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**Mental health: The elephant in the South African workplace**

**By Hameeda Bassa-Suleman**

With depression costing South Africa over [R200 billion](#) a year, mental health problems in the South African workplace are the elephants in the office, which we ignore at our peril. Employers, employees and colleagues usually feel its presence, are aware of the issues it causes, and might even have personal experiences with it, but don't talk about it openly due to fears of prejudice, discrimination, and unfair labelling.

In a Mail and Guardian [interview](#), Sebolelo Seape, says that "Depression is costing the country 4.2% of the GDP due to presenteeism, which is the number of people who come to work but are incapacitated from depression so they are not able to work. And the total is about 5.7% of GDP if we include people who are absent from work."

Thousands of people in South Africa wake up to get to work whilst battling a mental illness they are pretending they don't have in order to save face, contributing to the plague of [presenteeism](#).

Attaining work in South Africa and then securing it is a difficult task, given our high unemployment rate, now at a [13-year high](#), and when large organizations are retrenching employees on a regular basis. The South African Police Service, for example, is [currently](#) trying to avoid shedding 3000 jobs – an industry already fraught with severe mental health issues amongst its employees.

Suntosh Pillay, a clinical psychologist working in the public sector, says the workplace must value people and create caring environments. "This is where we spend the majority of our waking hours. If you hate your job, it's because you're being underutilized, or overworked, or underappreciated. Managers must create environments that motivate and inspire people, work spaces that are safe, so that people can speak out about their difficulties."

Fatima Seedat, industrial psychologist and executive director of the Psychological Society of South Africa says, "that organisations that cultivate a psychologically healthy working environment show that employers can value and care for their employees and at the same time reach their business goals. Therefore, organisations need to strike a balance between human and business capital to ensure success".

In our local context of unemployment, poverty, inequality, corruption and nepotism, the social pathways to mental illness are many. Often employees use a single salary to support five or more members of their family back home, and cannot afford to be unemployed for months on end, or to consider returning to college to further their studies. Other individuals try, and try again to gain employment in a climate where companies are no longer hiring due to cost cutting and higher manufacturing expenses.

Individuals often turn to psychologists because they do not have the necessary support structures at work to talk about their feelings of hopelessness and helplessness; or about their feelings of panic regarding an uncertain future. Talking about feelings, especially among men, is met with ridicule. Depression or anxiety is usually perceived as being weak or incompetent, so that even when employees are aware of themselves falling into a depressive episode, they avoid help-seeking due to prejudice.

Often the first step is an organization's Wellness Programme or Employee Assistance Programme that provides psychologically safe spaces, free from stigma and prejudice, in order to seek help. Employers should bear in mind that investing in mental health will improve your bottom line – so it makes both personal and financial sense to improve your employee mental health. There is no health without mental health.

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