

Work and Mental Health

Over the last few weeks, the newspapers' headlines have been busy: Petrotrin starts severance process! OWTU blanked! Sabotage suspected in fire; Mother of all marches starts! Loss possible after Petrotrin! They have alerted us to the impact that the closure of the refinery has had, not only on the workers who have lost their jobs, but also on the general public, many of whom are family members of these workers and who have empathized with and supported and prayed for these unemployed citizens.

As you can imagine, the workplace represents one of the key environments that affect our mental well-being and health. According to the ILO (International Labour Organisation), *'work is at the very core of life for most people, providing financial security, personal identity, and an opportunity to make a meaningful contribution to community life.'* So that the loss of one's job can lead to mental illness and depression. There have been attempts to increase awareness on this issue by many organizations, and to decrease the stigma of mental illness which marginalizes and ostracizes persons so affected. However, employers and enterprises still lag behind in their *'understanding of the pervasiveness, treatment and impact of mental illness on organizational life'*.

Very slowly, companies are realizing that **the productivity of their employees is connected to, not only their physical health, but also to their mental health and well-being.** But how many workplaces have a comprehensive policy or an EAP (Employee Assistance Provider) to address mental health issues? Why have Insurance companies in this country NOT come on board to help families to cover the costs of treatment? Thus far, Sagicor seems to be the only company willing to provide partial coverage here. Human resource policies in organizations must be worded to raise the profile of mental health as a workplace issue. Job stress is real! Downsizing and retrenchment, organizational restructuring and change, means increased workloads for the remaining staff. Job stress can increase the rate of work-related issues and accidents which in turn, can affect the health of an organization.

In Trinidad and Tobago, many workplaces do not have mental health policies in place, because no-one gives voice to this issue, or speaks up for our right to a mentally-well work environment. This stunts efforts at change or improvements and explains why workplaces do not take the mental health of its workforce seriously! Most companies have OSHA standards that address health and safety features and focus on the physical aspects of the workplace only.

Many changes have been identified to take place in this country post-Budget 2019. Let us be aware of this issue as a populace, especially those who are in supervisory and managerial positions, and aim to consider and implement policies that seek to address the consequences of mental illness. Perhaps these revised policies would decrease absenteeism and reductions in output and productivity, prevent turnover of staff and increase motivation and alleviate conflicts and tension between coworkers etc.

Let us quickly find solutions to the many citizens who have been dismissed, as businesses come together to offer at least part-time employment to these mothers and fathers. Studies report that persons who become unemployed had over twice the risk of increased depressive symptoms and diagnoses of clinical depression, than those who remained employed. Re-employment was shown to be one of the most effective ways of promoting the mental health of the unemployed.

Let us ALL do our part to help those who have been adversely affected by displacement and trauma.