



Breaking the Stigma

Attitudes toward mental health in Hong Kong are changing, but more needs to be done to help eradicate the stigma associated with it.

– By Sarah Graham

In a city of extremes – long working hours, a gaping poverty gap, and some of the highest rents in the world – you might expect some degree of stress-related issues among those living and working in Hong Kong.

But when it comes to mental health, the figures are stark: one in seven Hongkongers is said to suffer some form of mental health-related condition, with the statistics for the 40,000-plus expats who live in the city even higher.

Furthermore, a report published by Mind HK in February this year highlighted the stigma still attached to such illness, finding that 40% of people in Hong Kong would be unwilling to live near

someone with mental health problems. While almost 75% of respondents agreed that those who experience mental health problems should be better included in society, most were unwilling to engage personally, said the report, conducted in collaboration with the University of Hong Kong, King's College London, and funded by Aetna International.

“There are many reasons for a stigma around mental health, including a lack of understanding and the fact that people can’t ‘see mental health problems’ like they can ‘see physical health problems,’” says Dr Hannah Reidy, CEO of Mind HK. “A common symptom of many mental health problems is social withdrawal and isolation, which makes it harder for

individuals experiencing them to reach out, connect with others, and engage in social contact which will reduce stigma.”

Such attitudes towards mental health mean that the real number of sufferers may be even higher because the stigma makes some reluctant to discuss their condition and seek help. This is an area on which Mind HK is focused as it works to bring about a significant shift in perception towards mental health in Hong Kong.

Reidy explains: “A concept called the ‘social contact hypothesis’ is the basis of a lot of successful international anti-stigma campaigns and is based on the idea that actually speaking with or listening to someone who has experienced mental health problems significantly reduces stigma. Mind HK organises events, such as our ‘Mindful Suppers’ initiative, to do just this. We hope to be expanding on this soon by developing our online blog and other platforms for experiences to be shared. On a wider level, we need to educate people so that they better understand the realities of mental health problems; raising awareness of the unhelpful myths surrounding mental health can help in the destigmatisation process.”



Dr Hannah Reidy, CEO of Mind HK

Hong Kong’s culture of saving face – the reluctance to publicly show vulnerability – is one of a number of reasons why the stigma surrounding mental health is still an issue in the city.

“Individuals are often extremely self-stigmatising, which perpetuates the problem. We are working to complete a comprehensive comparison study with other international studies on mental health awareness and stigma; looking informally at some of Hong

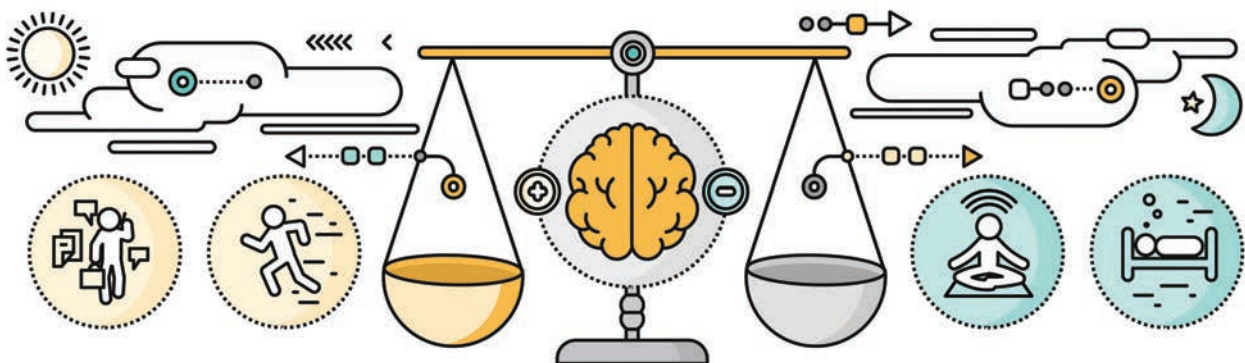
Kong’s attitudes against those held in countries such as the UK, our attitudes and levels of knowledge are not as positive nor developed,” she says.

Perhaps more worrying was the lack of awareness of where to get help: 60% of respondents didn’t know where to seek mental health help outside of hospitals. This has prompted Mind HK to

begin developing a community directory to enable easy searches of mental healthcare, including NGOs, community organisations, therapists, and support groups.

Reidy identifies many factors that contribute to mental health problems in Hong Kong. The city has one of the longest working hours in the world (an

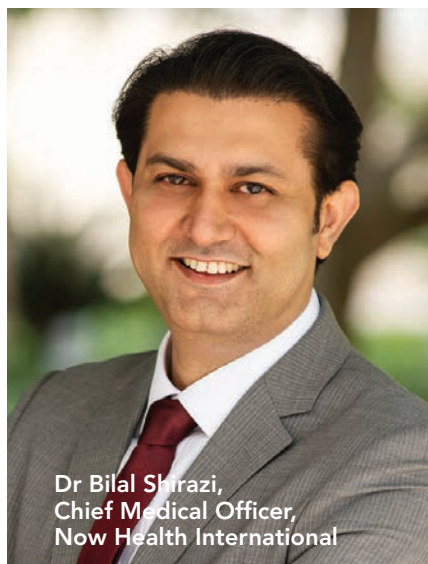
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average of around 50 hours per week) and its culture of presenteeism contributes to high levels of work stress. “Cramped living conditions, a relatively high wealth-gap, and our notoriously crowded urban environment make Hong Kong inherently more stressful than other places,” she adds.

Expats sent to work abroad are at least twice as likely to suffer mental health issues, and this is particularly true for those living in Hong Kong which ranks poorly on the WHO’s Five Well-Being Index. Last year Hong Kong’s Index score dropped significantly from 59.75 to 50.2, well below the WHO’s pass mark for a good quality of life.

Dr Bilal Shirazi, Chief Medical Officer of insurers Now Health International, agrees the taboo around mental health, particularly in certain parts of the world such as Asia and the Middle East, can prevent people from seeking the treatment they need.



Dr Bilal Shirazi,
Chief Medical Officer,
Now Health International

He says Now Health International has seen a slight increase in claims for mental health-related conditions in recent years, and in a survey of its membership conducted last year, 16% of respondents ranked mental health issues as one of their top three major health concerns.

“Research also shows that expatriates are 2.5 times more likely to suffer from mental health issues than their non-expat peers, particularly from depression or anxiety related disorders. In particular, expatriate postings can place severe pressures on the family, most often for the spouse, leading to feelings of loss, isolation from loved ones and loneliness,” Dr. Shirazi says.

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” He believes it’s crucial for employers to consider the broader well-being of their staff when relocating employees abroad, ensuring they have the necessary support in place including access to both physical health and



(Illustrations for Mind HK by Hong Kong-born illustrator, Dufficool)

mental health services. Now Health International provides cover for some mental health conditions and is planning to introduce a complimentary Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) for its SME corporate clients, which will include access to confidential advice and counselling on a range of mental health issues, from financial and legal worries to depression and bereavement.

“Such services can be particularly important for businesses sending employees on expatriate assignments, as an estimated 40% of international placements fail, largely due to the employee or their family not being able to settle in their new home country. With each failed assignment estimated to cost businesses up to US\$950,000, this is clearly an area worth investing in,” he says.

“Mental illness is something we should and need to be talking about more. Just amongst our own members in Hong Kong, we have seen about a 30% increase in annualised claims for psychological and psychiatric services since 2015. This tells us that more people are getting the care they need, but we feel there may be many more who are not accessing the resources available to them,” says Kevin Jones, Chief Executive of Aetna Insurance (Hong Kong) Limited. “Today, Aetna’s award-winning Summit health plans for employers offer a built-in Employee Assistance Program - at no additional cost – to help companies support the mental wellbeing of their employees. With the program, Aetna members get access to confidential counselling from behavioural health experts in 180

countries around the world; by phone call, email, web and even chat messaging via an app.”

Some firms are leading the conversation on mental health with their employees. GlaxoSmithKline plc (GSK) has launched several initiatives with a focus on the wellbeing of its staff, including the provision of workplaces, programmes and facilities that enable workers to understand their health, and help them feel healthier, happier and more energised at work and at home.

Flora He, Human Resources Director, GSK Hong Kong and Macau, believes that taking care of mental health and wellbeing is just as important as looking after physical health.

“Through various channels including the corporate intranet, Workplace by Facebook, as well as regular check-in sessions between employees and their line managers, staff can discuss any issues related to their work and personal life,” she says.

These include access to an external mental health specialist partner to get free and confidential advice, short live mindfulness online sessions, virtual workshops to learn simple techniques at work and at home, and webinars on mental health, managing stress for workplace and address anxiety.

She adds: “We believe that when we feel at our best, we perform at our best. We can thrive and do great things at work and at home.” **B**

