

Should I tell my boss I have mental health problems?



Many people would probably choose not to disclose their mental health condition at a job interview for fear of not being hired. PHOTO ILLUSTRATION: LIM YACHUI



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SINGAPORE – For people living with a mental health condition, having the right support at work can play a significant part in their recovery journey.

However, many people would probably choose not to disclose their mental health condition at a job interview for fear of not being hired, or in the workplace for fear of discrimination and stigma.

In Singapore, a study released in 2023 had estimated that symptoms of anxiety and depression in the post-pandemic era could cost Singapore 2.9 per cent of its gross domestic product – or nearly \$16 billion every year – in lost productivity.

The study by the Duke-NUS Medical School and the Institute of Mental Health had surveyed more than 5,000 Singaporean adults between April and June 2022.

The results further revealed that, among those who were identified as having these conditions, only around one-third reported seeking healthcare to treat their mental health conditions, and only about a quarter of them consulted a mental health provider.

“Not being able to share our mental health challenge and/or condition could bring about even more fear and stress” of being found out, said mental health advocate Anthea Ong, founder of social organisations Hush TeaBar, WorkWell Leaders and SG Mental Health Matters.

Still, should a person disclose his mental health conditions at a job interview?

Ms Porsche Poh, executive director of mental health advocacy organisation Silver Ribbon (Singapore), said this depends on the comfort level of the job applicant and the employer’s mindset.

Caring and understanding employers will be able to provide the relevant support, but those with limited knowledge of mental health might judge applicants based on their conditions, she added.

Ms Ong said in an ideal workplace, where mental health is understood and normalised, there would be adequate support across the mental health continuum.

“The responsibility is on the employer to create such a mental health-friendly workplace, so that (I) would never have to wonder how my career options would be affected if I disclose my mental health

challenges (that could be temporary) that might actually affect my work or a mental health condition that doesn't affect my work," she said.

A chief executive who is part of her WorkWell Leaders community, which is focused on championing workplace mental health and well-being, told her he shares openly with his teams that he sees a therapist, which would give permission for his people to share their mental health challenges and not fear repercussions.

"When we all understand the dual continuum of mental health that one could be flourishing with a mental health condition (with proper treatment and recovery process) and languishing without one, we would all feel safe to share our mental health challenges even if we don't have a clinical diagnosis," said Ms Ong.

To prevent employers from discriminating against those with mental health conditions, the Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices has advised employers to remove any mental health query from job application forms, but some organisations are still keeping them, said Ms Poh.

"If they don't ask you if you have hypertension, diabetes or other illnesses, why are they inquiring about mental health conditions."

Hopefully, more support will be given to companies with no or limited budget to support staff with mental health conditions, Ms Poh said.

Employers that are keen to support employees with mental health issues, but do not have the knowledge or budget to do so, can consider partnering with a mental health charity, she added.

Mr Nicholas Lee, executive director of mental health charity Resilience Collective (RC), said that it is important to involve the human

resources department when it comes to supporting staff with a mental health condition.

At a previous company, some years before Covid-19 hit, when a worker declared his mental health condition at the interview, Mr Lee allowed him to work from home for up to two days if he did not feel well enough to go to the office.

Ms Fong Min Hui, an internal auditor and volunteer with RC, is one of those who have declared their mental health conditions at work, and has largely found support, such as being able to claim half a day of medical leave a month for her therapy.

She and Mr Lee are guests in [the latest ST Health Check podcast](#) hosted by this reporter on supporting mental health in the workplace.

Listen to why Ms Fong decided to talk about her depression at work, and the challenges she faced at work. And find out about Mr Lee's mental health journey, what he does for his employees with a mental health condition, and what else companies can do to enable their employees with mental health challenges to thrive at work.

Here is an edited excerpt from their conversation:

Q: Should people tell their bosses or colleagues about their mental health conditions?

Mr Lee: I think it very much depends on the work culture of the place that they're in.

Is it open? Do they think that their colleagues or their bosses are receptive to hearing such things? And then, ultimately, what can the bosses do? Because if I tell my boss, and then my boss says, “Oh, okay, poor thing”, and that’s it, I might feel worse.

So we need to be really in tune with the culture of the company, or your supervisor at least.

Ms Fong: It’s really largely dependent on your work environment. Like with my previous company, I was told that they had reservations about promoting me because of my mental health history.

I was also told that at the time, when I wasn’t coping very well, I should take it as a lesson to be more professional at work by being able to compartmentalise my feelings... I’d love to do that, but I couldn’t do it, so I think it’s sort of like a double-edged sword.

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