

Draft guidelines on workplace mental health could be simpler, more compassionate: Experts



Mental health advocates said the guidelines should also reflect more compassion, and help to dispel stigma of those with mental health conditions. ST PHOTO: JACKSON GUHH

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SINGAPORE - While draft guidelines developed by the Workplace Safety and Health Council (WSHC) for employers to better support those with mental health challenges are comprehensive, the information can be further simplified and more specific case studies included, said employers and mental health advocates.

The guidelines, which were released for public consultation from Oct 1 to 31, are set to be launched by the first quarter of 2025.

The 45-page document was drafted by the WSHC's Mental Well-being Workgroup, which comprises about 20 representatives from tripartite partners, social service agencies and voluntary welfare organisations.

It covers strategies to help companies recognise those with mental health conditions, refer them to the help they need, and reintegrate them back into the workforce after being away for some time.

Mr Ang Yuit, president of the Association of Small and Medium Enterprises, said business owners have limited bandwidth to deep-dive into mental wellness.

While the guidelines include suggestions for accommodations that can be made for those with mental health struggles – such as reducing the quantity or complexity of tasks, or modifying responsibilities – Mr Ang said there is not enough practical insight on how these can be implemented.

“The guidelines could benefit from more specific examples and case studies to illustrate how companies have successfully implemented support measures for employees with mental health conditions. But importantly, these stories need to be succinct as well,” he added.

He said there could be a shorter, handy guide for companies that are pressed for time, with the full report available for those that are interested to learn more.

The Straits Times had approached Mr Ang, other employers and mental health experts for their views on the draft guidelines.

Ms Porsche Poh, executive director of Silver Ribbon (Singapore), a non-profit organisation that works to combat mental health stigma, said that in her interactions with companies, some have said they do not have the ability to invest in mental health at the workplace.

“Some said they can’t offer time off for their employees as they face a shortage of manpower. Others said they can’t support their employees as they do not have basic mental health knowledge, and do not know how to address the issue and start a conversation with the employee in distress,” she added.

Noting that if the guidelines appear too complicated, they might turn off these employers, she said: “Such employers would want to know what are some simple and basic steps to promote mental health in the workplace. They would also want some guidelines on what to do in case a mental health crisis, like a suicide or accident, happens in the workplace.”

Mental health advocates said the guidelines should also reflect more compassion, and help to dispel any stigma attached to those with mental health conditions.

That includes rewording some parts of the guidelines, said Ms Anthea Ong, founder and chairwoman of mental health charity WorkWell Leaders.

She highlighted one of the frequently asked questions in a section of the draft that addresses the approach to terminating the services of employees with mental health conditions who do not perform up to job expectations, without being accused of discrimination.

Ms Ong said that while the guidelines are comprehensive and will remind employers that a slew of actions must be taken before termination should be an option, she was concerned about the wording in the section.

“By pointing out the approach to take ‘without being accused of discrimination’, it now sounds a little like a cheat sheet for employers so they won’t suffer such accusations. Instead, these guidelines should emphasise that such measures are to demonstrate support for employees with mental health conditions,” she said, adding that it should be clearer that termination should be a last resort.

Mr Frank Ng, vice-president of growth at mental health solutions company Intellect, said the guidelines should be careful about labelling people with mental health conditions.

“Often, clients with mental health challenges that use our helpline and counselling services have day-to-day challenges that are well managed and are high-functioning on a day-to-day basis. Even people who are clinically diagnosed may be on a spectrum where day-to-day lived experience would be different,” he said.

Mr Ng added that many of them just need additional support on a temporary basis and could fully reintegrate into work over time, just like recovering from an injury or medical condition.

Ms Sabrina Ooi, co-founder of social enterprise Calm Collective, said there are free tactics that companies can put in place.

“To normalise talking about mental health in the workplace, lead by example. Leaders and managers can start the conversation by sharing their personal struggles, so it levels the playing field for other team members to open up as well,” she said.

Ms Jessica Zhang, senior vice-president for Asia-Pacific at human resources company ADP, said that while mental well-being efforts can lose momentum without a dedicated role or formal structure, small and medium-sized enterprises can implement small, consistent efforts that have a significant impact.

“Regular communications from executives about mental health, newsletters, meditation sessions and team activities are simple strategies that can gradually cultivate a more supportive culture. Prioritising mental wellness can enhance employee retention and talent acquisition efforts,” she said.