mariwala
health
initiative

Mental Wellbeing at the Workplace

About Mariwala Health Initiative

Mariwala Health Initiative (MHI) is a personal philanthropy of Mr. Harsh Mariwala, Chairman of Marico Limited. MHI exclusively works on mental health and is a grant making, advocacy and capacity building agency. MHI focuses on making mental health accessible to marginalised persons and communities by fostering an environment of accessible, affirmative, rights-based and user centric mental health care. At MHI, mental health is viewed as a specturm and that people with lived experiences must be situated at the core of any capacity building work, or intervention.

About this report

Mental Health is an important aspect of an individual's well-being. MHI started conversations on mental well-being by launching a report on Entrepreneurial well-being: Wearing Many Hats in 2019. It was important for the leaders of organisations to acknowledge their own mental health before conversations on employee well-being could be initiated with them. COVID-19 has opened up conversations on mental health both in personal spaces and in the workplace, MHI believes that it is important for corporate i.e. for-profit organisations to expand their understanding of mental health to view it not just as an individual issue but also understand how the organisation and the workplace ecosystem can impact employee's mental well-being. We hope that this report is a starting point for conversations amongst business leaders, human resource departments and employees to take mental health seriously and to have policies and practices that not only support an employee when they experience mental health issues but also aim to prevent the occurrence of mental health issues at the workplace by working on the culture of the organisation. It is time that organisations move from a reactive to a proactive approach in promoting the mental well-being of their employees.

Understanding Mental Health

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"*Mental health is a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community*"

– The World Health Organization (WHO)

Mental health is not a binary state – you are not either mentally healthy or ill. Mental health exists on a continuum. It can change - move up and down the continuum depending on different circumstances - and can get better or worse. On one end of the continuum is well-being, then there is *stress, distress and at the extreme end is clinical diagnosis.*

Mental health therefore includes emotional, psychological and social well-being. It is important at every stage of life, from childhood through adulthood and can deeply affect daily life, relationships, our performance at work and physical health too. Good mental health therefore means being able to think, feel and react in the ways that you need and want to live your life. If you go through a period of poor mental health you might find the ways you're frequently thinking, feeling or reacting become difficult, or even impossible, to cope with.

150 million people live with mental health issues in India.

One in four people will be impacted by mental health in their lifetime.

Corporate India needs to address mental well-being at the workplace because well-being is not just located within an individual. Workspace environments, culture and dynamics impact individual well-being and can serve as risk factors or protective factors for well-being.
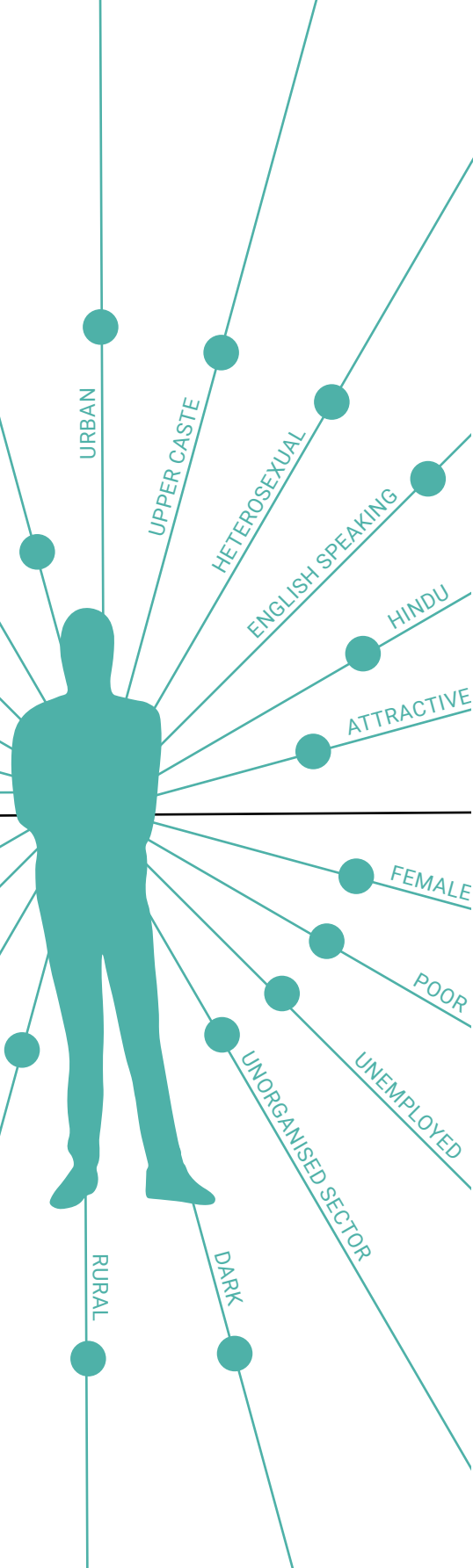
Psychosocial Approach to Mental Health

It is the idea that overall well-being is the *interaction between social aspects* (such as interpersonal relationships and social connections, social norms, social values, community life) *and psychological aspects* (such as emotions, thoughts, behaviours, knowledge and coping strategies). Taking into account social, cultural, context factors as influencing a person's mental health is important to understand what impacts an employee's well-being as well as to use as a lens to design policies and practices that support mental well-being.

For example, Management Trainees from smaller towns may experience different stressors from management trainees who are from the same city. This is because in the case of the former, they will need to find accommodation, will need to learn how to travel within the city, make new friends and learn to live independently.

Intersectional Approach to Mental Health

When we look at individuals, we see them as one-dimensional, whereas all of us have multiple identities based on age, gender, sexual orientation, education, caste, workplace location, our position in the organisational hierarchy etc. Some of these identities have privilege or advantage over others and there are *some identity locations that experience biases.* For instance, a woman Senior Vice President may have power due to her position but maybe at a

URBAN

UPPER CASTE

HETEROSEXUAL

ENGLISH SPEAKING

HINDU

ATTRACTIVE

FEMALE

POOR

UNEMPLOYED

UNORGANISED SECTOR

RURAL

DARK

disadvantage in an all-male-leadership team. Having an intersectional approach to mental health means that we understand that while all senior leaders may experience similar stressors, its *impact on individuals could be different* based on their gender (Women/ Trans persons), age (years left for retirement), location (whether they are based in head office (HO) or regional office), role (earning revenue or part of support services) etc. A Senior Vice President who is a man and recently promoted and is based out of a regional office may experience a different range of stressors than a Vice President who has been in the same role for the last five years and is based out of the HO.

An intersectional approach to mental health means that we account for a variety of experiences, accept that an event will have different impact on different individuals and design policies and practices so as to be dynamic to meet the needs of employees.

When we look at mental health from a psychosocial and intersectional lens, we can understand why COVID and work from home have impacted people differently. On one hand, some people have benefited from spending more time with family, saving cost and time for travel, and on the other hand some people have seen increased caregiving responsibilities, experience of grief due to loss of a loved one and not having enough work space at home. These disproportionate burdens have impacted the mental well-being of employees and this impact is unequal across the workforce.

Unique stressors at the workplace

There are many factors in the working environment that affect mental health. These could be interactions between the type of work, the organisational and managerial environment, the skills and competencies of employees, and the support available for employees to carry out their work.

At the most basic level, stress is our body's response to pressures from a situation or life event. What contributes to stress can vary hugely from person to person and differs according to our social and economic circumstances, the environment we live in and our genetic makeup. Stressors are situations that are experienced as a perceived threat to one's well-being or position in life, *especially if the challenge of dealing with it exceeds a person's perceived ability.* Stressors may therefore include:

- **Difficult relationship** with supervisor

- **Inadequate authority** necessary to carry out tasks

- **Long working hours** &/or the need to be continuously available to respond to work calls /emails

- **Burnout** due to the nature of work

- **Financial pressure** to continue to work due to existing debts

- **Threat of loss of job** due to financial pressures faced by company

Gender, age, sexuality, community, language, educational background, class, caste and religion can also cause stress in the workplace.

For example, if in an organisation, there is a culture of going out for team dinners frequently, then these meetings will act as a stressors for women with young children as they may have to arrange for extra hours of day care for the children as well as handle the social pressure to spend time with their children.

Most conversations around workplace stress tend to be limited to the concerns of white collar workers whereas employees on the shop floor, janitorial staff or contractual staff are invisibilised in these conversations.

Our workplaces need to be geared to meet the unique needs of employees across all levels and types of work. People with caregiving responsibilities, young workforce, women, LGBTQIA+ community, persons with disability and other persons from marginalized backgrounds tend to face very high levels of work related stress. Their stressors are not limited to but include:

- wage gaps

- workplace harassment

- lack of paid leave

- lack of flexibility in working hours

- need to continuously justify productivity

- policies that are geared for majority and not minority groups

# *Framework to Understand Workplace Mental Well-being*

Employees working in an organisation can experience mental health issues at three levels –
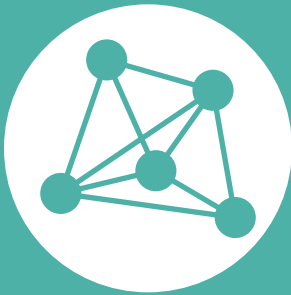
Ecosystem – impacted by structural issues i.e. economic, sectoral, political and other practices that impact all businesses within the sector.
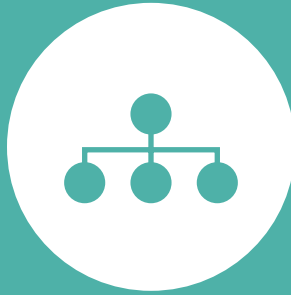
Organization – impacted by culture, policy, leadership, interpersonal relationships with supervisors, colleagues, team members etc .
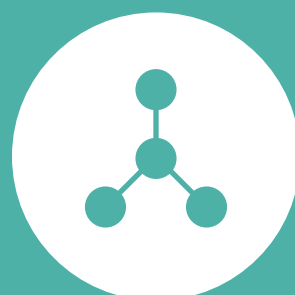
Individual – impacted by realities of their personal life.

At the ecosystem or sectoral level, there are unique challenges that organisations deal with due to the business model, the clients they work with, government regulations, status of economy etc. All these factors affect all the players in similar manner and therefore there are certain practices that are common across the industry. It is these practices that impact employee well-being irrespective of the size or location of the organisation for instance, in the Business Process Outsourcing sector, the employees may experience stress due to shift working, handling grievances from customers and the intense focus on efficiency parameters (which may mean limited flexibility on working styles). These challenges would be experienced by most employees in the sector, with some degree of variation across

An Ecosystem lens looks at the importance of the unique way of working of the sector and the need for adoption of change in the sector to make a difference rather than change being recommended by a single organisation.

organisations. These unique stressors would be different from stressors experienced by Relationship Managers in wholesale /corporate banking whose deal sizes are large and loss of a single deal /transaction /relationship can have a negative impact.

Another way to look at the ecosystem level is to look at broad roles that exist, such as Sales. When we look at the manufacturing sector, the issues faced

by the sales team may seem different from those experienced by a sales team in a service delivery organisation, although the challenges of month on month sales numbers, leading large teams, frequent travel or handling difficult customers are stressors that all sales team members across sectors experience.

There are organisations that take leadership roles, initiate new ways of working and have other organisations follow suit. These innovative practices become game-changers and industry norms in a few years. For instance, having recreation spaces within offices were started by large global organisations in the Information Technology industry and are now practically an industry standard and beyond as a way to give employees a break from work and create an engaged workforce.

At the organisational level, it is important to create a culture that is built on respect, non-discrimination and empathy. Cultures within organisations determine the unique stressors that employees experience – e.g. some organisations have the culture of work-related emails being sent and responded to on weekends or days off, whereas some organisations do not encourage this practice. Similarly, cultures determine whether progression within the company is based on years in service or performance or both.

Cultures also determine who will experience stress and what will act as stressors. These are stressors unique to the organisation and are communicated through policies and practices, both written and informal, prevalent in the organisation and impact the mental well-being of the employees. Expanding on the earlier example of emails on weekends, while it causes stress to everyone in the organisation, it will impact certain groups more than others e.g. women, parents of young children etc. Just as in physical health where those with lower immunity get impacted by disease much more, similarly in organisational context, those who have lesser power and authority within the organisation get impacted by unique stressors of the organisation much more than others further up in the hierarchy. These groups could be entry level employees, off-roll / contractual staff, women employees, employees from the LGBTQIA+ community, Dalits etc. Toxic culture has always been a stressor for most employees within an organisation.

It is in this context that mental well-being of employees is enhanced when people, practices and policies are aligned to organisational values. Organizations with strong Diversity & Inclusion (D&I) policies have a way to

Cultural practices within the organisation related to dignity of labour, transparency about decision making, pay & promotion based on performance, handling difference of opinion etc. determine the extent of stress that employees experience.

measure movement in the agenda and are led by the Board /CEO are more effective.

Organizations need to move beyond gender-sensitization workshops and establish that no form of abuse or harassment will be tolerated, as part of their inclusion policies. It is important that *D&I policymaking is a joint process* with representation not just from Human Resources (HR), Sales, Manufacturing and other teams but also from the people it applies to. For instance, a policy on flexible working hours assumes that it would be applicable only to young mothers. Organizations need to look beyond this gendered assumption and extend this to persons who provide elderly care at home, persons with mental health issues etc and have them involved right from designing the policy to its implementation.

An oganization's investment in an inclusive, non-discriminatory work culture will act as a preventive intervention for workplace mental health.

Policies should therefore have a component where a group of people / committee can look at the complaint and provide resolution to issues experienced in the shop floor or in the
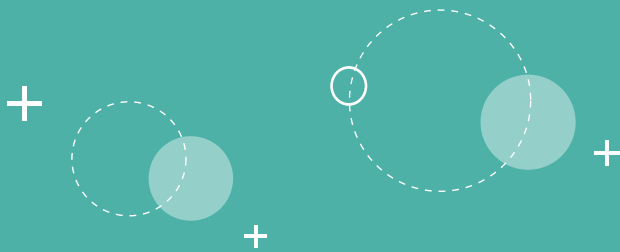
A strong policy is one that allows employees to not just access it but also creates a space for an open dialogue so that the employee can raise a grievance or complaint if it is not working as per stated objective.

office. It is important that the committees are led by people with similar experiences or life realities, diverse in terms of hierarchy, departments / divisions. Policies *need to articulate what support would be available* to the complainant during the process of resolution and protect the complainant from backlash. The best of mental health policies will be ineffective in practice if there is no space to complain about non- adherence of the same by the supervisors or leaders as there is no review mechanism and penalty for non-adherence.

Another aspect that causes mental health distress to employees is around confidentiality. It is important that organisations have strong policies around confidentiality. Organizations need to understand that employee information is personal and that the onus of confidentiality and personal safety is on the organisation. Information like medical history, family background, marital status, sexuality are shared to enable access to benefits or services provided by the organisation and have to be shared only on a need-to-know basis. Not everyone in the business, HR or reporting hierarchy needs to know about personal details of employees including past or current mental health issues.

At the individual level, unique stressors are related to the person's life and experiences, and this is where the personal and professional self interact. For example, the stress experienced by people who have lost a loved one during COVID is similar (although not same) as they deal with this loss, reflect on whether they could have done something more, deal with the paperwork regarding the death etc. It is at these distressing times that workplace mental health is impacted and the individual needs to be supported. How an individual experiences this stress at the workplace would be dependent on how the supervisor reacted during the period of illness, what support co-workers gave, what role the person performed etc.

Organizations have traditionally limited mental well-being programs to address the issues at the individual level and these usually started by providing *Employee Assistance programs,* i.e. providing a professional counsellor. During COVID, these have expanded to Friday Chill time, having yoga or mindfulness sessions etc.

Working on Mental Well-being of an Organisation – Way Forward

Emotional well being at work is inherently part of organisational culture, work conditions and management practices. While we know that multiple factors influence an individuals well-being it is critical to tangibly plan and put in place a range of measures that are within the control or in the responsibility of the workplace. This is partly why *it is important to collectively build a vision of what wellness at the workplace means for an organisation and its workforce.* This means that there should be specific, tangible goals that move toward the vision for wellness as well as a system in place to monitor and assess progress. Additionally, both the leadership and the employee have a shared responsibility for upholding the commitment to the mental well-being of the workplace.

Some of the factors that influence well-being in an organisation include:

Organizational Culture:

- Including respect for all
- Protection from violence, bullying, harassment and exclusion
- Positive regard or recognition in the workspace
- Work/life balance

Leadership style and their expectations

Systems and processes pertaining to **growth and development**

Safety of employees due to job demands or psychological impact of workload/ type of work

Chronic stressors as identified in the ecosystem, in the organization or by function or level of employees

Ecosystem Strengthening

Organizations need to *take proactive steps* in understanding the unique stressors that the workforce in their sector experience and *initiate conversations* at the industry-level maybe through trade /industry associations. These would enable some organizations to take a leadership role and act as early adopters of new ideas on employee well-being. For example at MHI, we have discussions on workplace mental health issues not just of our employees but also of employees working in the Non-Governmental Organization sector. These discussions are held with other funding / grantmaking organizations to encourage them to adopt certain practices for their employees and also *include budgetary support* for this to their grantees /partner organizations. CEOs/ business owners need to discuss mental well-being practices adopted within their organizations with their peers so as to learn from each other on best practices.
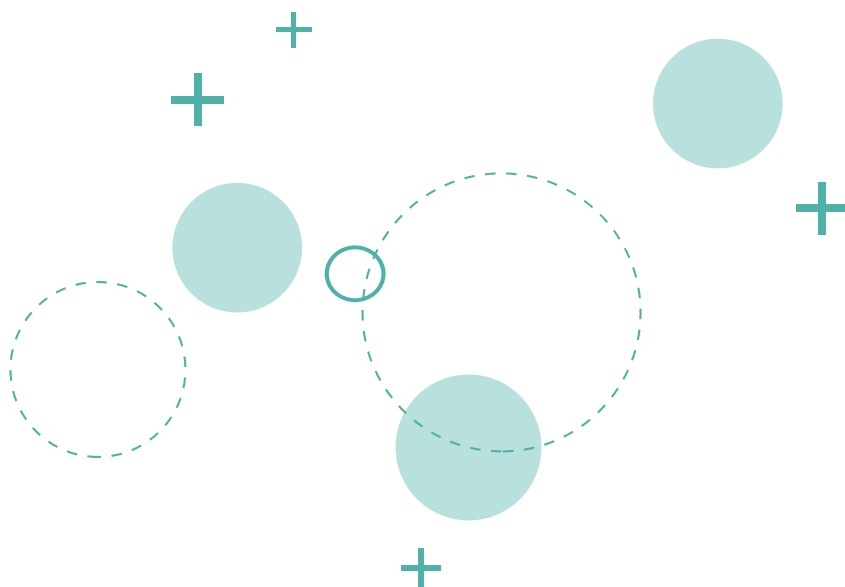
Strengthening Organizational Culture

Several workplace stressors can be addressed by *sensitized policy making,* modifying or re-creating the organization's culture by introspecting on how the organization can be *truly inclusive* and create a conducive work environment for each of its employees.

Organizations that have inclusive, supportive cultures make a conscious effort to implement the following:

○ **Having inclusive and affirming policies** that are co-created with employees. Starting with a hiring policy that is transparent and based on providing a fair opportunity to everyone irrespective of their backgrounds. For example, hiring alumni of certain schools and colleges does not just mean that the applicants were capable, but also that they may have had

the privilege of money and access to such schools/ colleges. Organizations that truly have affirming hiring policies will hire from diverse and wide-ranging institutes.

- **Creating diverse teams** comprising persons from different backgrounds, cross-cutting gender, caste, sexuality, religion, education, ability and geography. This diversity agenda is intentional, monitored and a priority for the CEO & the Board. This diversity needs to be across all levels within the organization, starting with the Board of Directors, Business Leaders and then the team below.

Another good practice is to have **strong on-boarding programs** for new employees across different levels and not just for management / graduate trainees. This could be in the form of Buddy, Mentoring or Assimilation programs. Care is taken to understand the potential stress/challenges that the new joinee may experience, given their backgrounds and to pair them with someone who understands their unique stressor.

- **Include mental health** as part of the Disability policy in line with the Rights of People with Disability Act, 2016.

- **A strong and effective anti-discrimination and equality policy** which articulates the organiz-ations stance on equality, what it means in terms of working environment and a grievance & redressal process.

- **A Leadership team** that openly talks about their own mental health challenges, flexibilities they sought and received from their past or current organizations, thereby reducing workplace mental health related stigma. It is important that heads/senior levels of the team acknowledge their own mental well-being and not limit it to introducing organization-wide initiatives.

We must always bear in mind that it takes a tremendous amount of courage for an employee to share their mental health concerns. An environment that stigmatizes mental illness or a lack of confidentiality, among other factors — amplifies stress. If we are in a position of authority and an employee has disclosed their mental health status, we must *prioritize their well-being, keep the information shared confidential* and provide support in accordance with the employee's stated needs.

Supporting individuals with mental health issues - Reasonable Accommodation

'Reasonable accommodation' is defined as any change to the application or hiring process, to the job, to the way the job is done, or the work environment that allows a person who is qualified for the job to perform the essential functions of that job and enjoy equal employment opportunities. Accommodations are considered "reasonable" if they do not create an undue hardship on the person or the organization.

Reasonable Accommodation implies that the organization is willing to have a conversation on what organizations need to provide so that the employee can perform their tasks. Such support is as an 'accommodation' and not a 'favour' by the organization. Whether or not an accommodation is reasonable may vary based on the needs of the employee, the way their mental health issue affects their ability to do their job, their role and their work environment. Reasonable accommodation on the part of the organization comes with accountability on the part of the employee where the employee is able to meet the requirements of the job on an ongoing basis because it enables the employee to meet work commitments.

All employees are not the same and each has backgrounds, aspirations, needs and expectations from the organization. *Policies and practices need to be flexible* to accommodate specific needs but at the same time act as frameworks that line managers could use to make decisions on employee requests.

Some organizations can also implement the following provisions related to mental health:

1. **Access to Employee Assistance Programs** where the employee & their family members can speak to mental health professionals outside of the organization — where "who spoke" and "what they discussed" is not shared with the organisation.

2. Ensuring that group health insurance covers **mental health benefits**.

3. **Leaves** to deal with temporary stressors like bereavement, mental health issues, exams etc.

4. Possibility of **role or location change** for a few months or longer depending on the needs of the employee.

5. Paying for a **'No Questions Asked'** mental health allowance for professional support.

In the case of persons living with diagnosed mental health issues, it is possible that *reasonable accommodation and support* would be required for a longer period of time. In such scenarios, the organization needs to create a safe, non-judgmental space for the employee to be able to request reasonable accommodation. The process of providing this accommodation and support must involve all stakeholders – the supervisor, the employee, and the person within the organization whose job it is to arrange accommodations – in order to achieve the best possible outcome for all. Some examples of reasonable accommodation for employees with mental health issues can include:

1. Temporarily changing the nature of tasks assigned to the employee. This may include tasks that have **flexible deadlines** and/or are not urgent in nature.

2. Make accommodation for time the employee may need to **access counselling services** or other forms of mental health services.

3. **Flexible working hours.**

4. In cases of psychosocial disability the organization can provide for **temporary paid leave** to the employee. The duration of the leaves, the nature of compensation, and the redistribution of the employee's work to other team members, will be contingent on the requirements of the organization and its existing financial and human resources.

# *Working on Creating a Workplace Mental Health Policy*

Reflection Within by the Leadership team

1. **Understand your Ecosystem:**
Identify unique stressors that other organisations experience in similar work. This has to do with the type of work that you do (high physical risk, routine etc), the background of employees you employ (migrants, contractual etc) As founders/ organisation leadership team, acknowledge such stressors, and put systems in place to identify and manage the stress. *Corporates need to challenge the notion that affirmative practices conflict with meritocracy.* Meritocracy means choosing based on a predetermined parameter. It assumes that everyone has the same opportunity and resources to start with. If your organisation does not represent the Indian population which has people from multiple backgrounds in terms of caste, class, religion, ability etc., then it means there are process and systems that are weaving out meritorious people and you will need specific policies like Prevention of Sexual
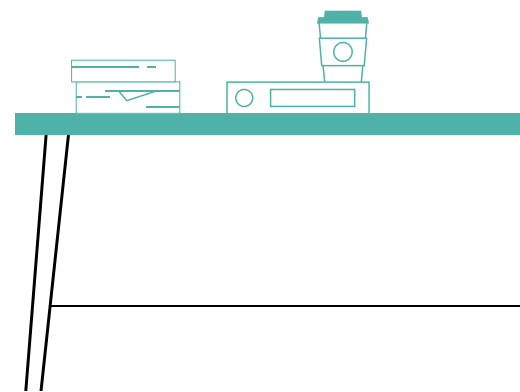
Harassment (POSH) Act, Disability, Anti-Discrimination policy etc. to give everyone a fair chance to not only join the organisation but also grow professionally.

2. **Understand your Culture:** – What do you say/do contributes to part of the culture that can lead to stress among your employees. Are your employees experiencing more stress than employees of other organisations doing similar work? Are there any aspects of your culture that you want to change? Is your organisation truly inclusive? Is the culture of the organisation discriminatory based on gender, sexuality, caste, religion, educational qualifications, years of experience or even years within the organisation. Do you have affirmative policies like Diversity & inclusion, Anti-discrimination, POSH etc? Do you have policies that cater to different needs of the employees like flexible working hours, sabbaticals, going for higher education etc? Are policies written and/or reviewed by people with lived experience?

3. **Provide Support:** – What policies can you provide as support to your employees given the type of work you do and the size of your team? What financial support can you provide to an employee with mental health issues? What is the cost of not providing this mental well-being support? They could range from employee absenteeism to higher attrition. Can you create resources that employees can read to better understand mental health?
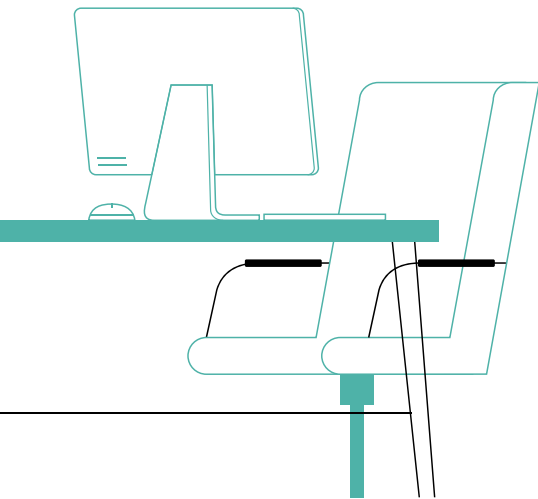
Drafting the policy by HR

Use this space to outline what your organisation envisions from drafting and implementing this policy and how it expects the policy to support your employees. Write down the broad goals that your organisation hopes to achieve by putting this policy in place. *Use people-first language.* If inputs have been taken from employees with lived experiences of mental health issues, it is important to mention that and acknowledge their contributions.

1. **Purpose & Objectives:**

   What are the specific purposes and objectives your organisation wants to achieve in employee mental health through this policy? How would you ensure monitoring and periodically evaluating whether this policy is implemented in its true spirit? *Be specific in this section and use qualitative indicators if you have decided them upfront.* Mention how this policy may evolve and its future direction, if you have that in mind.

2. **Scope and reach:**

   Mention the scope of the policy, whom it is applicable to and what the eligibility criteria of having the policy applied to is. Include components on:

   ○ **Barriers and accessibility**

   ○ **Communication and accountability**

   ○ **Monitoring and Evaluation**

3. **Benefits under the Policy**:

   Based on the needs of your workforce, the policy should contain the following sections with detailed notes and clauses on how the implementation will work:

   - **Benefits and facilities**

   - **Time-off support**

   - **Flexibility and transitions**

   - **Reasonable accommodation - Illustrations and case studies**

   - **Accountability**

4. **Grievance and Resolution:**

   Who will be part of the committee? Ensure that there are persons with lived experience and diverse backgrounds. Provide training to committee members and articulate their roles and responsibilities. Mention the support available to the complainant during the process.

Choosing the right service provider for Employee Assistance Programs

How to choose an EAP

While choosing an EAP provider, organizations need to take into consideration the number of employees, locations of work, type of work they perform, diversity within the team, existing issues that have been highlighted in the employee engagement surveys etc.

Some other parameters that organisations need to evaluate while choosing an EAP provider are:

○ **Varied range of technology options** - i.e. service delivery by telephone, email, chat, etc

○ **Language options** - are services being offered in multiple languages as most people may prefer to share about emotions in the local language.

○ **Training on working with marginalized communities** - individuals from marginalised backgrounds have unique life experiences and stressors and counsellors of the EAP service providers need to be trained to work with LGBTQ+, persons with disabilities, Dalit, etc.

○ **Training and capacity development** - EAP providers need to design programmes for capacity building of managers as well as other employees. These could be training on psychological first-aid, peer support training, etc.

○ **Extensive referral networks** - Not all problems experienced by

the employee can be handled over a call or email and some may need access to other services like medical professionals, lawyers, educators etc. The service provider needs to have a list of referrals &/or linkages which are geographically as well as across issue areas such as legal helplines, domestic violence helplines, LGBTQ+ collectives, support groups.

○ Strong & documented **ethics policies** - There is a need that the EAP service provider has good practices around confidentiality, Supervision of counsellors, around data collection and safeguarding including non-sharing, Practices around monitoring and professional supervision of EAP workforce.

○ **Availability of Resources** - a service provider should have the ability to generate materials and initiatives that can be integrated with diversity and inclusion initiatives as well as the broader workplace wellness policies.

Further Resources

1. Living with Bipolar Disorder: My journey to Resilience (VIDEO)

2. Is there a connection between mental and physical health? (VIDEO)

3. Bridge the Care Gap campaign: Where the mind is without fear. (VIDEO)

4. Breaking point to resilience- what it takes: A first-person account. (VIDEO)

5. How can I support loved ones who experience distress? (VIDEO)

6. What is the benefit of accessing a counsellor when I experience distress? (VIDEO)

7. Self-care for frontline workers. (VIDEO OF WEBINAR)

8. Answering the call for mental health support. (VIDEO)

9. COVID-19 and Mental Health: A Resource Guide. (READING MATERIAL)

10. Suicide prevention : Changing the Narrative. (READING MATERIAL)

11. Cyber bullying & Mental Health: A resource. (READING MATERIAL)

12. Mental Health Matters. (READING MATERIAL)

13. Neglected and Forgotten: Women with Disabilities during the COVID Crisis in India. (READING MATERIAL)