. Psychoses

2. Neuroses

3. Personality disorders and

4. Transient Situational disorders

A brief outline about each of these along with the causes, genesis, symptoms and the guidelines for HR are given below. It must be clarified and cautioned that these are being provided to merely promote education and awareness and are not intended to replace the role of professionals who are the only ones qualified and trained in the diagnosis and treatment of such illnesses.



1. Psychoses - Major Mental Illnesses

Schizophrenia and manic depressive psychoses would fall under this form of mental illness.

Causes & Genesis

It is understood to be caused by chemical imbalance inside the body. It is hereditary.

Symptoms

Irrational Behaviours, not in touch with reality, delusions, hallucinations, high suicide risk.

Insights for HR

New employees, campus recruits are likely to be most vulnerable. This might initially manifest as repetitive indiscipline episodes and are likely to be treated as behavioral problems by all. It must be understood that HR will be in no position to solve or address this. If any of these symptoms are presented, HR will need to find way for more accurate diagnosis and motivate and refer the person for psychiatric help with the support and involvement of the family.

In such cases, long-term medication and therapy is called for.

2. Neuroses – Minor Mental Illnesses

Anxiety related disorders and obsessive compulsive neuroses would fall under this form of illness.

Cause & Genesis

It is believed that traumatic life experiences triggered by perhaps external environmental events could be the cause.

Symptoms

Phobias (irrational fears), panic attacks, neurotic depression, chemical and other addictions and suicide risk in some extreme cases are some of the symptoms.

Insights for HR

It may not be possible for HR to try and solve problems or modify behaviours beyond a point. HR will need to find way for more accurate diagnosis and motivate and refer the person for psychiatric help with the support and involvement of the family.

Mild Medication and long term behaviour therapy might be called for.

3. Personality Disorders

People with disturbed / malformed personalities, psychopathic / antisocial personalities and narcissist personalities would fall under this disorder.

Cause

Research has brought out that while hereditary factors may be contributing to this, childhood trauma and difficult life experiences are almost always the major factors.

Symptoms

People with this disorder might think that the world owes them a living.

They might come across as selfish, self-centred, engage in glib talking, lie, cheat, manipulate and in general have no regret, or remorse and unable to feel pain of others and have series of interpersonal problems with people.

There is a fair amount of literature that points out that there are many in the corporate population who might be otherwise quite productive but might display some of these personality disorders. For example, in a landmark article titled Narcissist Leaders - The Incredible Pros, the Inevitable Cons which later became a book, Michael Maccoby talks about how such “narcissistic” leaders are essential during



times of transition. He describes them as gifted strategists and courageous risk-takers, people who inspire others and drive their organizations toward a compelling future. But he warns that they can also be emotionally isolated and highly distrustful, prone to hair-trigger rages and grandiose airs. They can ruin their company if their excesses go uncontrolled he says.

Insights for HR

Basically it is important to become aware that it is difficult to bring about changes in this category through counselling.

In some exceptional cases, people who are productive but display some of these symptoms can be helped to change very effectively through sound feedback and trusted mentoring relationships and in certain cases even through skilful coaching support.

Otherwise, in cases where the condition is acute, even counselling may not help. HR will need to find way for more accurate diagnosis and motivate and refer the person for psychiatric help. Long term behaviour therapy might be called for.

4. Transient Situational Disturbances

While the first three categories have been shared for awareness, it is unlikely that organisations will find employees presenting these conditions in large numbers.

On the other hand, the category of Transient situational disturbances is the category of mental health that is prevalent among a vast majority of the working population and the one that requires the maximum attention. This is because its relevance is fast increasing owing to the social, economic and cultural changes that the present generation is undergoing.

Disturbances caused by passing situations including the everyday stress, the routine problems of life that people face in their personal and professional life would fall under this category. Normally time is a healer and help in the form of counselling helps in healing even faster.



Insights for HR

Organisations can do a lot to help through counselling. Of course, beyond a point there might be need for referral. It must however be pointed out that mental ill-health caused by even transient situations can become acute when it is prolonged and unaddressed.

This is in fact the category about which we spoke about right in the beginning.

Workplace Strategies for Mental Health

Now that we have a conceptual understanding of mental health, we can now look at certain workplace strategies that may be adopted to tackle mental health related issues, especially the transient disturbances.

The involvement of Top management and the Board

The top management's direct involvement and ultimate accountability for the physical, mental and social well-being of employees is crucial.

For this to happen, there must be a Board level committee to review employee health, just as there are compensation committees and audit committees. This will force reviews and reporting and of course, corrective actions. The rewards of Board members and top management must include criteria that cover employee health.

Most importantly, the style of top management must reflect a concern for and commitment to employee health. This is what will shape a culture of care.

Making this happen would therefore be the first priority for HR Leadership.

A policy framework to detect, prevent and promote mental health

HR will need to review its policies to ensure that the issues around mental health are addressed within the existing framework.

For example, HR will need to determine if prospective employees need to be assessed only on the basis of physical health and fitness or if mental health should also be included.

Similarly, there must policies to address the needs of employees who display any of these conditions once in employment. This could include ways in which it will be addressed with the employee, the role of the family and the stance of continuation of employment, medical help and so on.

Psychological literacy for Managers and HR

Organisations need to provide basic education to managers to help them develop the ability to spot potential problems, pick up cues and symptoms and skilfully refer them for further diagnosis or help. This will mean that managers must have at least a basic understanding of some of the conditions we spoke about.

HR professionals will of course need much more understanding of this given that they will need to deal with it. Currently organisations are in a situation where HR professionals deal with it without knowledge or just pass the responsibility to an outsourced employee assistance program service provider.

It may also be critical for HR professionals to become lay counsellors not only to provide basic support but also to diagnose a mental state and refer the diagnosed to appropriate professionals.

Beyond this, it might also be useful to ensure that health, safety and well-being is tracked, measured and reported and all those who are in leadership positions are sensitised to the pay attention to it.

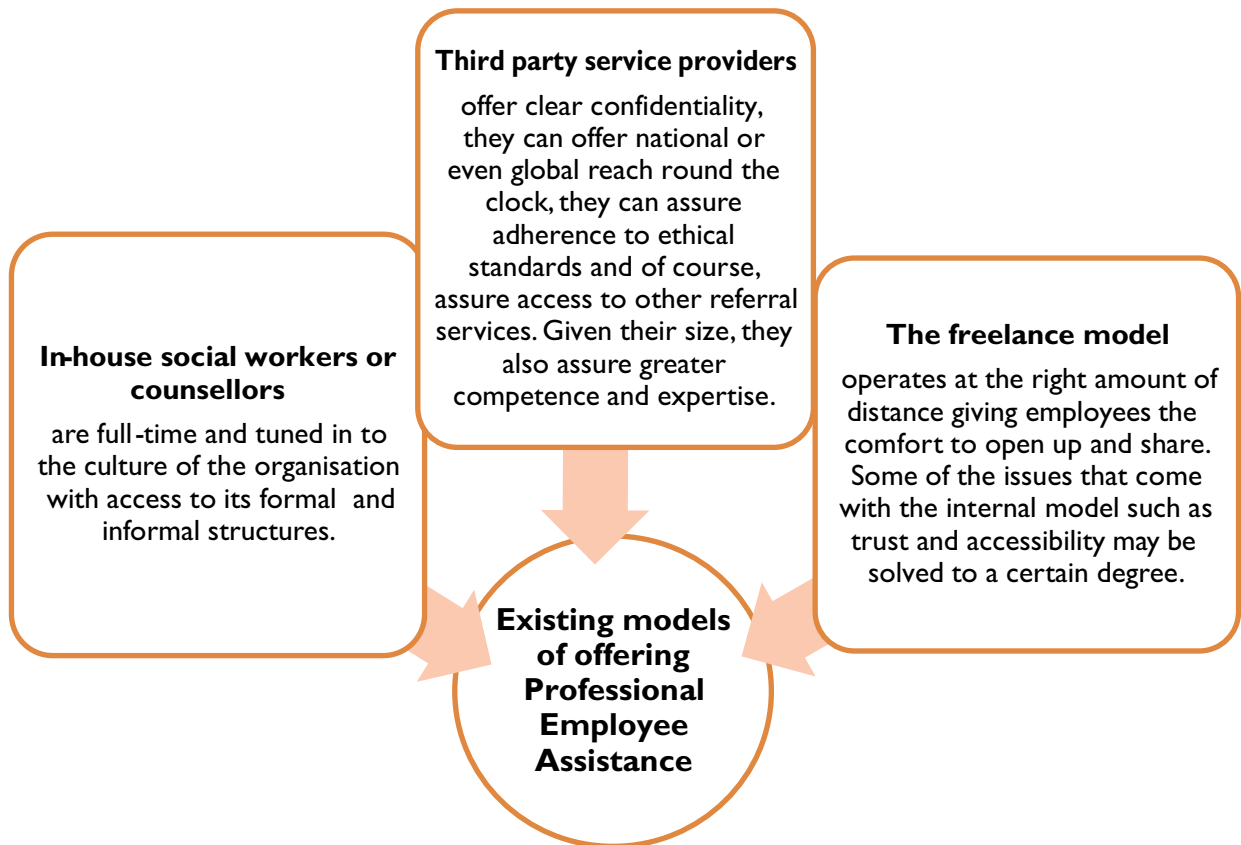
Referral resources for help

HR professionals may need to develop a referral network that they can access when needed. This could include counsellors and psychologists. This is in addition to the regular medical network that one must have in place.

Employee Assistance Programmes

Employee Assistance Program or EAP is an employer-sponsored service that helps employees and even their families deal with emotional, behavioural and well-being needs that may affect their work and their life. The services of EAP might include managing personal relationships, coping with stress and facing dilemmas and decision points, parenting, financial & legal advice and dealing with workplace issues.

You will notice that there are various EAP models in existence, from a simple in-company model that is found in traditional organisations to full outsourced phone based EAP services.



EAP is an extremely important source of support for transient issues. However, the challenge with the way EAP is now structured, it that it is seen by many as a way to outsource problems and keep it arm's length rather than as a means of accessing outside expertise but with internal ownership.

Many times, HR professionals have no understanding of what issues are addressed, the confidentiality clauses are stretched so far that things might be very opaque and the organisation may have no means of learning from the EAP services and the issues that employees are facing.

Conclusion

In the last decade, the HR function has come a long way. It is now held accountable for a large number of operational outcomes. To this end, many HR functions are run the way business operations are run. This is good. However, in the rush to become process oriented, we have long forgotten the need for being the custodians and champions of humanness. Today, the average employees is unable to trust and approach the HR function for anything. This must change. The first step for that change to happen is the appreciation of the situation that employees are in, socially and psychologically.

About totus HR School

totus HR School (THS) strives to make HR functions in organisations more aligned and effective by promoting the professional development of its HR practitioners.

THS works closely with its client organisations to achieve this goal through a combination of bespoke in-company programs and short courses, signature public programs, popular short courses and a wide range of individual member benefits.

About Under the Bonnet

totus HR School brings out a research-based quarterly journal called Under the Bonnet, which is distributed to the community of Business Leaders and HR professionals.

Under the Bonnet is our contribution to thought leadership and adding to the knowledge about people.

Edited by Ganesh Chella

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