How leaders deal with anxiety and sleepless nights

TOI+ - Expert Speak

Sonia Gupt TNSOFTHEDA DAY
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The pandemic has taken a toll on mental health and well-being. Companies are awake to this, and are offering a plethora of initiatives to relieve stress and anxiety. From poke nights to yoga, from therapy sessions to unlimited leave, here's how India Inc is managing mental health

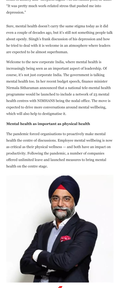
In a recent LinkedIn post, Gurpreet Singh, managing director - leadership & succession, Russell Reynolds India, talks about his bouts of anxiety and "sleepless nights". In his candid post, he adds: "It was pretty much work-related stress that pushed me into depression."

Sure, mental health doesn't carry the same stigma today as it did even a couple of decades ago, but it's still not something people talk about openly. Singh's frank discussion of his depression and how he tried to deal with it is welcome in an atmosphere where leaders are expected to be almost superhuman.

Welcome to the new corporate India, where mental health is increasingly being seen as an important aspect of leadership. Of course, it's not just corporate India. The government is talking about mental health. In her recent budget speech, finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced that a national tele-mental health programme will be launched, with 23 centres for mental health centres with NIMHANS being the nodal office. The move is expected to drive more conversations around mental wellbeing, which will also help to destigmatise it.

Mental health an important as physical health

The pandemic forced organisations to proactively make mental health the centre of discussions. Employee mental wellbeing is now as critical as their physical wellness — and both have an impact on productivity. Following the pandemic, a number of companies have offered subsidised leave and launched measures to bring mental health on the centre stage.



It was pretty much work-related stress that pushed me into depression (LinkedIn post)

Gurpreet Singh, MD - leadership & succession, Russell Reynolds India

The realisation soon dawned that leaders are perhaps more susceptible to burnout due to stress. Mental wellness for leaders is equally important and now the discussion is being driven top-down. What's more, they also have an ease of role modelling the need to seek help when needed.

In this context, Singh's LinkedIn post has particular relevance. He has since been lauded by the fraternity for his candid admission to a serious problem which he has managed to control. Armed with several learnings from a bad phase, Singh is now helping several other leaders that the confidence to seek counselling. By doing this, Singh is, in fact, helping them from getting caught in what may otherwise become a never-ending whirlpool of depression.

"I realise that even on my dark days, when I thought I wasn't making progress towards healing, in an infinitesimal way, it was. And it has all added up over time," said Singh.

Managing stress

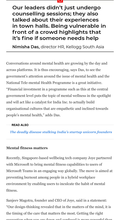
Role models matter

When leaders talk and confront an issue upfront, others pay heed and act accordingly.

Nimisha Das, director HR, Kellogg South Asia, which launched its EAP programme with inputs from partner post pandemic, says since there's still a stigma attached to mental health, the company realised that the first thing that needed to be done was role modelling.

"Our leaders did not just undergo the counselling sessions themselves; they also came forward and talked about their experiences to town halls. It was only down once they aligns that's attached to mental health issues, but by being vulnerable in front of a crowd, highlights that it's absolutely fine if someone needs help," says Das.

Das says when the employee assistance programme or EAP was introduced, the usage was abysmally low at a 2%. "When we ventured on the confidentiality factor, the usage picked up. The uptake further improved when the role modelling of behaviours started," she adds. The number of employees pursuing individual and formal counselling sessions at Kellogg India more than doubled in 2021.



Our leaders didn't just undergo counselling sessions; they also talked about their experiences in town halls. Being vulnerable in front of a crowd highlights that it's fine if someone needs help

Nimisha Das, director HR, Kellogg South Asia

Conversations around mental health are growing by the day and across platforms. It is thus encouraging, says Das, to see the government's attention around the issue of mental health and the National Tele-mental Health Programme is a great initiative. "Financial investment in a programme such as that at the central government level puts the topic of mental wellness in the spotlight and will act like a catalyst for India Inc. It actually build organisational cultures that are empathetic and inclined towards people's mental health," adds Das.

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Mental fitness matters

Recently, Singapore-based wellbeing tech company Aye partnered with Microsoft to bring mental fitness capabilities to users of Microsoft Teams in an engaging way globally. The move is aimed at preventing burnout among people in a hybrid workplace environment by enabling users to monitor the habit of mental fitness.

Sanjeev Magotra, founder and CEO of Aye, said in a statement: "Our design thinking revealed that in the matters of the mind, it is the timing of the cues that matters the most. Getting the right suggestion when you are down and confused is more powerful than a thousand mental wellbeing apps in your phone. This is exactly what Aye does, and why it is different from anything you have seen in mental wellbeing till date."

Aye, added Magotra, analyses people's work patterns in Microsoft Teams with extreme privacy and delivers timely suggestions to measure and manage their wellbeing when one may need it the most.

We're helping employees maintain good mental health by organising sessions conducted by psychotherapists & psychologists related to centering, mindfulness, body-mind integration, breath-work

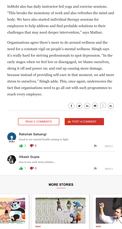
Sahil Mathur, CHRO, InMobi Group

Mental health and productivity

Studies show that mental wellbeing has a significant impact of spike on productivity. A number of companies started offering mid-week time-offs and enhanced leave to employees. Kompete nearly doubled its annual leave to 35 days. "We also have instituted extended unlimited leaves for our employees to manage any impact from Covid to themselves or their family. Our effort has been to instill peace of mind for our employees and ensure they can take care of family without worrying about work or any financial implications," says Prateek Kansal, head of India operations and engineering, Kompete.

InMobi Group, meanwhile, introduced 20 additional days of well-being related leave which employees can take at any time during the year. These can be used as pick-me-up, rejuvenate-off, care, and/or recharging days. "Other ways through which we are helping employees maintain and have good mental health is by organising sessions conducted by experienced psychotherapists and psychologists related to centering, mindfulness, body-mind integration, breath-work, etc," says Sahil Mathur, CHRO InMobi Group.

Other than that, companies also ensure people are well engaged and do not miss out on social collaboration. Kompete has "Friday Night poker" with all precautions, while InMobi Group has "No meeting Fridays".



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Prateek Kansal, head of India operations and engineering, Kompete

InMobi also has daily instructor-led yoga and exercise sessions. "This breaks the monotony of work and also refreshes the mind and body. We have also started individual therapy sessions for employees to help address and find probable solutions to their challenges that may need deeper intervention," says Mathur.

Organisations agree there's more to do around mental health and the need for a constant right on people's mental wellness. Singh says: it's really hard for striving professionals to spot depression. "In the early stages where we feel low or disengaged, we blame exercises, driving a tiff and power nap, and end up curtsying more damage, because instead of provoking self-care in that moment, we add more stress to ourselves," Singh adds. This, once again, underscores the fact that organisations need to go all out with such programmes to reach every employee.

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