Reimagine Mental Wellbeing at the Workplace Report

Explore innovative ways to enhance mental wellbeing for more supportive and inclusive workplaces
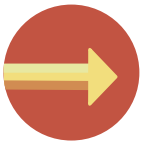
common GROUND
CREATING WHOLE COMMUNITIES

Studio DOJO

Report Content
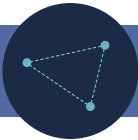
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About

This Report

A Loud And Clear Call

Conversations around mental health and wellbeing have gained more prominence in recent years. More leaders have spoken up about this topic. We see much more government policies, ground-up initiatives and startups focusing on mental wellbeing.

THE STRAITS TIMES

Mental health crisis could cost the world $22 trillion by 2030

10 October 2018

Singapore spends $3.1 billion on stress-related illnesses annually: Study

21 November 2019

New charity to enable those with mental health conditions to help their peers

8 June 2019

cna

Singapore

The rise of mental health awareness – and the stigma that remains attached to certain conditions

5 June 2021

Singapore

Government to publish advisory to help improve mental wellbeing in the workplace

3 March 2020

The widespread and prolonged disruptions that COVID-19 brought about, had highlighted the need for us to take care of mental wellbeing even more. In one way or another, we are all still experiencing the impact to people's mental wellbeing: the fear of contracting COVID-19, the loss of freedom in our previous ways of life, financial stress from the economic downturn, or *fatigue* and i s o l a t i o n from the unrelenting uncertainty.

THE STRAITS TIMES

More in Singapore seek help for mental health issues amid Covid-19 pandemic

Significant increase seen across different age groups; spike in calls to suicide helpline

10 October 2020

The New York Times

'What's the Point?' Young People's Despair Deepens as Covid-19 Crisis Drags On

Experts paint a grim picture of the struggle with lockdown isolation — a "mental health pandemic" that should be treated as seriously as containing the coronavirus.

15 February 2021

cna

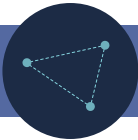### Commentary: Worries over COVID-19 situation are taking a mental toll on Singapore

Urgent attention must be paid to the impact of this raging pandemic on our mental health, former NMP and mental health advocate Anthea Ong urges.

30 May 2021

THE TIMES OF INDIA

Pandemic-triggered mental health crisis is real: Experts

24 April 2021

Cents And Sensibility

There are also economic reasons behind the urgent need for intervention: mental health and wellbeing has real monetary cost to it, and the WHO estimates that countries can lose up to USD 1 trillion/year in productivity if they do not invest in mental health[1]. Singapore is a particularly egregious case - rates of employee burnout here are amongst the highest in the world, and we have the dubious honour of working 23% longer than the global average of a 48 hour work week[2].

> *Will this reputation of high burnout continue to be a dominant narrative of our country? How might we find opportunities for innovation in points of intervention?*

We Hear The Call And We Respond

Much as this is a pain point that needs addressing, we also see it as a potential point of innovation. Many countries across the world are struggling to address this issue meaningfully. There are already some good best practices in other regions of the world that Singapore can reference. However, we also know that for mental wellbeing initiatives to take root deeply, we have to take into account the unique cultural context and environment that Singapore is in.

That is why Common Ground and Studio Dojo have embarked on a multitude of efforts, of which this report is one, in the hopes that our capabilities for mental wellbeing continue to strengthen and mature. We hope that any new interventions Singapore invents will not only improve our quality of life but also allow Singapore to have a stronger voice in the global mental wellbeing conversation.

Khee Shihui
Programme Director, Common Ground

Hong Khai Seng
Founder & Director, Studio Dojo

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1   WHO 2020 World Mental Health Day Press Release
2   Cigna March 2019 Study

1 Background

What good outcomes might we see if we catalyse UX designers to bring their creative energies and service design skills to improve mental health and well-being in Singapore?

Through exploring this question, Common Ground and Studio Dojo started to pilot a citizen-led process to identify new possibilities around mental wellbeing practices. With the help of volunteer designers and researchers, we conducted an in-depth discovery process which included:

Desktop research:
- to uncover perspectives from various stakeholders, including: employers, employees, policymakers and advocates both locally and internationally,
- through a range of formal and informal sources (academic articles, news articles, reports, and forums like reddit)

Two sets of interviews:
- 30 interviews with individuals to understand the experience of a young Singaporean discovering that they have a mental health condition (referenced as "Interview Transcript #")
- 10 interviews with HR professionals and senior leaders of organisations from the public, private and people sectors (referenced as "Employer Transcript #")

The interviews were conducted face to face or via video conference from July to November 2020. In light of the potential stigma attached to the topic, we took extra care to ensure that interviewees could speak freely without fear of repercussions. We sought to ensure privacy and confidentiality by removing any identifying details for both individuals and institutions.

We used a grounded theory approach to sense-make the interview data, then sought feedback on preliminary insights at curated public events.

Background

The discovery process concluded with 3 key outputs:

A written report

We chose to summarise the key insights into a short report (that you're reading now) that will be distributed freely. We hope that interested stakeholders can also use these findings to move the mental wellbeing conversation forward.

2 journey maps

Not everyone will have the time and patience to read a report, As such, we have also chosen to highlight our findings in a visual format that will make it easy for the public to understand via two journey maps.

Scan to download

A unique programme

The sobering realities we heard in our interviews showed how critical the workplace was. This resulted in Common Ground and Studio Dojo designing a programme specifically to address this. With this 5-month programme, we aim to bring together designers with creative energies and fresh perspectives, with willing and interested organisations, to prototype innovative mental wellbeing practices. The intent is not to replace medical or therapeutic forms of professional support for those managing mental health conditions only, but to find preventative, upstream practices that address the mental wellbeing needs of people at different parts of the mental wellness spectrum, and potentially even complement them.

1 How to Use This Report

We hope this report will provide some food for thought, depending on who you are and where you come from:

- a concerned employee looking to find resources to support a fellow team member
- a HR or OD executive sourcing inspiration for mental wellbeing initiatives
- an organisational leader wanting to take care of the team members in your charge
- a mental health sector stakeholder hoping to more deeply understand workplace concerns and challenges
- a social innovator looking to inspire and influence the landscape of mental wellbeing
- someone who has had or is going through a rough time with your mental wellbeing
- a curious citizen wanting to know more about mental wellbeing

Here are 4 different ways you could make use of this report:

1 Go straight to the key insights
Our 8 insights in Section 2 summarize key takeaways from the discovery process about how mental wellbeing is handled in organisations and specific examples from our interviewee experiences.

2 Use it as a springboard for ideas
At the end of each key insight, we offer a list of broad "How Might We" questions to explore possibilities for growing your understanding or even creating ways to change the situation around you. These are ripe as initial problem statements for your own organisation's mental wellbeing task force or to brainstorm in a hackathon.

3 Share this as a guide to help and support
As part of our due diligence, we have compiled an Annex at the end of this report. It lists useful mental health initiatives, support channels and resources in Singapore. If someone you know is looking for a consolidated list, feel free to send this section to them.
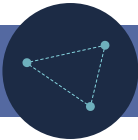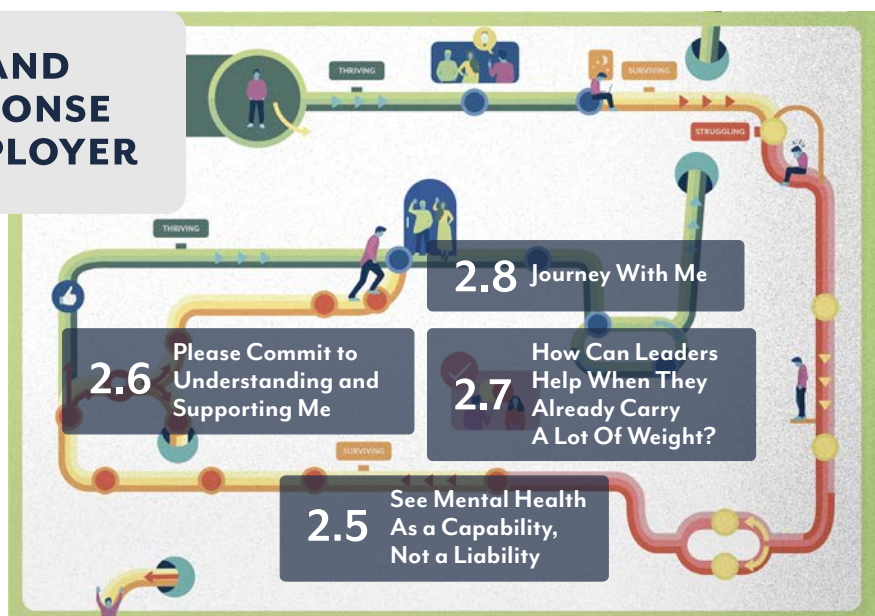
4 **Be guided by the journey maps**

You could start off by looking through the two journey maps to dive deeper into crucial checkpoints experienced by the people we interviewed. The journey maps detail the experiences of an individual managing their mental health and wellbeing at the workplace. The first map tracks a "well-meaning but unhelpful" response from their employer, and the second, a "safe and helpful response".

By walking in the footsteps of a person, we hope you gain empathy, not just for employees but also for the organisation. If you find an interesting point in the journey, find the corresponding key insight to explore a little further.

WELL-MEANING, BUT UNHELPFUL RESPONSE FROM EMPLOYER

2.1 Help Me Thrive, Not Just Survive

2.3 If I'm Performing, I Must Be Okay

2.2 I Can't Act On Something I Don't Know is Happening

2.4 Serious Problems Call For Drastic Measures… Or Maybe Not?

HELPFUL AND SAFE RESPONSE FROM EMPLOYER

2.8 Journey With Me

2.6 Please Commit to Understanding and Supporting Me

2.7 How Can Leaders Help When They Already Carry A Lot Of Weight?

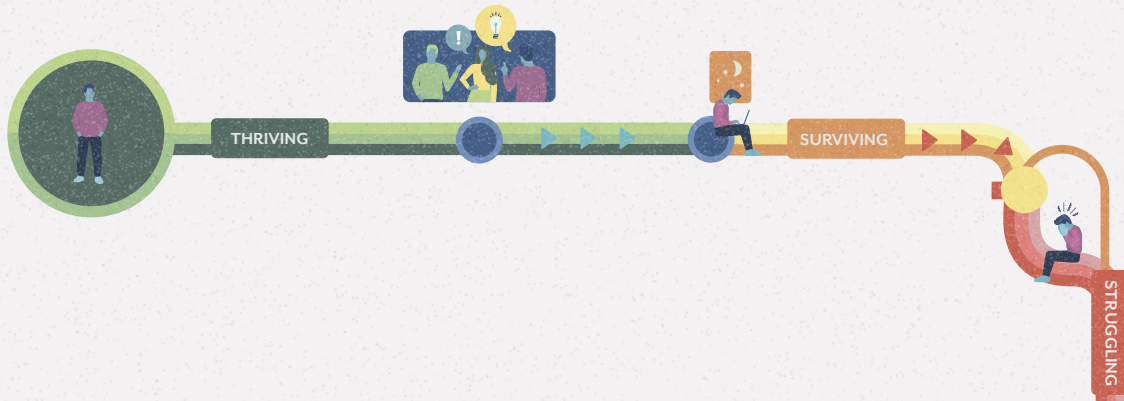2.5 See Mental Health As a Capability, Not a Liability

2

Key Insights

2.1 Help Me Thrive, Not Just Survive

Recognise The Many Shades Of Wellbeing

Mental wellbeing exists on a spectrum. For an organisation to be truly healthy, it is imperative that mental wellbeing practices support employees across the whole spectrum and include both preventive and reactive measures.

IN CRISIS	STRUGGLING	SURVIVING	THRIVING	EXCELLING
Very anxious	Anxious	Worried	Positive	Cheerful
Very low mood	Depressed	Nervous	Calm	Joyful
Absenteeism	Tired	Irritable	Performing	Energetic
Exhausted	Poor performance	Sad	Sleeping well	High performance
Very poor sleep	Poor sleep	Trouble sleeping	Eating normally	Flow
Weight loss	Poor appetite	Distracted	Normal social activity	Fully realising potential
		Withdrawn		

By and large, mental health support tends to kick in only after employees are outwardly struggling, or already in crisis. There is much less focus on maintaining or improving the mental wellbeing of employees who are surviving or thriving, so they can excel. Such employees may feel like they are coping well but may not experience being fully engaged or supported at work. There is also an assumption that employees who are performing well at work do not face any mental well-being challenges or need support.

> *I worked in a very toxic environment, The moment I left office, I would literally cry tears of joy every evening. It was hard to deal with, but I never had any more panic attacks. In fact, I was just trying to compartmentalise the stress. Near my house, there are volunteer counsellors from a church who would help, and I booked a session -- I only needed 1 session. It was nice to unload, that person was able to relate to my worries, they reassured me that it's normal, and there are many ways to cope with it.*
>
> *- Interview Transcript 17*

Help Me Thrive, Not Just Survive
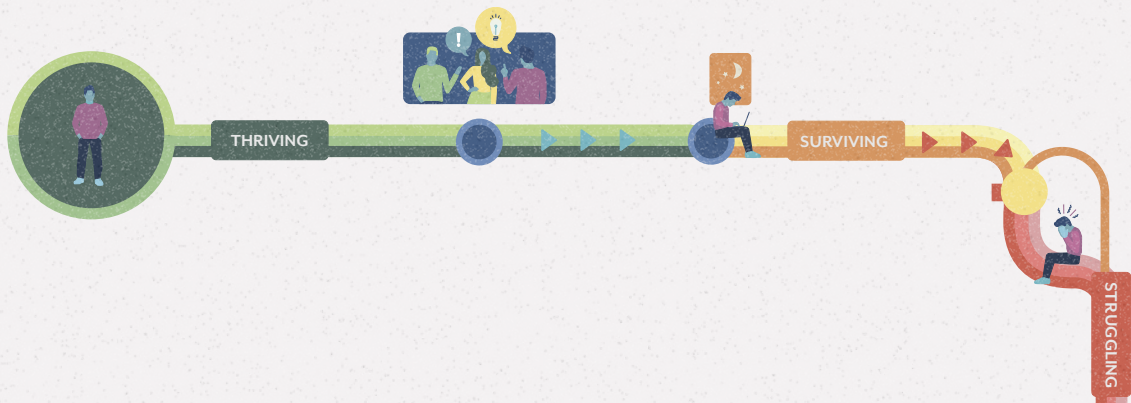
## Take Care Of My Wellness, Not Just My Illness

Similarly, conversations around mental health commonly revolve around mental illness more than mental wellbeing. Existing national policies are framed around penalising discrimination against employees with mental health conditions, and mental health policies at the workplace often involve finding professional, medical treatment for mental health conditions.

Focusing on illness over overall mental wellbeing may set up the expectation that only employees with mental health conditions need to care about their mental health. Organisations then miss out on important preventative mental wellbeing support practices that could benefit a much broader segment of their employees.

> *I don't know what support I need or can have, because I can understand they also need to deliver service and the manpower is low right now. It is a really tough struggle to live up to or produce 100% when I'm far from 100% myself. It is very hard.*
>
> *- Interview Transcript 16*
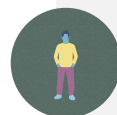
As an individual -
How might we distinguish between surviving and thriving in our own lives?

Amongst peers/colleagues -
How might we help each other see the importance of thriving?

As an organisation -
How might we redesign workplaces for thriving?

2.2 I Can't Act On Something I Don't Know Is Happening

Poor mental wellbeing becomes visible to self and work performance suffers. Try to act normal in front of peers.

Asks manager for time off, without sharing underlying reasons

Concerns about disclosure

Disclosure

Colleague or manager checks in to ask if employee needs support.

Work performance declines further, irritability with clients and colleagues.

Employers can find it hard to know the real situation because employees' mental health concerns are often concealed by everyday requests.

Help Me Help You

This may seem like an obvious point for everyone, but we still need to repeat it because of how common this situation is. Organisations and employees are often caught in a catch-22: Employers look to employees to disclose their mental health conditions, so that they can better understand the employees' concerns in order to create a safe and supportive workplace for them. However, most employees need to experience a safe workplace first before they are willing to disclose to their employers.

For employers, it may seem natural that the onus of disclosure is on the employee for several reasons. Firstly, signs of poor mental health are harder to observe as they are often invisible. Secondly, they assume that employees know their lived condition best and would be able to speak for themselves.

> *Providing in-house resources was very hard. We tried to provide counsellors for in-house services during COVID but there was no take up. We also tried to train in-house care / emergency officers as counsellors, but no one reached out to take on these services. Our programs with most traction talk about sleep, CPF, finances and resilient thinking. Our counselling sessions to do small group sessions to deal with stress mechanisms had zero responses even though it was organised during COVID.*
>
> *- Employer Transcript 1*

> *At the end of the day, the [employee] must be able to draw a line and say that it is enough.*
>
> *-Employer Transcript 6*

> *My depression was silent, I was still very high functioning, so my depression felt very invisible, and I felt that was where the problem was also.*
>
> *- Interview Transcript 19*

11

2.2 I Can't Act On Something I Don't Know Is Happening

This catch-22 acts as a critical barrier to improving workplace safety and support for affected employees, as employers face difficulties detecting mental health concerns to begin with. Paradoxically, in organisations where employees think it is unsafe to speak up, **employers may think everything is working well when they do not see evidence that points to the need to improve.**

The Weight of Disclosure

For the employees, disclosure is a difficult choice to make. Beyond being deterred by the stigma associated with it, they may also worry about possible implications on their current work scope or future career progression. They don't know how their peers, and managers will respond and the negative chain reactions that it may set off.

> *I want more support at work: telling bosses is a gamble, it doesn't always work out; I'm very lucky that when I told my first boss, he had physical health issues, which made it easier for him to empathise and work with me to manage my workload. When I changed to [new workplace], my bosses kind of listen, say the right things, but I was just viewed as a staff that's not productive, not meeting the mark; as opposed to someone who is just struggling. I don't sense any real empathy, which is ironic since we are serving [role redacted].*
>
> *- Interview Transcript 16*

Saying Without Telling

As such, employees often choose not to directly disclose to their employers. Instead, they may reach out for help in indirect or innocuous ways. Some make everyday requests - applying for a few days of medical leave or requesting for a lighter workload - aimed at addressing their own mental health concerns. Employees may also choose not to disclose their condition at all, and simply leave the company.

By having the everyday requests conceal their true concerns, this makes it more challenging for employers to recognise and support them. As employers tend to look out for clear signals of asking for help, they are more likely to overlook such cues.

> *I lied to my company, I didn't tell them that I burnt out. I told them I went to pursue my studies. It's not a lie, it's just a matter of time...they released me, to be in support of my personal development.*
>
> *- Interview Transcript 7*

> *I left [my workplace] last week and am having a break. I had 2 conversations with my boss about the workload - it's not something I can handle.... I'm scared that someone would know I am under such tremendous stress... fear of being judged as incompetent.*
>
> *- Employer Transcript 6 (speaking as an individual)*

I Can't Act On Something I Don't Know Is Happening

> *Everyone is very afraid that it will be in their record etc, they will get marked down, or it will affect their future jobs if they declare etc.*
>
> *- Interview Transcript 24*

> *I have come to terms with the fact that I will always have to be my own boss. One of the things about being depressed is that for masking it, you need to disappear sometimes. So if you are in the office, then you cannot disappear. You can't go off to one side. Even if you can hide to one side, last time when lunch time comes, the norm at my previous office is to go with your colleagues to lunch, and laugh and like haha and heehee.*
>
> *- Interview Transcript 30*

Making The First Move

We can see how the catch-22 causes a standstill between employers and employees. Unless safety is introduced to the organisation - for both to comfortably engage in a conversation on mental health - this situation will constantly be reproduced.

While it is understood that this reinforcing loop needs to be broken in order for change to happen, who then is responsible for making the first move?

As an Individual -
How might we determine conditions of workplace safety before we choose to disclose our mental wellbeing challenges?
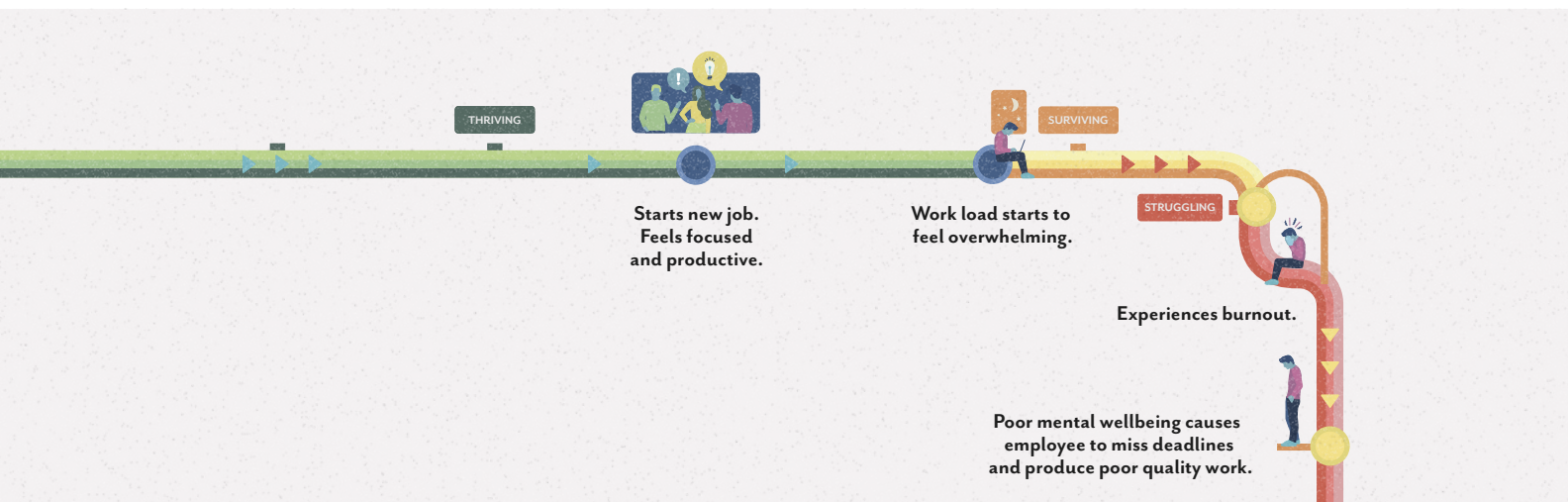
As an organisation -
How might we signal to employees that it is safe to disclose their mental wellbeing challenges?

2.3 If I'm Performing, I Must Be Okay

THRIVING

SURVIVING

Starts new job. Feels focused and productive.

Work load starts to feel overwhelming.

STRUGGLING

Experiences burnout.

Poor mental wellbeing causes employee to miss deadlines and produce poor quality work.

Work performance is the most commonly used signal of determining an employee's mental wellbeing even though it is not the most accurate.

Given that mental wellbeing indicators may not be obvious or are hidden underneath everyday requests, what do organisations do now? Work performance is often used by employers as a proxy for mental wellbeing at the workplace, as it is the most obvious, often measured and talked about as individuals and as teams. As such, employers may feel they have sufficient justification to intervene when work performance is visibly deteriorating.

> **In Singapore, [even] if you have cancer, people are wondering whether you can deliver the work or not.**
>
> *- Employer Transcript 10*

> **Initially, I shared with my colleagues about how I felt; but at the end of the day, the work just needs to be done and people didn't really care, except for whether I was meeting the deadlines. So when they asked how I was, I stopped giving real answers, because I felt that I won't be heard anyways.**
>
> *- Interview Transcript 16*

It also doesn't just happen with employers. Employees with mental health conditions may also see their wellbeing as tied to their productivity, such that they only seek help when they perceive that it affects their work performance. It doesn't help that for some, their sense of productivity comes from comparing with their team and peers, leading to an imagined expectation that seems impossible to reach.

> **I only got help because I wanted to address my work performance issues... it took me a few sessions with counsellors before I realised it was linked to my self-worth issues.**
>
> *- Interview Transcript 11*

> **Fear prevents (from speaking up). Everyone wants to be seen as productive; our self worth is tied to how productive we are, how we contribute to others. Tie strong sense of self to work. Gets in the way, people don't want to be seen as not well.**
>
> *- Interview Transcript 13*

2.3 If I'm Performing, I Must Be Okay

However, work performance is not always an accurate barometer of mental wellbeing as high performers may also suffer from mental wellbeing challenges. In some cases, experiencing a mental health challenge might even seemingly improve work performance — hence giving rise to terms like "high-functioning anxiety*". These employees are then less likely to receive the support they may need, despite being in crisis or struggling beneath the surface.

> *I mean, I had depression, but I could fulfill all my KPIs. Depression looks different for different people. Some go into hyperdrive and some are dysfunctional. I used to go to work at 2am.*
>
> *- Employer Transcript 4 (speaking as an individual)*

> *I needed to go to [healthcare provider] A&E, although I had to beg the doctor not to ward me, because I needed to go to work the next day. So I was just "please, I need to go to work, I'll feel a lot better when I go to work", and so he says, "okay, fine, but promise that you just come back in lah".*
>
> *- Interview Transcript 30*

Moreover, since employers tend not to intervene as long as an employee is performing well at work, workplace cultures that don't take care of mental health may be tolerated or even normalised as long as the team is perceived to be meeting certain work standards.

> *But my condition didn't affect my work — I can be crying and typing at the same time.*
>
> *- Interview Transcript 14*

> *(work) Is a good source of stress, it keeps me occupied, it won't let my thoughts run wild. I used to do shift work. So I do 2 morning, 2 night, 2 days off. At times, I got 36 hours straight, non-stop, just to cover up for the shortage of manpower, by law cannot. But I just do it. It is a good distraction, because I'm a workaholic by nature.*
>
> *- Interview Transcript 29*
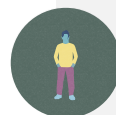
As an individual -
How might we encourage or normalise employees seeking help when they have mental health challenges, even before their work performance is impacted?

Amongst peers/colleagues -
How might we help colleagues spot signs of poor mental wellbeing in their peers?

As an organisation -
How might we design better indicators to measure and evaluate mental wellbeing at work?
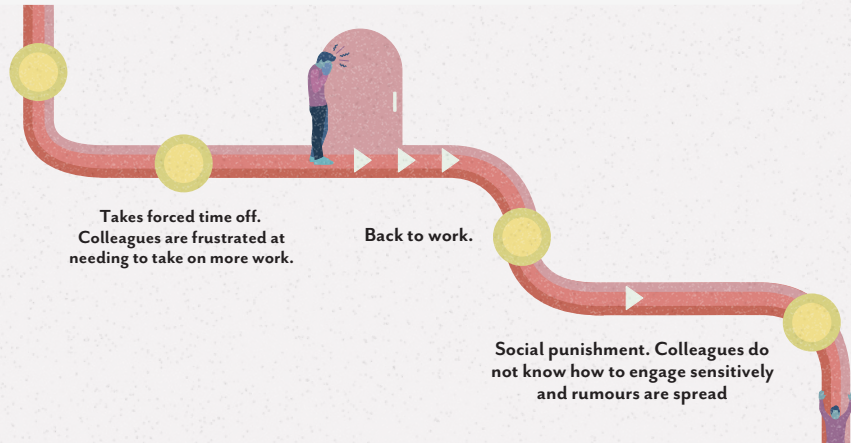
*High functioning anxiety is not a recognized mental health diagnosis or disorder.

2.4 Serious Problems Call For Drastic Measures… Or Maybe Not?

Poor mental wellbeing becomes visible to self and others as employee experiences a panic attack in front of colleagues.

Takes forced time off. Colleagues are frustrated at needing to take on more work.

Back to work.

Social punishment. Colleagues do not know how to engage sensitively and rumours are spread

Most employers currently see mental health conditions as acute problems. They need to start seeing them as ongoing instead.

Intense solutions for intense problems

If an employee's mental health challenge was not shared or addressed early, then disclosure may happen suddenly through unintended incidents when it becomes more difficult to manage. Often, employers witness intense disclosures of mental health conditions by their employees, whether in the form of panic attacks or breakdowns. This informs their understanding of it as a serious and acute problem, one that requires quick and drastic intervention.

> *When my employers fired me, they didn't talk to me first, and they just ended it. The least they could say is "how's your condition, are you ok to work?" Then, you say "yes", then they say they "ok", they want to be sure, then when things really do happen, their empathy goes away and understanding goes away, then it is just full on professionalism, which I can't blame them, but dont you think that's where the empathy and understanding is needed more?*
>
> *- Interview Transcript 15*

Employers then assume responsibility of providing directed, immediate, and short-term solutions. Examples include redirecting work tasks to other team members or isolating them from colleagues to allow for recovery. This is mostly based on the employers' perception of what is helpful as employees are often not involved in the planning of solutions.

> *The road to hell is paved with good intentions. There was a misunderstanding… the idea that a "drastic intervention" was needed. If only the people I trusted and loved had talked to me… My [workplace] told my colleagues, especially those close to me, do not contact her, let her focus completely on her recovery. No "how are you", no SMS from colleague, even when I got discharged and went back to [workplace].*
>
> *- Interview Transcript 1*

2.4 Serious Problems Call For Drastic Measures... Or Maybe Not?

Gradual And Empathetic Approach Preferred Instead

While well-intentioned, this approach may not match most employees' expectations. Often times, they are looking for more holistic, ongoing and long-term support from their employers. Drastic solutions implemented by the employer can therefore be seen as knee-jerk reactions that overlook their needs and undermine their capabilities.

> *I had to appear in front of a disciplinary panel at [workplace redacted]. After that, I'm not sure what happened to me, because no one told me. Because of this, all my work promotions were held back and my bonuses were not given. I was not officially recognised for the many years of service I gave to the sector. From time to time, these things are brought up and I will be seen as a failure at some point in my life, and it's actually quite hard to swallow.*
>
> *- Interview Transcript 19*

Employers are also on a journey to discover what would better meet the diverse mental health needs within their organisations. More companies in Singapore are beginning to offer an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) as a starting point. This usually covers access to individual counselling sessions, or other services such as mental health workshops or lunch-time talks.

A Call For Courageous Conversations

Whilst this is a helpful beginning and a more gentle entry point, companies that want to do more would need feedback from their employees on how they could improve such support. As the culture of openly discussing mental health and well-being is still in the process of being normalised, this requires both employers and employees willing to bridge the gap, to go the extra mile and step up to initiate such conversations in the workplace.

> *I initiated the conversation with the staff, I did not really know what to do, but we went to see a counsellor together in an open counselling session. ... As managers, it's hard to make a performance appraisal. I tried to be kind, but I also recognise the need for formal training as a manager. We didn't have real training that our leaders had gone through to understand the various depths of mental health issues that affect our colleagues. I didn't know for sure if I was doing the right thing e.g. was bringing a colleague to counselling something I had to do in my job?*
>
> *-Employer Transcript 9*

Amongst peers/colleagues - How might we offer different forms of holistic and appropriate support to employees or colleagues with different types of mental wellbeing challenges?

As an organisation - How might we begin to create solutions that can both address immediate needs and also allow a smoother entry point for the employee?

See Mental Health As a Capability, Not a Liability

?

Well-meaning but unhelpful response

Company has good intentions when it comes to supporting its staff. However, due to a lack of knowledge and resources, and a focus on productivity, the available support can be viewed as shoring up a weakness. This creates an experience of support that falls short of what the employee truly needs to fulfill their potential and realise their strengths at work.

The topic of mental wellbeing often crops up as interruptions, rather than a way to add strategic value

Conversations about mental wellbeing at the workplace is a reasonably new development in Singapore. Some organisations may perceive mental wellbeing as a short-term concern due to COVID, or a problem to be fixed quickly to get work "back on track".

> *Mental wellbeing is [in] a super super early stage... [It is in its] early stages, [there is a parallel to] how finance was at some point not understood as a strategic lever of success...*
>
> *- Employer Transcript 2*

The more mature the conversation becomes, the more organisations will begin to see it as a vital part of their organisational capabilities like HR, Finance or Marketing. Correspondingly, they are more likely to assign priority to it, allocate resources to and grow more awareness around it. More mature organisations might even hold a view that mental health and wellbeing practices are not solely HR's responsibility and is something that can be integrated throughout the organisation that can create powerful positive impact.

As an individual - How might we help employees to speak up about the importance of mental wellbeing at the workplace?

As an organisation - How might we help organisations see mental wellbeing as an organisational capability, and not an organisational liability?

At the sector/national level - How might we collate and show the measurable impact that good mental wellbeing practices can have in our workplaces?

> *Addressing well-being helps with retaining talents, and our employee value proposition has been beefed up. We have been collecting data, the cost of doing this (wellness initiatives) versus staff absenteeism and staff departure is lower. After such implementations, I noted a big shift in employee response, and we are now positioned as an organisation that cares. We think of well-being as an organisation capability.*
>
> *- Employer Transcript 10*

2.6 Please Commit to Understanding and Supporting Me

3 critical success factors need to be in place to foster successful mental wellbeing initiatives at workplaces:

To have successful mental wellbeing practices, organisations need to have the **appropriate knowledge, relevant resources,** and **organisational commitment**.

There has been growing progress in each of these 3 aspects in part due to the efforts of mental health advocates who champion mental wellbeing as a leadership priority, as well as government policies which play a signalling function. A list of existing efforts and initiatives can be found in Annex 1.
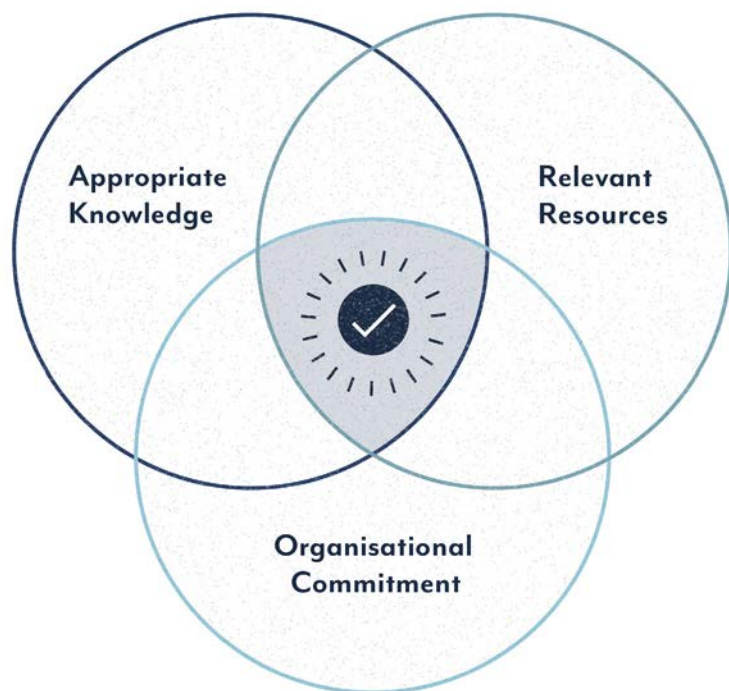
Many organisations only have 2 out of the 3 critical success factors to enable successful mental wellbeing initiatives.

Creating and sustaining mental wellbeing initiatives is a complex and systemic issue. This means that instead of looking for one single silver bullet, we will need to consider a holistic approach.

Like a three-legged stool, **Commitment, Knowledge and Resource** represent the interdependence of three critical success factors to support better mental wellbeing in organisations. Firstly, the stool must have all three legs to be stable enough. Secondly, if these capabilities are not nurtured more or less together, the stool will have legs of different lengths and may become too unstable to support anything for very long. So, even though you might experience momentary success, it could be short-lived. The challenge many organisations may face is how to create an environment where each of the 3 success factors flourish together.

Please Commit to Understanding and Supporting Me

Through our interviews, this was expressed largely in an interpersonal context as leaders and colleagues feared not knowing how best to respond to someone struggling with their mental wellbeing. At an organisational level, a lack of **knowledge** and best practices may also lead to absent or ineffective policies targeting mental wellbeing.

> *Training. We need training... In Singapore, [there are] not enough examples to learn from to say this is what you need to do.*
>
> *-Employer Transcript 4*

Appropriate Knowledge

Relevant Resources

Organisational Commitment
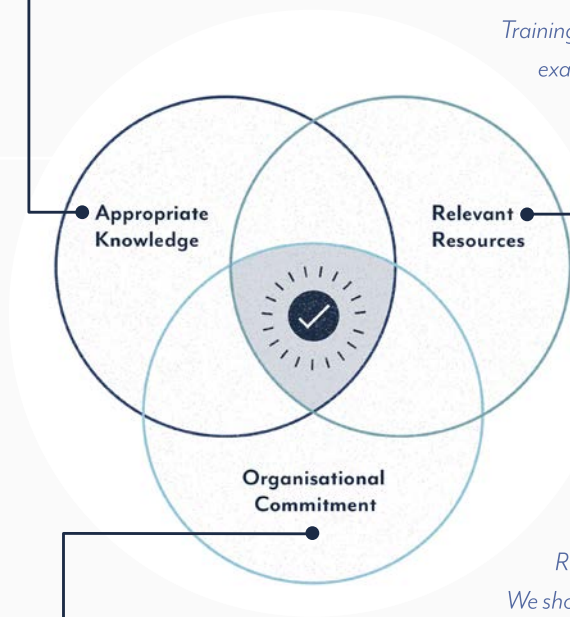
Through desktop research, we found that **resources** in the form of financial support can often only be afforded by larger companies. Resource scarcity is especially acute for SMEs, whom might not be able to ensure the longevity of their mental wellbeing solutions without some creative ways to create resource buffers.

> *Resources in [the] form of 'what can we do is important... We should have resource networks.*
>
> *-Employer Transcript 4*

Commitment appears to be the hardest success factor to influence from the outside. Internally, companies often juggle multiple priorities that are seemingly in tension with each other such as care and excellence, or people and results. However, it may be helpful to see these factors as inter-dependent and mutually reinforcing to form virtuous cycles. If seen in opposition, mental health can consequently become de-prioritised in favour of seemingly more immediate organisational plans and needs.

> *Wellbeing is high on agenda, leaders [are] proactive... But other priorities for the organisation can be in conflict, [like] workplan and KPIs.*
>
> *- Employer Transcript 7*

As an organisation -
Which of the three success factors does my organisation need more of?

At a sector level -
How might we support organisations to build capabilities that they lack and want to develop?

2.7 How Can Leaders Help When They Already Carry A Lot Of Weight?

Company has good intentions when it comes to supporting its staff. While the company expects leaders to take the lead on all mental wellbeing initiatives, leaders themselves may be maxed out and experiencing poor mental wellbeing themselves.

Well-meaning but unhelpful response

Leaders are often expected to approve all mental wellbeing initiatives at the workplace - as such, employees and even middle management may feel like they require formal, top-down approval for anything to happen.

> *For any kind of HR policy [about] physical or mental wellbeing, it happen[s] top-down... Top down sounds like a dirty word but I see advantages.*
>
> *- Employer Transcript 2*

> *Leadership must be supportive for initiatives... Leadership style is important.*
>
> *- Employer Transcript 6*

Leaders Are Also Human Too

While leadership commitment is important, this places pressure on leaders to have the right knowledge on mental wellbeing. Moreover, those who are expected to help (leaders, HR) are often overworked themselves, and may end up overstretching themselves and, counterproductively, developing poor mental health as they try to help others.

> *[Mental wellness program] cannot be pushed through... HR is burnt out... has no one to turn to.*
>
> *- Employer Transcript 6*

> *Do our leaders have the language, emotions to describe and have the conversations? Leaders also need to have the courage to share, so that they allow others (in the organisation) to reciprocate.*
>
> *- Employer Transcript 8*

> *I learnt that I cannot do everything -- I carried guilt from trying to solve things all by myself.*
>
> *- Interview Transcript 13*

How Can Leaders Help When They Already Carry A Lot Of Weight?

Workplace-based wellbeing plan created <u>with</u> employer

Joins workplace support group where colleagues check in on each other.

Leaders are so used to bearing responsibilities at the workplace that it can become a bottleneck to how an organisation responds to mental wellbeing concerns.

Instead of placing all responsibility on leaders, what's more important is for leaders and employees to engage in conversation, and collectively take on ownership over the problem. New possibilities for working together can then start to emerge.

Different arrangements have worked for different organisations: some prefer that employees suggest and plan new ideas that leaders can then take up and implement; others prefer top-down management backed with willingness from the ground.

> *A lot is about the leadership top down, but also need to have willingness amongst colleagues. Management sets the tone, invites ideas and is open to consider proposals. Staff feel empowered that they want to do something.*
>
> *- Employer Transcript 7*

> *[A peer support program] came from staff suggestion, and our management just took it up.*
>
> *- Employer Transcript 6*

> *Managers also need to go into how to plan workload, or manpower of the team such that I am supporting you without being unfair to anyone else. These are not things that anyone in the world really knows.*
>
> *- Employer Transcript 4*

Amongst peers/colleagues -
How might we relieve the burden on leaders who might already feel overwhelmed?
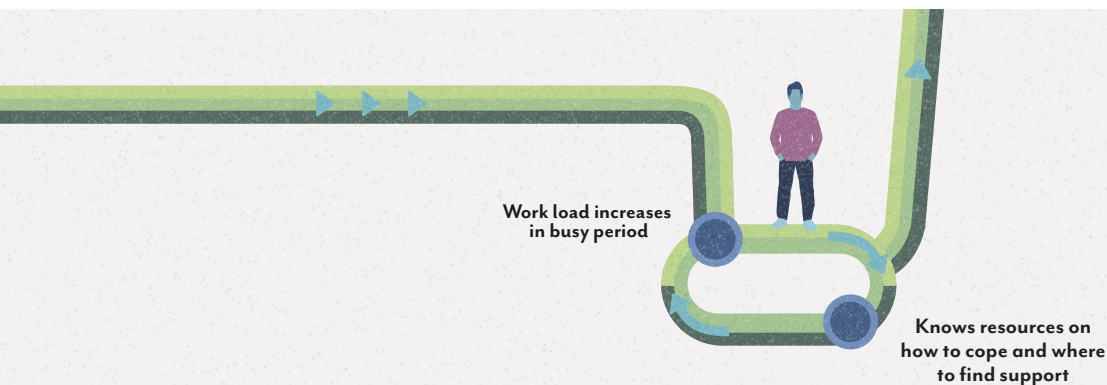
As an organisation -
How might we empower all individuals at the workplace to contribute to supportive mental wellbeing practices?

2.8 | Journey With Me

Work load increases in busy period

Knows resources on how to cope and where to find support

A conducive workplace provides continuous support, instead of one-off solutions.

Employees desire both continuous and customised support throughout the different stages of their mental health and well-being journey, ranging from wanting to be accepted as they are, to wanting support as they embark on the process of healing.

Organisations that provide safe and helpful responses are better able to meet the needs of each employee in part because they are committed to providing continuous support. Over time, organisations learn how best to support employees by trying new things and learning from their knowledge gaps. Similarly, they see mental health challenges not as a bookended process with a definite start and end point, but a continuing condition that requires holistic support from the community (both within and outside of the workplace), as well as constant, patient maintenance.

> *It's an iterative process to ensure we do better, can't pinpoint one or two specific actions [to improve quality of support provided].*
>
> *- Employer Transcript 7*

> *[Some successful mental wellbeing programs include] forming peer support group[s]... support will be useful from the rest of the community outside the organisation too, especially when the [colleagues with mental health conditions] are working from home.*
>
> *- Employer Transcript 7*
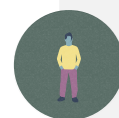
As an individual - How might we help employees articulate what their needs are at each stage of their journey?

As an organisation - How might we customise the help we offer employees to what they need at each stage of their journey?
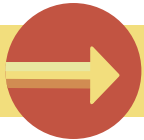
At an entire sector - How might we encourage organisations to invest in continuous support?

3

What's Next?

Before we jump into any kind of action, we want to invite you to explore the journey map in greater detail - to see if there's anything that resonates with your experience as an employee/employer. If anything sparked strong feelings or persistent questions in you, do examine it further as an indication of what areas of intervention you may be interested in, and why you might be interested in it.

Appropriate Knowledge

Relevant Resources

Organisational Commitment
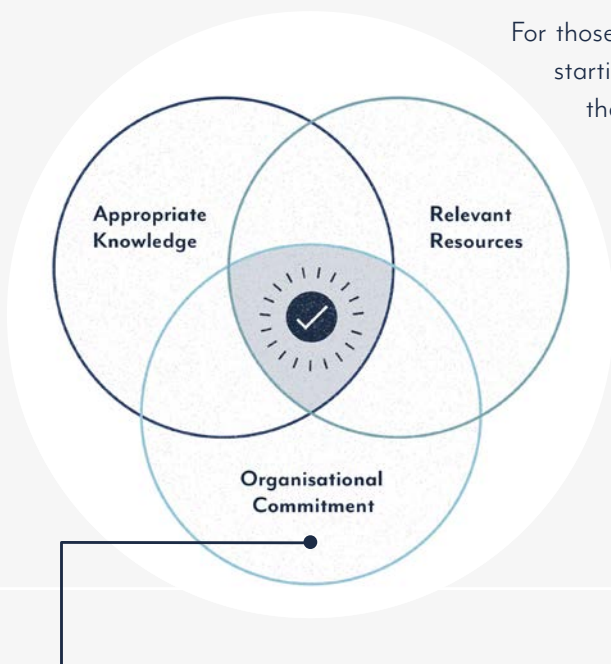
For those reading with their organisation in mind, a good starting point before any further action might be to use the journey map to stocktake where your organisation is currently at, what resources and assets your organisation has, and what gaps there might be. Each gap could be a powerful opportunity to help your organisation develop more capacity in the domain of mental wellbeing.

Below are possible points of exploration for you and your organisation, based on the 3 critical factors necessary for successful mental wellbeing practices (explained in Insight 2.6).

Change first starts with the **commitment** to do better. While many organisations may understand the value of mental wellbeing practices at the workplaces, they may deprioritise it when it clashes with different priorities. We invite you to consider:

- What keeps you committed to improving mental wellbeing practices at your workplace?

- Where and when are the formal and informal mental wellbeing conversations happening at work?

- What is your organisation currently committed to, or what does it prioritise?

- What might help your organisation to make mental wellbeing a higher priority?

- What benefits could your organisation have from making mental wellbeing a higher priority?
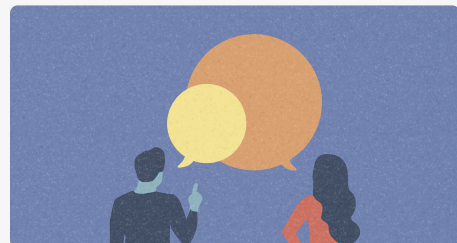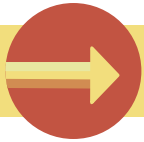
While many of us may desire to make a change, we may not **know** how to begin. We do not claim to be subject matter experts on mental health and wellbeing, and have appended a list of initiatives and resources that you and/or your organisation could follow up on for more information (See 4. Annex 1). As you read through, consider:

- What knowledge do you have to offer others?

- What capacity and pockets of expertise already exist within your organisation?

- What kinds of knowledge do you or your organisation want to gain, and where/who can you find it from?

Appropriate Knowledge

Relevant Resources

Organisational Commitment

Even if we are committed to change and know how to, we may not have the **resources** to enable us to do so. Similarly, the list of resources appended is available for you to follow up on (See 4. Annex 2 and 3); beyond that, we would also invite you to consider tapping on different kinds of resources - be it financial, relational, experiential, or emotional:

- In what ways have you been a resource for others?

- Which kind of resources do you see around you and in your organisation?

- Is there a particular kind of resource that you have more of, or a particular kind that you need?

4

Annex

Annex 1: Government Initiatives

List of Mental Health Initiatives

A.   **Covid-19 Mental Wellness Task Force, Oct 2020**

The Mental Wellness Task Force was implemented to review the psychosocial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the population. It was convened by MOH and IMH with representatives from MOE, MOM, MSF, HPB, AIC, PA & NCS. The task force aims to take stock of the mental health and well-being initiatives that have been introduced across ministries and agencies and identify the gaps that need to be addressed to better meet the mental health needs of the population.

B.   **Tripartite Advisory on Mental Well-being at Workplaces, Nov 2020**

A joint effort by the Ministry of Manpower, National Trades Union Congress and the Singapore National Employers Federation. This advisory sets out to provide practical guidance on measures that employers can adopt to support their employees' mental well-being. It also aims to provide resources that employers, employees and self-employed persons can tap on.

The key recommendations from the Tripartite Advisory include:

- Appoint mental wellness champions to raise employees' awareness on mental well-being and mental health conditions through talks and workshops.
- Provide access to counselling services that allow employees to speak to a professional on their work and non-work related challenges
- Train managers to spot signs of mental distress, and on where they can refer employees to seek help from
- Recognise the need for employees to have adequate rest outside work hours by establishing a work-life harmony policy to provide clarity on after-hours work communication.

C.   **Alliance for Action on Work-Life Harmony (WLH), Feb 2021**

This alliance came out of conversations on Emerging Stronger by MOM and tripartite partners. The alliance aims to grow a community of work-life ambassadors who will raise awareness and promote practices on work-life balance to the wider public.

The key goals for the AfA on WLH are:

- Improve awareness of the importance of WLH and best work-life practices
- Support workplaces and the wider community to sustain and enhance WLH practices
- Support companies in specific sectors to overcome challenges and implement FWAs and work-life practices

Annex 1: Government Initiatives

List of Mental Health Initiatives

D.   Youth Mental Well-Being Network, 2020

This network has over 1000 members, with members from MCCY, MSF, MOH and REACH under MCI. The Youth Mental Well-Being Network is a ground-up network where projects are run by the groups formed within the network. The network acknowledges the difficulties surrounding workplace mental health. Discussions around this topic successfully persuaded several SMEs and HR managers within the network to recognise mental wellbeing as an integral part of workplace success.

E.   Workplace Outreach Wellness Package

An initiative by the Health Promotion Board, This package offers co-funding for HPB-approved programmes and is available for private companies of all sizes. This package allows companies to tailor the programmes to the employees specific needs.

WOW Programmes include:

- Chronic Disease Screening & Follow Up
- General Workplace Health Programmes
  (i.e. Physical Activity, Nutrition, Mental Wellbeing, Ergonomics Workshop)
- Targeted Workplace Health Programmes
  (i.e. Weight Management, Chronic Diseases Management, Smoking Cessation)

F.   Healthy Workplace Ecosystem

An initiative by the Health Promotion Board. Over 68 ecosystems.

Ecosystem Locations include: Capitaland Changi Airport, National University Health System (NUHS) HPB partners with landlords and developers to bring healthier food options, free exercise sessions, educational workshops and health screenings to their workers and tenants.

The collaboration aims to establish Healthy Workplace Ecosystems of convenient and conducive environments for workers to achieve healthier lifestyles. It also aims to provide effective tenant engagement platforms for landlords and developers.

Annex 1: Government Initiatives

List of Mental Health Initiatives

G. Community Resource Engagement and Support Team (CREST)

An initiative by AIC. This community outreach team serves as a community safety network for people with/and at risk of depression, dementia and other mental health conditions. It also provides resources for caregivers.

Services provided include:

- Raising awareness of mental health through outreach events to residents and caregivers
- Promoting the recognition of early signs and symptoms of mental illnesses
- Regular home visits to clients and their caregivers
- Provide person-centric care, information, and support for clients and caregivers through basic emotional support, follow-up and service linkage
- Network and engage community partners and coordinate mental health training and education

H. Mood and Dementia Screening

An islandwide screening initiative by AIC and carried out with Project Silver Screen under MOH.

I. iWorkHealth, March 2021

iWorkHealth is an online, self-administered psychosocial health assessment tool for companies and their employees to identify common workplace stressors. It was developed by MOM's Workplace Safety and Health (WSH) Institute in partnership with the WSH Council, IMH, Changi General Hospital and HPB.

The tool itself comprises a list of questions, covering stress-related factors at the workplace including job demands, job control, job recognition, organisation culture and relationship with supervisors and co-workers. After an employee has completed the iWorkHealth survey, the company will receive an aggregated anonymised department and company report identifying the key workplace stressors, extent of workplace stress and the overall state of mental well-being of their employees. Participating employees will receive individual reports on their mental well-being scores and workplace stressors.

List of Mental Health Initiatives

Note: This is a non-exhaustive list and is subjective to change. Please check for opening hours, COVID-19 measures and other details before consulting with any.

Singapore Association for Mental Health
🗨 1800-283-7019

AWARE Counselling Helpline
🗨 1800-777-5555

National Care Hotline
🗨 1800-202-6868
🕒 8am -12am Daily

TOUCHline (Counselling)
🗨 1800-377-2252

Samaritans of Singapore
🕒 24 hr Suicide Hotline
🗨 1800-221-4444

Silver Ribbon
🗨 6386 1928

IMH Mental Health Helpline
🗨 6389 2222
🕒 24HR

WE CARE Community Services (for Addiction)
🗨 6547 5459

CHAT Community Health Assessment Team
🗨 6493 6500   6493 6501
✉ chat@mentalhealth.sg

4   Annex 3: Counselling Services

List of Mental Health Initiatives

Note: This is a non-exhaustive list and is subjective to change. Please check for opening hours, COVID-19 measures and other details before consulting with any.

Counselling and Care Centre
- 6536 6366
- Mon - Fri: 9:00am - 4:00pm

REACH Counselling Centre
- 6801 0730
- Mon - Fri: 9:00am - 6:00pm
  Mon & Wed: 6:00pm - 9:00pm
  Sat: 9:00am - 1:00pm

Talk Your Heart Out
https://talkyourheartout.com/
- contact@talkyourheartout.com
- 6502 2840   9831 0005
Counselling hours:
- Mon - Sun: 7:00am - 11:00pm
Corporate office hours:
- Mon - Fri: 9:30am - 6:00pm

LGBTQ+ Community
Oogachaga
https://oogachaga.com/email-counselling
- Whatsapp: 8592 0609
- Tue, Wed, Thur: 7:00pm – 10:00pm
  Sat: 2:00pm – 5:00pm.

WINGS Counselling Centre
- 6383 5745
- Mon - Fri: 8:30am - 5:30pm
  Sat: 9:00am - 1:00pm

AWARE Sexual Assault Care Centre (SACC)
- 6779 0282
- Mon - Fri: 10:00am - 10:00pm

Fei Yue's Online Counselling Service https://www.ec2.sg/

Malay Community
Club HEAL (Hope, Empowerment, Acceptance & Love)
- Mon - Fri: 9:00am – 5:00pm
- 6899 3463 (office hours)
- info@clubheal.org.sg

Indian Community
Mental A.C.T. (Advocate. Care. Train.)
https://www.facebook.com/mentalactsg/
- 24/7 Helpline 1: 9619 3531
- 24/7 Helpline 2: 9776 9067

4 Acknowledgement

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