

## Mental health guidelines for employers to be launched in 2025, now open for public consultation



Minister of State for Education and Manpower Gan Siow Huang announced the guidelines at an awards ceremony held by mental health non-profit organisation Silver Ribbon on Oct 1. ST PHOTO: JASON GUAH

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SINGAPORE - Employers who are unsure about how to support staff with mental health challenges will be able to tap advice from a set of guidelines being developed by the Workplace Safety and Health (WSH) Council. It will be launched by the first quarter of 2025.

Minister of State for Education and Manpower Gan Siow Huang announced the guidelines at an awards ceremony held by mental health non-profit organisation Silver Ribbon on Oct 1 at PSB Academy's City Campus.

Pointing out that the document will be a useful resource for employers to help workers facing or recovering from mental health conditions, she said the guidelines can be distilled into three Rs: recognise, refer and reintegrate.

She said employees need to be educated on mental well-being and health to recognise the signs of such conditions, so the issue can be demystified and they can recognise that ups and downs are a part of life.

Employees should be aware of the early signs of mental health issues and initiate discussion with their supervisors to seek help. At the same time, supervisors should treat these discussions with sensitivity and maintain confidentiality, said Ms Gan.

“Even so, not every employee may be aware of or comfortable with discussing their personal struggles. In such cases, having trained supervisors and peer supporters in the workplace can help in spotting early signs of distress or deviation from normal behaviours, before the situation escalates,” she added.

Noting that employees who need more assistance should be referred to professionals, she said: “Employers can subscribe to an employee assistance programme, which provides professional assistance to employees with personal or work-related issues that may adversely impact their physical health, work performance, and mental and psychological well-being.”

Employees who are ready can be reintegrated back to work. While work can help in the recovery journey by giving employees confidence and a sense of purpose, reintegration should be done with care and sensitivity, she said.

“Employers can help by having an early discussion with the returning employee. Together, the employer and employee can also explore if any adjustment is needed, such as managing workload, to enable the individual to work productively and healthily,” she added.

The first draft of the guidelines by WSH Council’s Mental Well-being Workgroup, which comprises about 20 representatives from tripartite partners, social service agencies and voluntary welfare organisations, is ready for public consultation.

The draft includes a section on frequently asked questions like how to approach performance appraisal for employees with mental health conditions and how to terminate underperforming employees with mental health conditions without being accused of discrimination.

The lead of the Mental Well-being Workgroup, Mr Paul Fong, said these issues were included in the guidelines to help employers navigate difficult conversations.

He said: “We want to encourage employers not to jump to conclusions or pre-judgments just because someone has a mental health issue. Some people may not be performing temporarily, but when they overcome their mental health issues, they become fantastic employees.

“Employers have to take some time to assess and have a conversation with the affected employee and take appropriate action to help him or her.”

The draft guidelines are open for public consultation online from Oct 1. Industry stakeholders and the public will have till Oct 31 to share their feedback.

At the ceremony, 42 organisations, including schools and employers, received awards for promoting mental health.

One of them is the Animal and Avian Veterinary Clinic. The clinic has 12 employees, including two with mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety.

They are given time off to attend sessions with mental health professionals, which can happen about once a month. They do not need to produce medical certificates when attending the sessions. Other staff will cover their duties to facilitate these arrangements.

Dr Kenneth Tong, who founded the clinic, said: "Being human, I face mental well-being challenges too. So I like to practise a culture of empathy, respect and acceptance for my team, and hopefully that ripples into their families and even our clients."