

Mental health takes heavy toll on workers

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FAR more must be done to safeguard mental health on the job, the United Nations said Wednesday, presenting new guidelines on how to lessen psychological strains linked to the workplace.



The UN agencies for health and labour published two documents filled with advice on how best to prevent and protect against mental health risks at work, warning that psychological distress is costly for individuals and society alike.

An estimated 12 billion workdays are lost every year due to depression and anxiety, costing the global economy nearly US\$1 trillion (RM4.64 trillion), the World Health Organisation and the International Labour Organisation said.

"It's time to focus on the detrimental effect work can have on our mental health," WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said in a joint statement.

"The well-being of the individual is reason enough to act, but poor mental health can also have a debilitating impact on a person's performance and productivity."

The UN health agency cautioned in June that nearly one billion people globally were living with a mental disorder before Covid-19 hit – and the pandemic has made this much worse.

Numbers 'alarming'

Working-age adults are especially affected, with one in six suffering from a mental disorder at any given time, the WHO said.

"The numbers are alarming," Manal Azzi, the ILO team lead on occupational safety and health, told reporters.

"We have a huge responsibility ahead of us."

The workplace itself is often a trigger for mental health woes, the two agencies warned.

In its fresh report listing 13 guidelines on how to counter the problem, the WHO highlighted that meaningful work can protect mental well-being, providing a sense of accomplishment, confidence and earnings.

But it stressed that harmful or poor working conditions, poor working relationships and unemployment "can significantly contribute to worsening mental health or exacerbate existing mental health conditions."

The workplace can also amplify wider issues that negatively affect mental health, like discrimination over gender, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation and disability, the WHO pointed out.

The new guidelines cover measures to build workers' stress management, including mindfulness and physical activity.

Health work environment 'critical' But perhaps the most important

ones revolve around the "organisational interventions" needed to prevent risks to mental health at work, including for the first time recommending training managers to prevent stressful work environments and respond to workers in distress.

Aiysha Malik, from the WHO's mental health and substance use department, told reporters it was essential to "stop people from experiencing risks such as very heavy workloads ... being bullied, difficult relationships with colleagues or supervisors."

That needs to change, she said, or we will continue "experiencing difficulties with our mental health at work, no matter how many stress-management tools" we apply.

In addition to its new guidelines, the WHO and ILO published a joint policy brief, laying out practical strategies for governments, employers and workers, and their organisations to protect and promote mental health at work.

It also sets out how to support people with mental health conditions and help them participate and thrive in the workplace.

"As people spend a large proportion of their lives in work, a safe and healthy working environment is critical," ILO chief Guy Ryder said in the statement.

"We need to invest to build a culture of prevention around mental health at work, reshape the work environment to stop stigma and social exclusion, and ensure employees with mental health conditions feel protected and supported."