

Business sector mental illness crisis looms

By [Kreshnee Govender](#)

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As medical aid schemes and hospitals warn that society is on the cusp of a mental health crisis, within the business sector, some companies are reporting that over 50% of referrals made for incapacity support in the workplace are due to mental illness.



Source: © Rob Marmion [123rf](#)

This signals an urgent need from employers to provide support for their employees.

A Covid-19 complication

While mental illness has for many years made up a large percentage of workplace difficulties, the prevalence and complexity of these disorders have increased in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

When we consider the already stressful lives that many lived before the pandemic, many of these stressors have been exacerbated and added to.

This is due to Covid-19 related issues such as increased financial strain and instability, fear for our own and loved ones' well-being and the impact of the changed lifestyles and behaviours both at home and in the workplace in response to the pandemic.

The protracted period of the pandemic has further affected people's well-being with the hope of "return to normal" not being a reality and resulting in Covid fatigue.

Mental illness itself has also been found to be a long-term effect of contracting Covid-19. Anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder resulting from contracting the virus are identified as a Covid-19 complication.

Supporting employees

Understandably, higher prevalence of mental illness in the workplace has resulted in more absenteeism and reduced performance.

It is imperative that employers look at taking proactive steps to support their employees.

The workplace is an important focus point in managing mental health issues related to the pandemic.

An early intervention approach to prevent long-term incapacity and even disability consists of awareness of:

- The signs and symptoms of mental illness, and how this affects our work.
- Employees' needs.

The following factors can signal that an employee is experiencing a mental health issue:

- Decreases in productivity and low levels of engagement.
- Increased sick absence.
- A change in working patterns.
- Inability to cope with normal or increased workload.
- Disinterest in work activities.

Monitoring of absenteeism, presenteeism and productivity is imperative to identify affected or at-risk employees early.

Moreover, employers may face challenges in monitoring their employees given that some companies have work-from-home arrangements.

Employers can target these areas of concern by providing support options:

- Create an environment where there is open communication and a sense of cohesiveness.
- Implement resilience training programmes.
- Increase awareness of employee assistance programmes and how to use them
- Foster a culture of balance between work and home lives.
- Adopt healthy work practices, including workspace set-up and work habits.

Early identification of mental illness and implementation of appropriate workplace support channels can help prevent or curtail the adverse effects of the pandemic.

This will not only support an employee's own well-being but also that of other employees and the greater community.

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