

Destigmatising mental health in corporate culture

By [Linda Mthenjane](#), issued by [Trialogue](#)

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The Covid-19 crisis has exacted a heavy price, from financial insecurity to the isolation of remote work and demands on parents home-schooling their children. We need to have hard conversations about mental health in the workplace - or the new spaces in which we find ourselves working.



Linda Mthenjane

Poor mental health is an unseen and undervalued problem, but a not insubstantial one – according to the World Economic Forum, loss or productivity from mental disorders amounts to around \$1 trillion a year. In South Africa, the loss of earnings due to depression and anxiety amounts to R54 000 per adult – a total of around R40 billion, or roughly 2.2% of the country's GDP. On average, 36 workdays are lost to each mental health incident in the workplace, and around 26.5% of South African employees will be diagnosed with mental health issues in their lifetime. Only a small percentage of them will seek help, however.

We tend to shy away from addressing the issue of poor mental health as it is often stigmatised, with social censure the norm. This operates at a systemic and institutional level – around 5% of our national health budget is allocated to mental health, with around 65-75% of that going towards short-term rather than long-term solutions and support. This has not shifted in the wake of the pandemic, even though we have seen an exponential rise in post-traumatic stress, burnout, gender-based violence and child abuse.

Moral judgements about mental health

All too often, there is a lack of understanding about poor mental health, which leads to a lack of social acceptance. This is partly because we do not understand how the brain works. For example, if someone sees animals crawling on a wall, we don't see this as a symptom of paranoid schizophrenia – we see it as something wrong and make a moral judgement about it. We look at it from the perspective of "you can control this, and if you can't, you're weak, lazy or possessed". We fear what we can see, so we label mental illness as dangerous. This leads to shame and denial among mental health sufferers, who do not disclose their condition or seek therapeutic help.

A crisis of this nature calls for conversation and openness. Our purpose is to get to a world where mental health is everybody's business; where it's understood as something as basic as brushing your teeth. We need to see support for mental wellbeing as a core element of helping you succeed in your world.

What companies can do to help

We need to distinguish between mental health and mental illness in the workplace. Mental health speaks to your ability to use your brain and mind to function, be productive, have meaningful relationships, deal with change, and understand your thoughts and emotions, as well as the impact they have on your behaviour. By contrast, mental illness speaks to impairments that change the way you experience the world and how you function. In the workplace, we focus on how to prevent that walk towards mental illness. Understanding that mental illness is not a choice makes us more tolerant towards sufferers.

Leaders are much like parents – they set the tone of company culture and establish the rules of engagement. They determine how people treat one another, whether talent is taken seriously, and how the human resources department is viewed. As such, they have three primary roles to play: they need to demonstrate vulnerability and share their own stories;

they need to create a culture of connection; and they need to invest in workplace training and sensitivity.

Most importantly, they need to model healthy behaviour and demonstrate that self-care needs to be prioritised. Unfortunately, workers are often encouraged to leave their problems at the office door, with leadership frequently doing the same. However, our personal and professional lives are not easily cordoned off and the pandemic has helped to further collapse these boundaries.

The need for open communication

The solution lies in relationship building. The threads that form the fabric of society begin with strong, committed relationships, which define us and are part of good mental health. Relationships are the only place where, if the connection to other people is strong, you are able to see that your colleague's behaviour is different – when they're silent rather than smiling.

We need to stop asking questions like "Are you okay?". A better question is: "What kind of support do you need today?" Leaders need to ask the right questions and really listen. All healthy relationships are rooted in open communication. We need to create a common language among employers and teams and start decreasing the fear they have when they talk about mental illness.

This is an abridged version of Dr Linda Mthenjane's Tri Talk 'Destigmatising mental health in corporate culture', which she delivered at the Trialogue Business in Society Conference 2021. For more information about the Trialogue Business in Society Conference, visit <https://trialogue.co.za/businessinsocietyconference/>.

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Dr Linda Mthenjane is a psychologist and managing director of The Space Between Us.

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