

Mental Health in the workplace: survey of Hong Kong employees in professional services firms

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Introduction

Mental ill health is prevalent across the globe; the World Health Organisation estimates that 1 in 4 of us will be affected by mental or neurological disorders at some point in our lives. Successful campaigns in several countries have brought more publicity and society's attention to the issue of poor mental health in the corporate workplace, but in Hong Kong, many issues including stigma and cultural factors continue to discourage open discussion.

The City Mental Health Alliance (CMHA) is a not for profit alliance of organisations which work together to support city employers to create a good culture of mental health for employees, increase mental health understanding, and identify practical steps that businesses can take to create healthy workplaces where employees flourish. The Alliance is led by senior leaders from city businesses. The CMHA was founded in the UK and CMHA Hong Kong launched in 2017.

To assess the current status of mental health conditions in the corporate workplace, and to provide a benchmark for reference for Hong Kong employers – the CMHA HK, together with Oliver Wyman, launched its inaugural mental health survey in 2017. In 2018, we present the results from our second survey.

By the end of the survey period, we received over 400 responses from employees working in the Legal, Financial Services and Consulting industries – the survey results can be used as a base to highlight the typical difficulties associated with managing mental health in Hong Kong, and initiate the dialogue in discussing mental ill health in workplace. We would like to note:

- Participation in this survey is 100% voluntary and anonymous and
- Participation is only limited to professional services firms in Hong Kong and
- Some, but not all, of the organisations that participated in the survey were consistent across 2017 and 2018; some participants may have participated in both surveys

These factors should be noted when drawing comparisons with future studies conducted by CMHA HK or similar studies conducted by other institutions.

Mental ill health is a common and widespread issue amongst Hong Kong professional services employees

Prevalence of mental ill health

The survey results in 2018 indicate that 37% of respondents have at any point in their lifetime experienced a mental ill health while in employment (comparing to 35% in 2017), and 25% of respondents experienced mental health problems while working for their current employer (comparing to 24% in 2017). This year on year pattern of results indicates that mental ill health are a consistent and common feature in professional services companies in Hong Kong.

Experience of mental ill health amongst Hong Kong professional services employees



Figure 1

Source CMHA HK Survey (2018); sample size n = 405

Stigma towards mental ill health

Moreover, the stigma attached to mental ill health is widespread in Hong Kong with 55% of respondents indicating that they have experienced stigma personally and/or know of someone who has due to a mental health condition. Stigma has been shown to be a major inhibitor to people talking openly about mental ill health and can prevent discussion among employees within the workplace (in a study conducted by Time to Change in the UK in 2011, 67% of respondents believed that fear of stigma had stopped them from telling their employer about their mental ill health¹).

Stigma attached to mental ill health in Hong Kong

In response to “have you, a colleague or someone you know ever experienced stigma due to a mental health condition?”

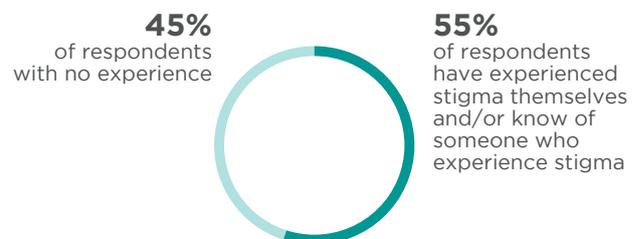


Figure 2

Source CMHA HK Survey (2018); sample size n = 132

¹ Based on a survey (2,770 respondents) conducted by Time to Change (a mental health campaign in the UK) in 2011 to research the impact of stigma and discrimination:
www.time-to-change.org.uk/sites/default/files/imce_uploads/The%20impact%20of%20stigma%20in%202011.pdf

Impact of mental ill health

Mental ill health also represents significant hidden costs both to companies and broader society – with ~65% of respondents indicated that the quality and productivity of their work has been impacted, and that there needs to be more support for people experiencing mental ill health.

This is especially apparent when we consider common mental ill health related symptoms, such as a lack of energy – and that over 50% of respondents have reported at least one of these symptoms in the past two weeks.

Survey results also indicated that symptoms of mental ill health are especially prevalent among mid-level roles (e.g. managers,

Potential productivity uplift in the workplace

In response to “when you experienced mental ill health, how often in a one-month period would you have gone to work, but the quality and productivity of your work were not at the level that are expected of you?”

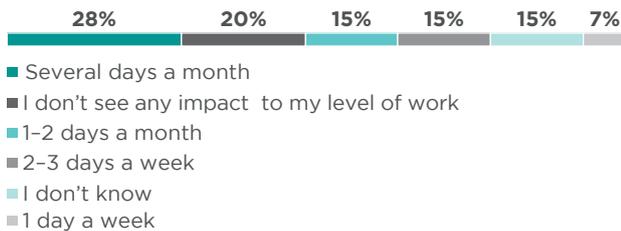


Figure 3
Source CMHA HK Survey (2018); sample size n = 145

Evaluation of American Psychiatric Association (APA) Mental Health Symptoms

Percentage of respondents experiencing the following mental health symptoms at least once in the last 2 weeks

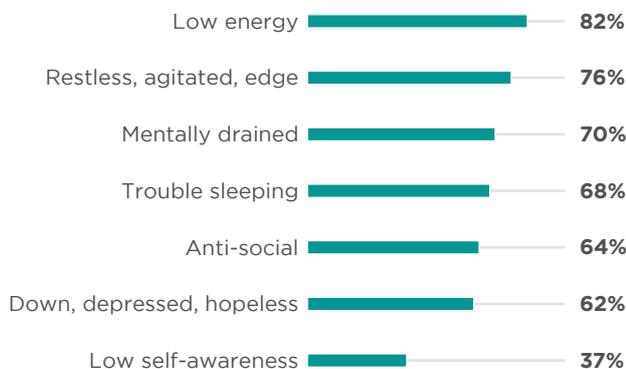


Figure 4
Source CMHA HK Survey (2018); sample size n = 430

team heads) – who are typically “sandwiched” by both subordinates and superiors, and qualitative responses suggested that this is typically driven by:

- A reluctance to discuss mental ill health as they fear this may impact their career progression
- The requirement to be physically present at work (i.e. there is no policy that would support taking time off due to mental health issues)
- Long working hours with little “downtime” as employees are expected to work even after office hours

Issues such as difficulties in controlling anger and the need to cut down on alcohol consumption were also reported by 30% and 20% respondents respectively. Overall these findings have highlighted clear areas of concern.

However, ensuring a clear strategy of support for employees can help to ensure that these issues are addressed.

Implementing a clear policy, working to create a more open culture around mental health and offering reasonable adjustments are some strategies that can be employed to support employees and address areas of concern.

Evaluation of APA Mental Health Symptoms – averaging across all mental health symptoms observed

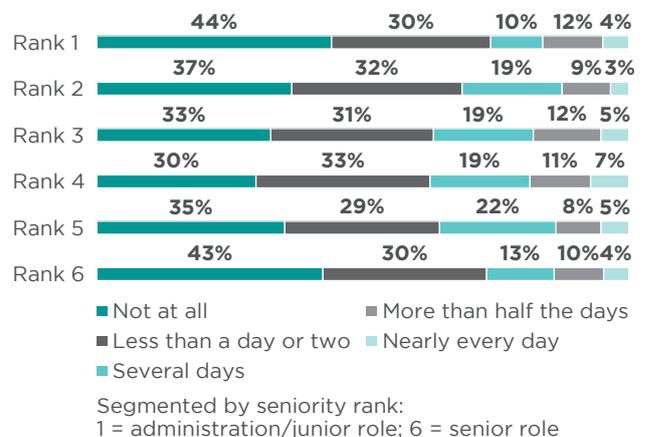


Figure 5
Source CMHA HK Survey (2018); sample size n = 430

Three gaps have been identified – Knowledge, Support, Trust

Selected quotes from employees

Survey respondents were also given the opportunity to provide further information, and asked to comment specifically on the following 4 areas: advice, service or support from their employer that they found helpful, what else organisations can do to support staff facing mental ill health and how new joiners to the firm can be supported.

"I think organisation need to put their money [to] where their mouth is [and] stop having unrealistic expectations of your staff (i.e. being on call 24/7 and working through weekends) and offer real support."

"Train managers to be able to have conversations, offer more information about support mechanisms."

"Cover mental health appointments because otherwise they are too costly."

"Organizations should raise awareness for the importance of mental health/mental wellness. Often times, emphasis is placed on exercising more (i.e. physical wellness) but mental and emotional health is just as important. I feel like with [the] stigma and negative connotations associated with this topic, [it] hinders people to openly talk about it."

"Mental illness sufferers are not supported in the same way as medical illnesses. For mental illness, if time off is required, then it needs to be from a medical practitioner, yet sometimes the medical practitioner is not involved at all, it is the psychotherapist. In some cases, psychotherapists do not fall under being registered as a medical practitioner. Hitting these walls [make it] really difficult to seek the necessary rest time to recover or get over a difficult day."

"There need to be many senior voices from the top of the organisation showing support for this, and demonstrating practical ways of supporting (not just lip service) a very serious matter."

"My feeling is that one of the main causes of mental health problems amongst employees at organisations in Hong Kong is a culture of very long working hours, and a general acceptance of poor work-life-balance. Further, employees are reluctant to talk about

Some verbatim responses have been highlighted below, indicating that employees have clear ideas around how employers can better support staff, improve mental health and wellbeing in the workplace and create better working environments.

mental health issues with their employers because of the fear that this may have an impact on their career progression."

"Employers in Hong Kong may be beginning to talk about mental health with their employees, and it would probably be unlikely that an employee would face active discrimination if they were to raise the fact that they have mental health problems with their employer. However, I feel that the situation for mental health in Hong Kong will not fundamentally improve unless there is a significant change in the working culture of employers in Hong Kong, and that will only change if there is a change in the underlying business model, which is currently based on being available to clients 24/7, and on billing as many hours to clients as possible."

"Partners/managers need to be educated on these issue[s] and must lead by example to create an inclusive environment where employees feel safe to discuss these issues with them directly or with HR. Employee assistance hotlines/program do not provide a high return on investment. Instead, partners/direct managers need to develop a higher level of awareness, and should consider providing deal team members with a "mental health" day off after signing/closing of a transaction. They could also encourage flexible working arrangements, so that employees have better control over their work/life commitments and are able to commit to regular exercise or other activities that encourage social bonding which have positive impacts on mental health."

"Continuously reminding people that mental health issues are normal. It needs to be a societal change, so I would like the process required to that required for gender equality."

"Giving them space. Usually when you tell them you're having problems, they'll end up smothering you or over helping."

Survey results have been used to highlight three areas associated with employee experience of mental ill health – but can be easily addressed within professional services companies:

Knowledge gap: 69% of survey respondents have never received any education or information on mental ill health.

Firm support gap: Only 8% of people that have previously experienced mental

ill health indicated that they think their firms have sufficient resources to support staff well-being.

Trust gap: Of those who have experienced mental ill health, only 36% reported revealing their experience to someone in the workplace. The fact that a large number of people have also experienced stigma in some form may suggest that some of this could be attributed to stigma.

Majors gaps identified – knowledge, firm support and trust



Source CMHA HK Survey (2018); sample size n = 427 (knowledge gap); n = 148 (firm support gap); n = 99 (trust gap)

Figure 6

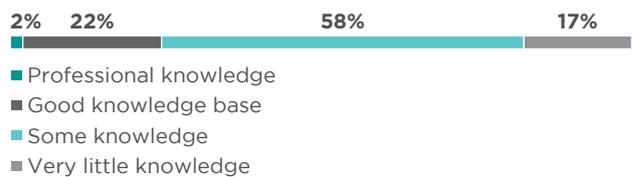
Knowledge gap

The survey suggested that only ~24% of respondents have indicated that they have good knowledge or professional knowledge about mental ill health.

This is important as we observed a clear correlation between employees with greater knowledge on mental health and being able to talk openly to a line manager about their concerns.

Workplace mental health knowledge

In response to “How would you rate your knowledge about mental ill health”



Source CMHA HK Survey (2018); sample size n = 430

Figure 7

Furthermore, of the ~31% respondents that had received some form of training, most (~65%) had completed some sessions on general mental health awareness as opposed to a dedicated full day or multi-day training sessions. It is encouraging that this number of staff have received some awareness sessions but this is a clear area for improvement.

Employers should lead in organizing seminars or other forms of training sessions to educate employees on recognizing signs and symptoms of poor mental health as well as ensuring that staff have strategies and support systems in place to support good mental health.

Firm support gap

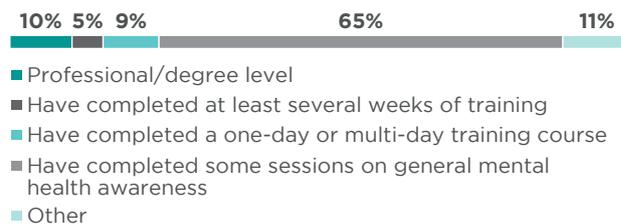
Only 8% of respondents (who indicated that they have experienced mental ill health previously) believe the resources available to support staff well-being were sufficient and tailored to their needs. This is in line with findings from other studies e.g. the MIND HK 2018 survey which found that 73% of respondents stated that their workplaces did not provide any programmes of support for mental health needs for staff¹.

In addition, survey respondents tend not to agree that their firm is providing sufficient support for their mental health wellbeing, indicating potential room for improvement especially in areas such as providing more resources to employees.

Breaking down these scores further, 36% of employees stated that they do not achieve a good work-life balance and 21% of employees indicated that they do not feel valued at work.

Workplace mental health training

Of the 31% who have received some training, respondents were asked to select which level of training they received

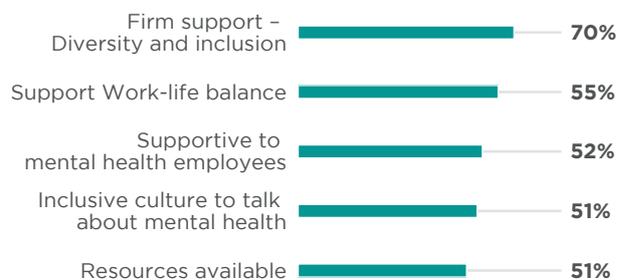


Source CMHA HK Survey (2018); sample size n = 133 **Figure 8**

Employers therefore have considerable areas for improvement. Firms should invest more resources to support employees, and management should set the tone “from the top” of the house to promote a healthy firm culture.

Firm support for mental health

In response to “To what extent do you agree the firm support mental health” (100% = fully agree)



Source CMHA HK Survey (2018); sample size n = 430 **Figure 9**

¹ Based on a survey (1,210 respondents) conducted by Mind Hong Kong (a charitable initiative formed out of the Patient Care Foundation) in 2018 to research the attitude towards mental health in Hong Kong: www.mind.org.hk/news/timetochangehkresearch/

Trust gap

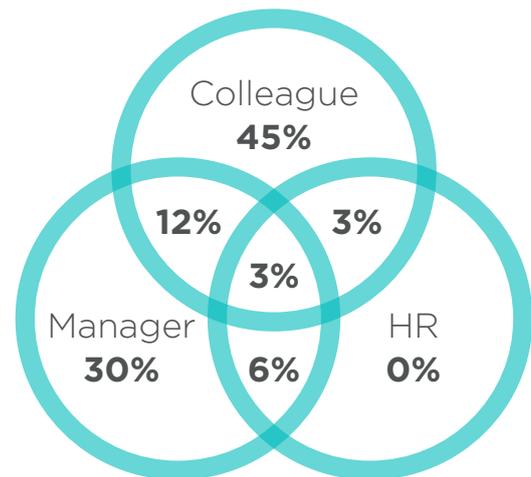
Only ~36% of respondents have told someone about their mental ill health at their workplace – of which only 12% spoke to HR, while the vast majority chose to reach out to either their colleagues or managers to

discuss the issue. Therefore, given the fact that many people chose to speak to a colleague or manager rather than HR, it is crucial that staff at all levels are aware and educated on mental health as well as sources of support.

Trust within the workplace

In response to “Who did you tell?”

Diagram highlights whom staff told about their mental ill health (respondents could indicate multiple parties in one response e.g. Colleague and Manager - this is shown as the intersection between the two groups i.e. 12%, no respondents indicated that they have only spoken with HR)



Source CMHA HK Survey (2018); sample size n = 33 – excluding “Prefer not to say” and “Others” **Figure 10**

What employers can do to support employees

Mental ill health has been shown to be a widespread issue amongst staff working in professional services companies in Hong Kong. Costs are high for both employees and employers and investment in strategy is required. Employers need to take appropriate and significant steps to ensure employee wellbeing.

This report has identified areas for improvement in working practices as well as clear gaps that exist between the employee experience of mental ill health and the support provided by employers. This includes a lack of knowledge and awareness around mental health, a lack of support provided by the company and inability for employees to feel comfortable in talking about their concerns. Addressing each of these areas as part of an overall strategy to support good mental health in the workplace will bring benefits to both the employer and employee and ensure long-term sustainability.

Companies should "lead by example", sending a clear message that a mentally

healthy environment in the workplace is important. Senior management should work to identify and address areas of employee concern. This may include examination of working practices, policy, and support for implementation of strategies to promote "good mental health" and wellbeing practices. Companies should also ensure that staff are able to talk about concerns without fear or stigma and know where to get help and support if required.

Staff at all levels should be trained on understanding and awareness around mental health and firms should consider training options for staff at different levels and with different levels of responsibilities including senior staff, line managers and Human Resources/people manager role.

With appropriate planning, employers can meaningfully contribute to creating mentally healthy workplaces and ensure employee wellbeing is top of the agenda.

About City Mental Health Alliance (CMHA) Hong Kong

The CMHA Hong Kong is a not for profit alliance of organisations which work together to support city employers to create a good culture of mental health for employees, increase mental health understanding, and identify practical steps that businesses can take to create healthy workplaces where employees flourish. The Alliance is business led and expert guided. The CMHA was originally founded in the UK. CMHA Hong Kong was launched in 2017 at the same time as Mind Hong Kong and with the support of the Patient Care Foundation. For more information, visit www.cmhahk.org/.

About Oliver Wyman

Oliver Wyman is a global leader in management consulting. With offices in 50+ cities across nearly 30 countries, Oliver Wyman combines deep industry knowledge with specialized expertise in strategy, operations, risk management, and organization transformation. The firm has more than 4,700 professionals around the world who help clients optimize their business, improve their operations and risk profile, and accelerate their organizational performance to seize the most attractive opportunities. Oliver Wyman is a wholly owned subsidiary of Marsh & McLennan Companies [NYSE: MMC]. For more information, visit www.oliverwyman.com.

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