



Johnson & Johnson's 'A Good Day' event for staff pre-COVID. (Photo: Silver Ribbon Singapore)

By [Grace Yeoh](#) ([/author/12453256](#))

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SINGAPORE: Twelve employers were given awards for creating mentally friendly and healthy working environments by mental health non-profit organisation, Silver Ribbon (Singapore), on Tuesday (May 4).

The employers are Bizlink Centre Singapore Ltd, FedEx Express, Jardines MINDSET, Jebsen & Jessen Group, Johnson & Johnson Singapore, Otsuka Pharmaceuticals (Singapore) Pte Ltd, Pocari Sweat Singapore, Project X, PSA Corporation Limited, Rio Tinto, Singapore Civil Defence Force and Twitter Asia Pacific.

They were commended for promoting positive mental health awareness in their workplace, offering job opportunities to persons with mental health issues, commemorating World Mental Health Day, equipping their staff with knowledge on identifying mental health issues, and providing accommodation for staff with mental health issues.

“(The award winners have made) exemplary efforts in championing mental wellbeing in their workplaces ... This is especially timely, given the rising awareness of mental wellbeing at workplaces,” said Zaqy Mohamad, Senior Minister of State for Manpower and guest-of-honour at the event.

“Mental health is just as important as physical health and it can have a significant impact on workers' productivity.”

WORKPLACE MENTAL HEALTH IN THE PANDEMIC

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), an estimated 264 million people suffer from depression globally, with many of these people also experiencing symptoms of anxiety, said Ellen Lee, president of Silver Ribbon.

She added that a negative working environment can worsen these mental health problems, leading to physical health issues, harmful use of substances or alcohol, absenteeism, and lost productivity.

Working arrangements under the COVID-19 pandemic have resurfaced the importance of looking after employees' mental wellbeing.

In an online survey conducted by Silver Ribbon in April last year, one in four experienced "low mood, anxiety and loneliness more than usual", said Ms Lee.

Clients who attended Silver Ribbon's complimentary online emotional support shared that they felt "stressed out while working from home, handling household chores and taking care of their loved ones", she added.

Employers also said that their employees requested Silver Ribbon's assistance to handle crises and conduct talks for them.

WALKING THE TALK

Beyond seeking help from Silver Ribbon, employers who received the award have their own mental wellbeing initiatives.



Rio Tinto's employees attending mental health awareness talks pre-COVID. (Photo: Silver Ribbon Singapore)

At Rio Tinto, a global mining company, leaders and employees get mental health training to recognise "psychosocial hazards", so they can notice a problem and extend help before it develops, said Karina Gistelinc, vice president for minerals sales and marketing.

The company also has peer support programmes with "specially-trained" employees playing a pivotal role to support fellow colleagues, as those who are in distress are "more likely to reach out to friends and colleagues than to use more formal support programmes", she added.

In the company's Singapore office, Rio Tinto has an Employee Assistance Programme that makes it easier for colleagues and their families to access professional psychologists for help.



Employees learn about mental illness and how to cope with them at a mental health training at Jardine Cycle & Carriage. (Photo: Jardines MINDSET)

Similarly at Jardines MINDSET, employees are encouraged to use their 24-hour anonymous counselling service.

Managers and HR personnel are also trained in “mental health first-aid”, while managers are encouraged to “exercise discretion” in giving team members time off due to mental health related issues, said Jeffery Tan, CEO of Jardines MINDSET.

“During these scenarios, it might be difficult for employees to produce an MC (medical certificate), but this shouldn’t stop them from getting a day off. We want to build a safe environment for our employees to speak openly about their troubles and ask for help when necessary,” added Mr Tan.

GOOD MENTAL HEALTH IS GOOD BUSINESS SENSE

Aside from boosting morale, mental health initiatives in the workplace can help the company’s bottom line.

“According to WHO, every \$1 put into scaled up treatment for common mental disorders, there is a return-on-investment of \$4 in improved health and productivity,” said Mr Tan.

“An inclusive and safe workplace culture boosts employee morale, and creates a workplace employees are happy with and thus more inclined to remain at.”

While there is “no magic bullet” for workplace mental health, Mr Tan said a large part of mental wellbeing comes down to “creating more human-centered work cultures that put employees first”.

Hiring people with mental health conditions is even part of business strategy at companies like Bizlink Centre.

“Once (these employees) adapt and perform, they bring stability to the workforce. They tend to be committed to delivering the requirements in their job role and could bring a positive mindset and resilience to the workforce,” said Ang Li May, CEO of Bizlink Centre.

“What is typically required is bringing them through a structured process, which also helps the organisation put in place better SOPs and have more structure to their processes.”



FedEx's Diversity, Equity & Inclusion online event. (Photo: Silver Ribbon Singapore)

But to promote better mental health at work, companies like the Singapore International Chamber of Commerce (SICC) recognise that stigma against mental health issues in the workplace is a societal issue.

“For too long, mental health issues were seen as character flaws that derailed careers. It’s not just companies that held these views; societies did too, and sadly some still do. But mental health issues don’t define anyone any more than a broken leg does,” said Mr Victor Mills, Chief Executive of SICC, which hopes to encourage more companies to promote mental wellness.

To treat mental illness in the workforce, Mr Mills added that companies should begin with “eliminating possible stress triggers”.

“Toxic managers should be held accountable and sent for help. Root out purposeless meetings. Don’t call your colleagues after office hours, and certainly not on weekends, unless it’s an emergency. Don’t expect colleagues to respond to an email at some ungodly hour. And don’t treat mental health issues as weaknesses.”

Source: CNA/gy(ac)