

# Mental health: Who bears the cost at the workplace?

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Humans are social beings. The need to have a social circuit where humans come in human contact with others of their species and communicate in various ways is essential for human existence. As dystopia set in with the Covid-9 pandemic, humans got restricted to within homes and were forced to rethink ways of the human connect. The internet temporarily came to the rescue and every aspect of human life, be it interaction or education or work all moved online. Soon enough laptop fatigue set in along with a host of other problems including mental health problems since humans are simply not genetically adept to deal with lives without the essential human connect.



Mental health workshop for men in city

Once the devastating impacts of the pandemic reduced, it was envisaged that humans could go back to their normal ways of life. However, months and years in the case of some countries of lockdowns made return to our normal lives a Herculean task as well. After months and years of artificial conditioning of operating from within one's safe space, several people find it difficult to easily strike conversations or to work in office spaces. The mental health of the species underwent another drastic round of conditioning

As per World Health Organization (WHO) statistics, 15% of working-age adults were estimated to have a mental disorder in 2019, and globally, an estimated 12 billion working days are lost every year to depression and anxiety at a cost of US\$ 1 trillion per year in lost productivity. The case of China, the country with the world's largest population till 2023 stands out in this context. As stated by the WHO, approximately 54 and 41 million people respectively in China suffer from depression and anxiety disorders, and the proportion of Chinese people with mental illnesses is more than 12% of that worldwide. This is the case of just one country. In India's case, the most populated country since

2023, the Aditya Birla Education Trust's survey revealed nearly 48% of corporate employees struggle with mental health issues, with women being more prone to high mental health risks at 56 per cent versus 41 per cent for men. In the United States, the most powerful State of the international system, as stated by the Society for Human Resources Management, of the nearly 53 million US adults with a mental illness, only 46% have accessed mental health services and burnout, exhaustion and hopelessness are more common among workers than ever before, while pandemic related stresses continue to chip away at productivity.

While conversations around mental health have become much more common than ever before, across countries of the globe, mechanisms to address mental health are lesser than what are needed. Legislations have come up in the post pandemic world order wherein work from home for a certain number of days and mental health leave are laudable measures. However, questions of enforcement of such legislations still remain murky. This year has seen a firing style of tech firms across the globe and the recent spate of layoffs has left employees stumped. Big name companies like Apple Inc and Peloton Interactive Inc have been leading the charge. Last year, certain companies including Apple Inc set Labour Day as the deadline for corporate employees to be in the office at least thrice a week. The pandemic proved that work can and gets work done from home, and the amount of time saved in travelling to and from work also gets saved, along with reduced pollution costs. However, companies have been stressing that employees return to the office space. With the return of the previous "normal" post the pandemic, the same old struggles of overtime, lack of breaks and burnouts have returned. To enhance human productivity, measures in the European Union (EU) have been laudable. In the EU, an employer has to ensure that their staff does not work for more than 48 hours per week on average, including overtime, over a reference period of up to four months. Legislations exist and are enforced for violations. However, the same does not exist for a plethora of countries across the globe, including both the developed and the developing world. In China, the 996 working hour system is deemed as an extremely treacherous one and the Chinese youth have been opposing it in a multitude of ways. The 996 working hour system is a work schedule which derives its name from the requirement that employees work from 9.00 am to 9.00 pm, for six days a week- a total of 72 hours per week! The Chinese generation Z is starting to rebel against the 996-work culture, and a new philosophy has taken root among the generation during the pandemic called "touching fish". The term comes from an idiom which means the best time to catch a fish is when the water is muddy. When bosses are distracted, young Chinese people lounge around at work, deliver the bare minimum and go for frequent bathroom breaks and refuse to do overtime. It is also a reflection of the dejection Gen Z has with inadequate pay.

The question that arises here for companies and legislators across the globe is who bears the cost of mental health crises due to work. While legislations exist in a host of country, including in India, the US and in China, stringent enforcement still remains a

reality. If the global economy truly has to recover with increased productivity post a pandemic that has not just affected the ways in which humans interact, work and survive then conditions facilitating the same need to exist beyond just on paper.

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