

SINGAPORE

In the relentless and highly competitive corporate culture of Singapore, those with mental health conditions often feel the need to keep their struggles a secret.

Fears of being overlooked or dismissed due to others' beliefs that equate mental struggles with weakness or inadequacy often compel employees to try and keep up a brave front while at work. But the lack of support can lead to further burnout, decreased job satisfaction and poor performance.

A 2023 study by Duke-NUS Medical School and the

Institute of Mental Health suggested that people with anxiety and depression here could be costing Singapore nearly \$6 billion a year – or about 2.9 per cent of the nation's gross domestic product – in terms of absenteeism, reduced productivity and use of healthcare resources.

Tackling stigma and discrimination can encourage open conversations, provide much-needed support for employees, and cultivate a more resilient workforce.

The *Straits Times* looks at what can be done to build a more inclusive workplace for those with mental health issues.

Attitudes have improved, but fear of mental health stigma at work still persists



Lee Yi Ying
Correspondent

Stuck in a toxic relationship, Amanda suffered a miscarriage while still reeling from the loss of someone dear to her during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The 30-year-old, who declined to give her real name, was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder after suffering from a miscarriage in 2022.

She was plagued by frequent, intense flashbacks and panic attacks. Unable to function, Amanda was forced to take a six-month break from work in the finance sector. But upon her return, her supervisor chastised her for not being resilient.

"She told me that she had gone through her own mental health struggles before, and she didn't need professional help. The instruction was that I was weak for needing help and being away for so long," said Amanda.

Dismissed, she submitted feedback to the human resources (HR) department on what her supervisor had said.

Although she had opted not to

lodge an official complaint out of fear of ruffling more feathers, the damage had already been done.

"Previously, she would be very active about my development but, after the incident, my manager didn't help me the way she used to," said Amanda.

While overt discrimination, such as firing or not hiring purely because people have a mental health condition, has become less common over the years, experiences like Amanda's still remain, noted mental health patients and advocates.

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For example, some employers were uncomfortable with hiring individuals with mental health conditions because they were unsure what to do if an employee had a breakdown at work or threatened self-harm, said Ms Poh.

"But because of increased awareness, employers are now more open to the idea of hiring, promoting and retaining employees with mental health issues. They just need more guidance on how to handle such issues at work."

EVOLVING ATTITUDES

The Covid-19 pandemic has cast a spotlight on mental well-being in the workplace and the need for more support for workers.

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stitute (SHR) president D.N. Prasad said the institute has seen companies offering more wellness programmes and employee assistance services.

"There have all made the workplace more friendly for those with mental health conditions.

According to the Fair Employment Practices Report 2023 by MOM, the proportion of job seekers who faced discrimination during their job search decreased from 8 per cent in 2022 to 2.9 per cent in 2023.

Discriminatory behaviour included instances where applicants were asked about their mental health history even though it was irrelevant to the job and derogatory remarks made about their mental health issues during interviews.

Cases of workplace discrimination related to mental health declined from 4.7 per cent in 2022 to 1.6 per cent in 2023. Instances of unfair treatment were found in areas like salary, workload distribution and bonuses.

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On one occasion, a superior remarked that she found it hard to believe an employee had mental health issues, as the person appeared to be logical.

"It shows me how much she doesn't know about mental health, as there are many people with mental health conditions (who) can be very high functioning," said Rachel.

Owing to her boss' biases, Rachel is unwilling to disclose that she was diagnosed with psychosis in 2005, even when she struggles at work on some days. She fears she will face obstacles in her career growth.

Mr Theodorick Chew, co-founder of mental health solutions company Intellect, pointed out that stigma feeds into discrimination.

"In a scenario of a promotion, stigma would be having the assumption that an employee's condition will affect their performance. Discrimination would be to actively overlook or deny a promotion purely based on the assumptions about their capabilities, rather than their actual performance."

It is important to not stigmatise in the past.

SHR's Mr Prasad said, "Biases tend to stem from lack of awareness and education, rather than malice. The key to reducing it lies in fostering a culture where performance is assessed objectively, and support is offered based on individual needs, not assumptions."

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MORE GUIDANCE NEEDED

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WALKING THE TALK

Some companies have all these policies, and they put their values up on the wall. But it's not reflected on the ground. We don't want that. We want to actually know our people, and we do that by having conversations.

MS PORSCHE POH, executive director of mental health charity Silver Ribbons.

MS DEBBIE NG, Singapore Pool's senior director of people and culture.

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STAYING SANE AT WORK

How three bosses set the tone at work by embracing vulnerability



Joyce Tee
Senior Health Correspondent

Leaders are accustomed to having power at their fingertips, but they often struggle with the paradox of embracing both authority and vulnerability.

Yet, reconciling these opposing forces can help inspire trust and connection and create a psychologically safe environment in the workplace.

Here are three leaders who have gone through tough times and show that it is more than okay to be vulnerable.

MSIEH FU HUA: HE WENT IN SEARCH OF MEANING AFTER TOUGH CHILDHOOD, JOB LOSS

When Mr Hsieh Fu Hua became chairman of UOB in 2013, he had to fill in an application form, which included a question on whether he had sought help at a mental health institution.

"He replied 'yes'."

The company secretary came into my office (after looking through the form). She was shocked (and she said "Surely, you don't mean it, right?"), he said, with a laugh.

"If I having done what I have done in my career, can't even stand up to say something openly and honestly, can you expect others to do the same?"

The finance industry veteran, 75, who has his own charity, Binjai-Tree, has co-founded several non-profit and business organisations, including NUS and sovereign wealth fund GIC.

He started his career in merchant banking and capital markets in 1974 when he joined Morgan Grenfell Asia Holdings upon graduation, rising to head the organisation by 1985.

He subsequently served as group managing director of BNP Prime Peregine Group Hong Kong.

Chief executive of the Singapore Exchange, president of Temasek, chairman of Tiger Airways, chairman of UOB and chairman of Asia Capital Insurance Group.

In 1993, Mr Hsieh found himself out of work after a public fallout over management control with his employer that led to him resigning from Morgan Grenfell Asia Holdings, together with four other directors.

The Commercial Affairs Department was breathing down his neck because several allegations had been made against him, he said.

"I didn't get into things like 'Was I depressed at that time?'. I was humiliated. I was not sure if I was depressed, because you have to carry on day by day, especially as a leader," said Mr Hsieh.

Someone suggested that he take long walks, and he did. "You realise how refreshed you are, and (you feel) much less burdened," he said.

In 1993, he co-founded boutique corporate finance firm Prime Partners.

To cope with the stress of everything that was happening, he went in search of meaning and spirituality, and found meditation



Mr Hsieh Fu Hua, a finance industry veteran, says mental health issues should be something people can talk about, and he is attuned to how staff are doing. ST PHOTO: NG SIK LIAN

In Myanmar in 1994. He has been practicing it ever since.

He was not always so open to talking about mental health.

In 2018, he co-founded Caregivers Alliance, which provides training and support for caregivers of people with mental illness, and was challenged by his son to go for psychotherapy himself to see what it was like.

It led to about 40 sessions of psychotherapy at the Institute of Mental Health.

This made him willing to talk about mental health and how he deals with his own challenges, if only to help others see that it is part of everyday life, and something that one can learn to manage or, if needed, seek help for.

Mental health issues should be something that people can talk about, Mr Hsieh said. Mental and physical health are closely linked, and mental health is not a binary condition but rather a constantly fluctuating aspect of overall well-being, or what he terms an evolving state of mind.

"It's like saying you've never been sick. How can it be possible? Everyone has been sick at one time. Then the question is, how sick? Is it chronic... Are you able to work or not?" he said.

"We are all weak at different times in different ways, and therefore, how do you care for yourself so that you don't actually get into a deeper funk?"

Mr Hsieh, who grew up in a modest three-room Singapore Improvement Trust flat, had a difficult childhood marked by his mother's suicide attempt.

"School was really, for me, the high point, because going home

was not the high point... and then, of course, playing with your neighbours," he said.

"And how did I go through that (childhood) and come out not too bad for it? Not too bad, because you actually have to put the ghost behind you as you journey on in life."

He recalls confiding in an elder cousin. Although his cousin offered no solutions, the act of unburdening himself helped him cope.

"I remember it so well, because who do you talk to about your family's darkest secrets?" said Mr Hsieh. "The idea of counselling is partly unburdening, and not anything giving you an answer. It's to be able to talk it out."

As a boss, he says he is attuned to how his staff are doing.

"Generally, I'll ask people: 'How are you sleeping? How are you resting?'. Sometimes, it's a public crisis, sometimes it's a private crisis. How do you give them the kind of belief to carry on, both at work and at home?" said Mr Hsieh.

"You can actually be supportive of them. And if the boss is supportive, everybody else will fall in line. Generally speaking, the tone is set from the top."

NOT GIVING IN TO DESPAIR

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JAMES CHANG: START-UP HE CO-FOUNDED FAILED AND LEFT HIM WITH \$273 IN THE BANK

At 34, Mr James Chang started a company with a partner, spent four years building it and then had to leave the business because it was not making money.

"I had to sort of restart my corporate career (at the age of 38)," said Mr Chang, who is now 49 and the vice-president and general manager for Asia at global diabetes care firm Embecta.

"It's a very painful experience to want to give up something that you started and put all your heart and soul into, but it didn't work out. After that, you (have to) climb your way back up to just even the normal level of comfort."

At the time, his two children, who are now 12 and 16, were very young.

"I remember there was one time I literally had \$273 left in my bank. You've failed in something you tried to do so that's when you start to have a lot of self-doubt."

He added: "You do get stuck in the rumination... and then you realise that it's going to be a long, hard road ahead to recovery and it can work only if you start putting



Mr James Chang, vice-president and general manager for Asia at Embecta, says having a positive feedback culture is key to resolving a lot of conflicts. ST PHOTO: JASON GUAY

one foot in front of the other and start... climbing out of this hole."

He did not know it then, but the pivotal career setback provided a crucible moment that helped him understand himself on a deeper level. It taught him resilience and empathy, and made him more motivated to succeed in what he does.

"It helped me to see that sometimes, people do go through very tough times," he said.

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Mr Benjamin Boh, managing director of McDonald's Singapore, says his own mental health journey helped him to be a better boss. There is an open culture at McDonald's Singapore that encourages feedback, and an "I Choose Happy" mental wellness programme that allows staff to take time off without a medical certificate if they feel they could not cope that day. His workplace was also adjusted, with his team's wellness filling in for him. On top of that, his boss did not penalise him during his performance appraisal.

Mr Benjamin Boh, 42, recalls being overwhelmed with sadness and anxiety when he had farewelled to his wife and his daughter, who was then a few months old, at an airport in Japan in 2019.

He had quit his job in Singapore to join McDonald's Japan as a consultant to be with his wife, who had moved there to work as a recruiter. Now, she and their baby were returning to Singapore, where the family could get help with childcare.

"I was going through a tough time there, away from home... I felt a bit lost," he said.

He took up his wife's suggestion of seeing a therapist to better understand himself. It was difficult because he had been a commando in national service and was the sort of person who was always confident about handling challenges. But therapy helped him see the need to acknowledge his emotions rather than fight or suppress them.

"He managed to return home in 2019 with a new position as chief operating officer of McDonald's Singapore, a role that took the in-

trovert from managing one employee in Japan to managing nearly 10,000 people here.

Then came the Covid-19 pandemic, and the inevitable chaos every time an outlet worker caught the virus and the store had to be closed temporarily.

When Singapore closed its borders because of the pandemic, half of McDonald's Singapore's Malaysian workforce stayed. The management housed them for two years here, during which their hopes of seeing their families were dashed as the virus evolved.

"There were a lot of new things happening at the same time... I thought I was supposed to have it all together and know all the answers, but I didn't."

Mr Boh was promoted to general manager in 2021, and took over as managing director in January 2022.

His own mental health journey helped him to be a better boss. He also found it helpful to talk about the challenges at work with his peers under WorkWell Leaders, a collective of chief executives and leaders focused on championing employee mental health and well-being.

Mr Boh said that while the legislation will encourage individuals to speak up, real progress requires a workplace culture built on openness and accountability rather than fear.

To achieve this, workplaces need to exemplify objectivity and empathy, and they put their values up on the wall. But it's not reflected on the ground. We don't want that.

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