

EAPs are not enough to tackle South Africa's Mental Health Challenge in Organisations



A mental health awareness partnership article in last week's Sunday Times entitled Productivity Under Pressure, rightly highlights the enormous crisis we are facing in South African organisations in terms of mental health. The approach to this crisis (which many are referring to as a pandemic), suggested in the article is to implement Employee Assistance Programmes (EAP's) such as that provided by Discovery Healthy Company.

I would agree that EAP's play an important role within organisations. However, it must be stressed that they are only one part of the solution. In my work as an Industrial Psychologist in many organisations in South Africa and across the continent, I have heard so many stories from employees who tell me that they do not want to talk about their issues with a stranger on the phone, or worse still an AI bot. They want to engage with real people and professionals, feel truly supported by their organisations, and have their organisations address the inherent structural and cultural factors (poor leadership, long working hours, multiple pressures, competing demands, a lack of transparency and communication, disengagement etc.), contributing to their mental health issues.

Organisations cannot simply implement an EAP service and hope that this will be a silver bullet. They need to look at their approach to mental health and wellness, and take a comprehensive strategic view that includes preventative, health promotive and supportive strategies (Ruwayne et. al, 2025).

Many organisations are implementing EAPs as a cost-effective blanket approach to employee support. However, in our experience, utilisation is low especially when compared with the scale of the crisis. In

addition, organisations are not effectively managing how employees are engaging with the service, or tracking the nature of the issues emerging, so that they can respond to them directly.

Backing up our experience in the field, EAP-SA research indicates that utilisation rates are a low 3-5% and though this is in line with the global average, it should reach 7-10% to indicate strong engagement (Steen, 20203). In addition, the quality of the engagement is critical. I have heard countless stories from employees of how their EAP provided them with stock standard, surface level, self-help solutions that did not speak to their lived reality as South Africans. This can cause damage to an already vulnerable person and contribute to further mental health challenges.

The piece correctly names stigma surrounding mental health issues as a barrier to seeking help. But the issue here is that organisations must tackle stigma by normalising seeking help and implementing holistic ways to encourage employees to seek support. This requires regular, deep conversations with leadership and the workforce, communication campaigns that go beyond self-help, and ongoing awareness of what good support looks like and where it can be accessed.

The writer also correctly observes that “Employers must go beyond the façade of wellbeing to create a genuinely supportive and psychologically safe working environment”. This means working at multiple levels (individual, interpersonal, and organisational) when designing mental health programmes, drawing insights from employee experiences and co-creating solutions with them (Fleming, et. al, 2023).

Individual-level interventions do not significantly improve mental health and well-being and the possible explanation for this is that individual level interventions are only effective when organisations work on structural changes too. (Fleming, et. al, 2023).

How is this done? Recent research in the South African Journal of Industrial Psychology on how to cultivate a culture of mental health in organisations by Ruwayne et. al (2025) highlights a 3-pronged approach. First, conduct a comprehensive organisational needs analysis to identify mental health needs. Then, use evidence-based interventions for managing mental health in the workplace and finally create a holistic multi-level framework to address mental health which is tracked over time and modified when necessary.

A multi-stakeholder approach to wellness is critical if we are to truly support people and in turn, support organisations. EAPs are a critical stakeholder, but we must take a broader long-term, strategic view. Working on multiple fronts with multiple stakeholders involves ongoing health promotion and awareness, capacitating local wellness champions through peer education, increasing referrals to EAP's, supporting individuals to access the help they need, co-creating interventions that speak to the lived realities of South Africans and creating multi stakeholder governance structures to regularly monitor progress. But before we even begin, we must ensure that mental health and wellness is firmly on an organisation's agenda; driven, owned and sustained at the highest levels of an organisation. If this is not the case, anything done to tackle this issue will amount to nothing more than a tick-box exercise.

Yes, EAP's are a powerful tool in the South African workplace, however as a nation in the grips of a catastrophic health crisis, we need to do much more.

Taegan Devar is an Industrial Psychologist and the Managing Director of Organisational Development company PeopleSmart (www.peoplesmart.global)