

When the workplace feels unsafe

DOSH: Bosses must tackle psychosocial risks to protect staff

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PETALING JAYA: Work pressure, excessive workloads and workplace relationships are among the psychosocial concerns raised by employees, with the public service sector recording the highest number of complaints received by the Department of Occupational Safety and Health (DOSH).

DOSH director-general Hazlina Yon (pic) said the complaints included pressure from supervisors or management, excessive workloads, unprofessional communication, unfair treatment and failures by management to act on workers' grievances.

She said the complaints showed that workplace mental health could no longer be viewed simply as a personal problem faced by individual employees.

"Psychosocial risks can occur in all sectors.

"However, based on the complaints received by DOSH so far, the public service sector has recorded the highest number of complaints related to psychosocial risks at the workplace," she told *The Star* in an interview.

Hazlina said the situation highlighted the need to pay closer attention to issues such as work stress, service demands and rela-



tionships between employees and management.

She said that a psychologically unsafe workplace is one where psychosocial risk factors are not effectively managed to the extent that they affect workers' safety, health and well-being.

Among the risks identified under DOSH's Guidelines on Psychosocial Risk Assessment and Management at the Workplace (PRISMA) 2024 are work stress, excessive workloads, harassment, bullying, conflicts with superiors and a lack of organisational support.

Based on complaints received by DOSH, 48 psychosocial-related complaints were recorded last year.

However, the department said 77.1% of the complaints investigated were found to be unsub-

How workplace stress progresses

- Work pressure
- Sleep disruption
- Mood & concentration affected
- Physical health symptoms
- Relationships strained
- Declining performance
- Burnout / absenteeism
- Resignation from the workforce

Source: Dr Amit Janardhan, Brainstore.asia



Warning signs and when to seek help

- Persistent brain fog
- Anxiety or low mood
- Major changes in sleep
- Emotional outbursts
- Social withdrawal
- Loss of interest
- Declining work performance
- Unexplained physical symptoms
- Increased reliance on alcohol or other substances

The Star graphics

stantiated, while 22.9%, or 11 complaints, were found to have merit.

Hazlina said employers had a primary responsibility to ensure that workplaces were safe and healthy both physically and mentally.

She said under Section 15 of the Occupational Safety and Health Act 1994 (Act 514), it is the responsibility of employers, as far as is practicable, to ensure the safety, health and welfare of their workers.

Hazlina said this responsibility extended to managing psychosocial risks through proper risk assessments, effective complaint mechanisms, workload management and appropriate support for employees.

"Employers need to ensure that every complaint is handled appropriately and effectively.

"Workplace safety and health committees also have an important role to play by providing a platform for psychosocial issues to be discussed and resolved before they escalate to the point where they affect workers' mental health, well-being and ability to perform their duties," she stressed.

Hazlina said DOSH could consider enforcement action under the Act 514 if there was evidence that an employer had failed to act on workers' complaints or failed

to manage psychosocial risks to the extent that workers' safety and health were affected.

"PRISMA 2024 was developed to help employers identify, assess and control psychosocial risks at the workplace, in line with the Occupational Safety and Health Act 1994," she said.

She said that awareness of mental health in the workplace is increasing, but some organisations still view it as an individual problem rather than part of their occupational safety and health responsibilities.

She said PRISMA 2024 clarifies that mental health and psychosocial risks form part of the broader occupational safety and health agenda.

"All parties, including employers, supervisors and occupational safety and health practitioners, need to play a proactive role in creating a workplace that is safe both physically and mentally," she said.

Hazlina said that psychosocial risks are not confined to any particular sector and can occur in any workplace.

Health Minister Datuk Seri Dr Dzulkefly Ahmad revealed two weeks ago that the Health Ministry is drafting a workplace mental health policy aimed at creating more supportive, safe and harmonious workplaces.

Workplace stress doesn't just hurt workers

PETALING JAYA: Workplace stress may not only take a toll on employees but also affect employers through higher staff turnover, recruitment costs and lost productivity, says an integrative psychotherapy consultant, Mej (R) Dr Amit Janardhan.

He said organisations need to recognise employee mental health as a strategic business issue rather than simply an individual concern.

Dr Amit said the effects of workplace stress could extend beyond the affected employee, influencing colleagues, team dynamics, decision-making, productivity and family life.

He likened workplace stress to "the Brownian movement of smoke in a confined space", where it might originate from one source but gradually permeate the environment and affect everyone sharing that space.

"When one individual is struggling, the workplace feels it. When an entire workplace is under strain, families and eventually society can feel the effects too.

ees is not merely a human resources initiative but a strategic business investment," said the former Armed Forces medical doctor.

Dr Amit said prolonged workplace stress could contribute to absenteeism, burnout and eventually workers leaving the workforce altogether.

He pointed out that workplace stress was not by itself a mental health disorder.

"Chronic and unaddressed stress can act as a Trojan horse, initially appearing harmless or transient while gradually exerting cumulative effects that undermine overall functioning," he said.

He added that prolonged stress could disrupt sleep, affect mood and concentration, strain relationships and adversely affect physical health.

Dr Amit said it could also worsen anxiety, depression, adjustment difficulties, insomnia, addictions and trauma-related symptoms, while contributing to physical problems such as headaches, gastrointestinal issues, chronic pain and eczema.

He said employees should consider professional help if symptoms such as persistent brain fog, anxiety, low mood, sleep changes, emotional outbursts, social withdrawal, loss of interest, declining performance or unexplained physical symptoms persist despite adequate rest and usual coping strategies.

He said care should be personalised, with some benefiting from stressors, psychoeducation and psychotherapy while others may require specialised psychiatric management.

"Some workers are now walking away from stressful workplaces without another job lined up. This shows that protecting mental health can become more important than protecting a pay cheque," he said.

"Workplace stress is therefore not just an individual issue but an organisational and economic one. Investing in mental health can improve well-being and productivity while reducing disruption."

Assoc Prof Dr Fauziah Mohd Saad, a psychologist and counselor at Universiti Pendidikan

Sultan Idris (UPSI) said some employees may chose to remain silent of their plight as they fear being judged, losing promotion opportunities, receiving poor performance evaluations or facing retaliation.

"Some also believe unhealthy workplace conditions are normal and blame themselves for not being able to cope," she said.

Assoc Prof Fauziah said excessive workloads, pressure from bosses and poor treatment could gradually cause emotional exhaustion, anxiety, low self-confidence and burnout.

"If such conditions continued, employees could feel helpless, disengaged and mentally drained," she added.

She said employers should address the causes of stress rather than relying solely on stress-management programmes.

Assoc Prof Fauziah said this included ensuring reasonable workloads, realistic deadlines, supportive leadership, fair treatment, safe complaint channels, counselling support and early intervention when employees showed signs of distress.

Choosing peace of mind when work takes a toll

PETALING JAYA: It was not one bad day at work.

Instead, it was months of mounting pressure that gradually began affecting a 32-year-old administrative executive who only wanted to be known as Suriani.

As her workload grew, she found herself thinking about unfinished tasks long after office hours, waking up in the middle of the night worrying about deadlines.

By the time she arrived at work, she was mentally exhausted.

At first, she told herself it was simply part of the demands of the promotion she had taken up three months earlier. But it soon became unbearable.

"There were days I wanted to leave for home in the middle of work as I was so stressed out, but I kept telling myself that everyone faces work pressure one time or another. I just needed to be stronger," Suriani said.

Several months later, Suriani quit and decided to run her own e-commerce business.

"Now I get to manage my stress levels better and am more relaxed," she said.

"There were days I wanted to leave for home in the middle of work as I was so stressed out."

Suriani

Suriani is just one of many whose mental health has been affected by the heavy workload.

Shan, a 41-year-old factory technician, regretted switching to a new job lured by a higher salary and better healthcare perks last year. It came at the cost of his mental well-being.

He said the long working hours and constant demands of his superiors in his new workplace took a toll on him.

Often, he dreaded going to work and frequently took leave.

As the warning signs of mental stress crept in, it was his family that first noticed the change before he did.

"My wife told me I was no longer the same person I used to be when I was employed at my previous workplace. I was always tired, angry or thinking about work. Fortunately, my previous employer was kind enough to re-employ me. So I quit and went back. Even though it was a smaller paycheque, I regained my peace of mind," he said.

Seeking a better work environment, he said, was not a sign of weakness but a wise move in ensuring he remained fit to provide for his family – and himself.