

HomeGround

When the boss says it's okay not to be okay

Will Covid-19 be the catalyst that normalises acceptance of mental health issues in the workplace? Perhaps when more bosses admit their own struggles.



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The world knows Mr Piyush Gupta as the banker who leads the best bank on the globe.

Described as a progressive leader who led DBS' transformation from a domestic bank into a global presence on the back of its strong Asian network, he exudes confidence at public events.

And yet, for about a year after his start-up venture Go4i.com failed in 2000, he struggled with mental wellness.

"My dot-com failed and I was left in limbo with big life decisions. I went through a period of acute anxiety. I shut down my start-up, and was trying to figure what to do with my life," he tells *The Straits Times* via e-mail.

During that period, he says, "the key thing that I embraced then was meditation. This had been a godsend to me, and I have meditated ever since".

That episode was the first of two mental health issues he faced personally in his career. The second happened around three to four years ago when he had acute insomnia for several days.

He says: "In both cases, I had medical assistance, which helped sort out the problem. My learning from these episodes is that the human brain is difficult to control, and can sometimes act up."

"The best is to recognise that this is a medical condition, just like other physical ailments, and seek appropriate help."

"I also learnt that people are often wary of talking about this, because of a presumed stigma. However, the more open you are, the easier it becomes to deal with the issue."

Those episodes helped hone his leadership style to focus more on empathy. Mr Gupta, 60, joined DBS Bank in 2009 and was named CEO of the year last year by *The Digital Banker* at its Global Retail Banking Innovation Awards.

He is the second Singapore leader to speak publicly about his personal experiences with mental health issues in a week.

Last week, Mr Chng Kai Fong, 41, managing director of Singapore's investment promotions agency, the Economic Development Board (EDB), spoke about his mental health struggles during a virtual tech conference in remarks picked up by Bloomberg news agency.

A series of events pushed him to the edge this year. A cancer diagnosis, and a death, in the family happened close together. And a close family member struggles with serious mental health issues.

As he shared at the conference: "There was this feeling of heat and anger starting with palms and then sort of moves towards your entire body. There was one day when I couldn't even wake up; I had to really drag myself out at 11.30 and go for a run because I knew these were signs of depressive bouts. Even during the run, I was super breathless. It was a bad sign." He sought help, together with family members, to work through the challenges.

In Singapore's hard-driving culture, showing signs of vulnerability is a risk. Despite knowing that detractors may use such disclosures to diminish his future leadership potential, Mr Chng told *The Straits Times* this week why he chose to go public with his experience.

"This year has been so tough for many of us, with Covid-19 forcing us to work and live differently and causing unprecedented pressures."

"You read the reports of rising divorce, rising mental health stress

of middle managers, people being hospitalised, stresses over schooling."

"I can't be the only one facing these challenges. I figured if the guy at the top speaks about it, permission is given to all down the line to do so."

Despite the personal challenges, Mr Chng has led EDB to a rousing year – it attracted about \$14.3 billion in fixed-asset investments – which is 95 per cent of the investment commitments for the whole of last year. He attributes this to having "a very good team" in a collegial organisation where people relate as friends, not just co-workers.

Many colleagues, business partners here and overseas, and other "senior people" have opened up to him about their issues after his public disclosure.

He says that within EDB, "it's early days yet, but the conversations are starting, and we're looking to see how we can support our staff better through counselling, better mental wellness support".

Like Mr Chng, Mr Gupta has prioritised mental wellness in his organisation, believing that employers have to be proactive about creating an environment where mental stresses and strains are pre-empted.

He said: "That is why through the pandemic, we at DBS placed the greatest importance on managing staff spirits. We created a programme called Together, under which we had several themes: casual get-togethers online, virtual celebrations and parties and online learning programmes with gamification." There are also webinars on mindfulness and a mindfulness app for staff.

SENSE OF URGENCY

As Covid-19 rages across the world, mental health issues are being pushed from the "important, but not urgent" quadrant to the "important and urgent" quadrant

of issues, says former Nominated MP Anthea Ong, a mental health activist who started the WorkWell Leaders Workgroup to champion mental health as a strategic priority at the workplace.

More bosses are coming on board the mental health agenda, she says, adding that 52 of them are taking part in a webinar this morning to share best practices, the third such session since the group was set up in 2018. Mr Gupta had shared about his experience in this closed-door group in July.

Covid-19 has brought mental health issues to the fore.

The United Nations warned in May of a looming global mental health crisis as a result of isolation, poverty and anxiety caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

A Mercer report found that 36 per cent of respondents said employees working remotely are experiencing mental health issues due to social isolation and economic anxiety.

An April study by human resources company Profile Asia found that 44 per cent of those working in Singapore reported that Covid-19 had adversely affected their mental health.

It is not hard to see why: Lockdowns and forced quarantines remove personal freedoms and upset daily routines like work, exercise and going out with friends that give people a sense of order and autonomy.

Working from home is isolating for those living alone. Others living with family face overcrowding and loss of personal space and time, balancing caregiving and work.

The pandemic has blurred the distinction between home and workplace. Where previously people went to work and left their personal or family struggles at home, working from home means those issues become visible and front and centre to colleagues and bosses.

REDUCING STIGMA

In that sense, the pandemic may

offer an opportunity to finally achieve what decades of mental health advocacy have failed to do: Normalise acceptance of and support for mental health conditions at the workplace.

While most employers have strong benefits and support systems for those with physical illness, mental illness tends to be treated differently and discriminated against.

For example, it was only in January that it was reported that tripartite guidelines were issued making it discriminatory to ask job applicants to declare their mental health conditions without good reason.

Last month, a tripartite advisory on mental well-being at workplaces was issued. It suggests that employers appoint mental wellness champions; provide access to counselling services; train managers to spot signs of mental distress; and have a work-life harmony policy to provide clarity on after-hours work communication.

In October, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced the setting up of an inter-agency Covid-19 Mental Wellness Taskforce to review and coordinate the national response to mental health needs arising from the pandemic.

Such attention from the top is pivotal to having mental health issues acknowledged and provided for at the workplace.

Ms Yohanna Abdullah, 53, is a rehabilitation executive at non-profit Club Heal, where she runs expressive arts therapy and support groups for people with mental illness.

She has lived with bipolar disorder for 22 years, and says an understanding boss and colleagues make a big difference to whether people with mental health issues can integrate into the workforce.

She says: "Mentally ill people often feel like they are not normal and are stigmatised. When the boss speaks openly on mental health issues, including their own, we feel more accepted."

"I have been very lucky to have employers who see what I can do despite my mental health condition, and colleagues who support me. Many of us can live and work productively with support, just like everybody else."

Mental health problems can be characterised as stigmatised identities, which carry negative traits people do not want to be associated with. Thus, they do not disclose their conditions.

But when bosses reveal their own struggles, they send a different signal to the organisation, reducing the stigma. They also show one can live with a mental health problem and be high-performing at work – just as someone with a physical illness, say, diabetes, can excel.

This is important in Singapore's context, where awareness and understanding of mental health issues remain low.

A 2016 study found that nearly nine in 10 employees with mental health conditions never seek help because of the stigma.

A 2017 Public Attitudes Survey by the National Council of Social Service found that one in two people admitted to having little knowledge of mental health conditions. Despite the lack of knowledge, four in 10 expressed views like "Lack of discipline and willpower is one of the main causes of mental health issues", or "Persons with mental health issues should not be given responsibility".

Such views spring from a misunderstanding of mental health issues that catastrophises such conditions.

In fact, in Singapore, one in seven people has experienced a mental health condition (defined as a mood, anxiety or alcohol-use disorder) in his lifetime.

Various studies estimate that during this pandemic, one-third to half of employees report deteriorating mental health.

In any case, most workers will face stressful periods in their lives – coping with illness of self or loved ones, death of family members, divorce, parenting issues, relocation, change of jobs and other disruptions. Many would benefit from support during these periods to remain optimal at work.

Human resource professionals say that having mental health issues openly acknowledged is good for the workforce. It allows workers to feel more supported, which improves performance; gives organisations a clearer picture of the health of its human capital; and fosters greater trust.

One of those who believe strongly in the need to normalise acceptance of mental health issues is Mr Hsieh Fu Hua, 70, who chairs the National University of Singapore's Board of Trustees, and has served as chief executive of the Singapore Exchange and as president of Temasek.

He has long been an advocate for this issue, after seeing his own children struggle with depression. To better appreciate mental health challenges and treatment, he went for psychotherapy around 2011 and found it useful in helping him gain self-awareness and understanding of his family's situation.

And when a beloved pet dog was brutally run over by a car before his eyes in 2015, the resulting anger and flashbacks sent him to seek psychiatric help.

When he was put up for the post of United Overseas Bank chairman in 2013, he had to fill in a form which asked if he had sought mental health treatment. Without hesitation, he answered "yes".

Recounting the incident, Mr Hsieh says: "The legal secretary was shocked. How can you declare such a thing? But I told them, I have to; it is true."

That declaration did not cost him the chairman post, and no one ever suggested that it might affect his ability to perform his duties.

He muses: "Mental health issues are the scourge of our time. They remain stigmatised when it is human and natural for all of us to feel that we cannot cope with things. One has to constantly push so that mental health issues are accepted and acknowledged."

He hopes to see the day mental illness is treated the way physical illness is at the workplace: as a natural part of life, and workers with these conditions are supported in a way that lets them contribute fully.

"For example, we are all susceptible to coughs and colds and need time off. From time to time in life, we will need to care for our mental well-being."

"Many people live with chronic conditions like hypertension and diabetes and are productive workers; similarly, people with mental health issues like depression and anxiety can remain productive workers, with treatment and management."

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