- Work

Addressing mental health in the workplace

New Straits Times · 11 May 2023 · 14 · *The writer is a medical officer at the psychiatry department of Hospital Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah, Universiti Putra Malaysia

IT is increasingly recognised that an employee's mental health is a crucial determinant of overall health and the success of an organisation. Since most of our life is spent working, the workplace is an ideal setting to promote mental health, and a cost-effective approach should be devised to balance productivity and mental health.

Work stress can reduce productivity.
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A healthy workforce will benefit everyone and sustain the organisation's productivity in the long run.

Globally, an estimated 12 billion working days are lost yearly due to depression and anxiety. This translates to a cost of US$1 trillion annually in lost productivity.

Mental health problems can lead to reduced productivity in the workplace. At the same time, a decent working environment can aid in the recovery of mental illness.

Work is a psychosocial risk to mental illness. Some of these work-related risks include poor coping skills, excessive workloads, fixed working hours, an inconducive working environment and an organisational culture that enables negative behaviour, job insecurity and unclear job roles.

In addition, discrimination and inequalities at work may contribute to the development of mental illness.

Governments, companies and organisations should work together to improve mental health at work through these approaches:

- Reduce work-related risks of mental illness
Implement organisational interventions and frameworks to deal with violence and harassment at work.

- Make mental health selfassessment tools available to all employees, arrange free clinical screenings followed by direct feedback or referral if necessary, and build interpersonal skills, like open communication and active listening.
Promote mental health at work Raise mental health awareness and literacy

- Interventions include hosting seminars or workshops addressing depression and stress management.

- Support those with mental health conditions
The World Health Organisation recommends interventions, which include providing more flexible working hours, extra time to complete tasks, modified assignments to reduce stress, and time off for health appointments.
It also includes return-to-work programmes for those with mental illness and initiatives to help employees with severe mental illness return to the workforce and stay there with ongoing support.

- Create an enabling environment for change
This includes strengthening leadership, investment of sufficient funds and resources and including workers in decisionmaking.
All these approaches are essential to ensure the mental health of employees and the optimal productivity of an organisation.