

## EXECUTIVE BRIEFINGS BUSINESS & MANAGEMENT: THE WORK PLACE

---

*Adit Jain, IMA India  
October 2018*

### Depression at work

Construction workers and miners, traditionally involved in physically arduous jobs, and now even office employees that remain glued to their chairs, acknowledge cervical damage and other physical conditions as work related hazards. Employers have become increasingly conscious of such disorders and provide therapy in order to help. However, the issue of mental depression and stress-induced conditions such as anxiety are frequently ignored. Regrettably, mental illnesses have a social stigma attached to them and whilst this has now begun to gradually change, the fact remains that an acceptance of reality is frustratingly slow. Employees are therefore susceptible to escalations in their conditions or slipping into further complications. The demands of urban living with the pressures of commute, pollution and a general decline in the quality of life, have significantly aggravated things over the past two decades. None of these are likely to improve hurriedly and hence the urgency to acknowledge their impact.

A study by the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences, shockingly suggested that 14% of the Indian population suffers from mental ailments, with about 11% requiring immediate attention. Unsurprisingly, the prevalence of such complaints is higher in urban India and ailments such as schizophrenia, mood disorders and other neurotic conditions are distressingly common. The worst part is that most people go untreated. A study in 2015 by ASSOCHAM, an industry body, suggested that 42.4% of workers in the private sector suffer from depression or anxiety disorders. Some reports indicate that an average employee clocks about 52 hours a week at work. When combined with an over-competitive or demotivating work environment, high levels of stress inevitably follow. Moreover, employers expect their workforce to remain available on smart devices and emails, even during off-duty hours, undermining the concept of a complete break. Whilst it is tempting to argue in favour of strictly regimented work hours and untouchable off-duty periods, this would possibly amount to moving from one extreme to another. Every individual has different thresholds of stress and motivation. Ultimately, the only sustainable solution is one that allows flexibility while retaining discipline and accountability.

As a start, employers and their Human Resource departments need to establish formal processes to deal with the phenomenon. One step would be to urge workers to discuss their conditions and seek help. Recognition is half the battle. An awareness campaign to ensure that there is no social stigma attached to mental disorders is essential. People are reluctant to tell their friends and colleagues that they need help and the way to fix this is through a greater understanding and acceptance of issues. According to a study published in the *Lancet*, a medical journal, managers could have a significant impact on the mental health of their subordinates and even a four-hour training programme makes a world of difference in providing empathy and flexibility to employees.

A study by Bupa Global, a health insurer, suggested that in the United Kingdom over 60% of business executives suffered a mental condition at some point in their lives. Instinctively, figures in corporate India are likely to be quite similar. Therefore, empathy should override embarrassment towards staff members. Some larger employers have begun to offer in-house therapy or arrangements with out-sourced medical professionals. Still others run mental health workshops and, finally, companies have begun to encourage a better work-life balance. This should all improve employee output, lower absenteeism and generally provide a more productive and happier working environment. Depression at work is no longer an anecdotal issue but a worrying trend. It needs to be handled accordingly.