

# Mental Health = Success:

## The Leader's Role in Addressing Mental Health in the Workplace

Kelly De Jesus | 33rd IPMA World Congress, Cape Town

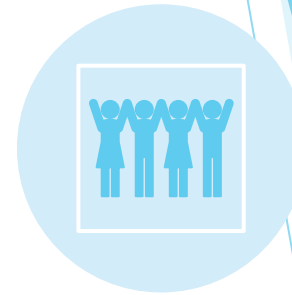
# Introduction



- KELLY DE JESUS, MPHIL HRM, MSC PM ... (LOADING), SOFTWARE SPECIALIST, HRIS EXPERT



- EXPLORING THE LEADER'S ROLE IN MENTAL HEALTH DURING PROJECTS & IN THE WORKPLACE





- GOAL: EQUIP SUPERVISORS TO FOSTER HEALTHIER WORKPLACES WITH BENEFITS FOR ALL STAKEHOLDERS

## A supervisor perspective on mental illness in the South African workspace



### Authors:

Kelly De Jesus<sup>1</sup>   
Sumari O'Neil<sup>1</sup> 

### Affiliations:

<sup>1</sup>Department of Human Resource Management, Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

### Corresponding author:

Sumari O'Neil,  
sumari.oneil@up.ac.za

### Dates:

Received: 26 Jan. 2023  
Accepted: 21 Nov. 2023  
Published: 20 Feb. 2024

### How to cite this article:

De Jesus, K., & O'Neil, S. (2024). A supervisor perspective on mental illness in the South African

**Orientation:** Supervisors have a direct impact on the work experience and outcomes of subordinates living with mental illness; these employees often struggle with consistent employment.

**Research purpose:** The supervisory role in addressing mental health in the workplace has been explored in terms of the managerial dimension, but not in terms of the supervisor's perceptions and understanding of mental health issues. This study set out to explore and describe supervisors' perceptions of mental illness in the workplace with specific reference to depression, bipolar disorder and anxiety in the South African workplace.

**Motivation for the study:** If supervisors are not aware of the effect of their behaviour and perceptions, reasonable workplace accommodations cannot be successfully made.

**Research approach/design and method:** Data were collected by means of in-depth, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with 26 junior, middle and senior managers and analysed by means of thematic analysis.

**Main findings:** Organisations in South Africa may not be ready to deal with mental illness in the workplace with supervisors who agree that they are not equipped to deal with mental health issues and their views on mental illness related to common misconceptions and stigmas surrounding it.

**Practical/managerial implications:** Knowledge about mental health conditions within the

Read online:



Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

# Mental Illnesses & the Workplace



Bipolar Disorder: Defined by alternating periods of depression (extreme sadness) & mania (euphoria)



Depression: Persistent feelings of sadness & loss of interest & enjoyment



Anxiety: Intense fear



Impact on the workplace: Reduced productivity, increased absenteeism, direct & indirect costs

Mood Disorders

Dynamic Concept

# Supervisors Role: Key Insights

## Training Needs for Supervisors:

- Misconceptions & unintentional derogatory language
- Empathy = disclosure & treatment-seeking behaviour

## Reasonable Accommodations:

- Practical & simple = improved outcomes for all
- Foster inclusion & productivity

## Benefits of Supporting Mental Health:

- Evidence from the paper: stable employees with a history of mental illness often outperform their peers
- Effective management leads to better project outcomes

# Points to Ponder

- ▶ During the Study various “Case Studies” were presented to participants
- ▶ Some were indicative of illness as per DSM-V criteria others were “control” studies
- ▶ The three main questions to participants were:
  - ▶ What would your next steps be with the employee in the scenario?
  - ▶ Do you believe the scenario is situational or indicative of an illness?
  - ▶ If indicative of an illness, which one?

# Consider this Case study

- Case Study 1:

Michelle\* is a senior auditor in a large company. She has worked here for about two years, having come from another big firm. Michelle always got on very well with her colleagues. She is bubbly, talkative and enjoys spontaneity. She has good relationships with both subordinates and supervisors. She is often described as a high-flyer or an over achiever – attaining workplace success but sporadically pursuing extra mural activities outside of the workplace as well. Often partaking in adrenaline inducing activities and sports.

It is not uncommon for her to work ruthlessly for weeks on end and even pull all-nighters. When working on a top priority client, she achieves major feats in short periods of time by managing her goals. Although she can be distractible she often works on multiple tasks and achieves aspects of what she sets out at different rates.

Occasionally Michelle will lose interest in her hobbies for a few weeks at a time, she will stop pursuing sports and other activities. Even when projects are low at work she occasionally suffers from insomnia. She suffers from fatigue when work is slow, but she attributes this to lack of sleep and withdrawal from sports. She is often seen up and about in the office and could be described as restless. Sometimes she makes cynical comments about work situations, “all hope is lost”

# Study Participants

Majority of Participants concluded that this was not indicative of an illness they said things like:

- ▶ No, it's not an illness. It's a **workaholic**. It's someone that enjoys what she does.
- ▶ I would say this is situational. This is basically a **personality type**.
- ▶ I think Michelle is a very - she is an **overachiever**. She is very hardworking as a person She loves work. She loves her activities.
- ▶ I think it's a **situational thing**. Because it boils down to her work situation. And where she is at work, she's pushing herself at work
- ▶ She likes to push her boundaries. She likes to **achieve** as much as she can.



# *Indicative of Bipolar*



Manic Features



Depressive  
Features



Cycling

# Why does this matter?

- ▶ Leaders are not psychologists but an important presence/ influence in the workplace
- ▶ How are you speaking?
  - ▶ Microaggressions & microinvalidations
  - ▶ Empathy = treatment seeking
  - ▶ Stigma increases self-stigma
  - ▶ Disclosure Encouraging
- ▶ Reasonable accommodation
- ▶ Thriving Employee's

# Workplace & Project Benefits

Leveraging Employee Strengths

Reducing Organisational Costs

Improved Workplace Relationships

Early Intervention and Support

Enhanced Employee Engagement

Improved Productivity

Promotes Retention

Fosters a Positive Organisational Culture

# Further Research: Inclusivity



Authors Current research




Neurodiversity's role in project risk mitigation



Career decisions of early neurodiverse academics



Vision:  
A workplace enriched by inclusivity & well-being



It is not the strongest of the species  
that survive, nor the most intelligent,  
but the one most responsive to  
change.

– **Charles Darwin**





## Exchange Of Insights

