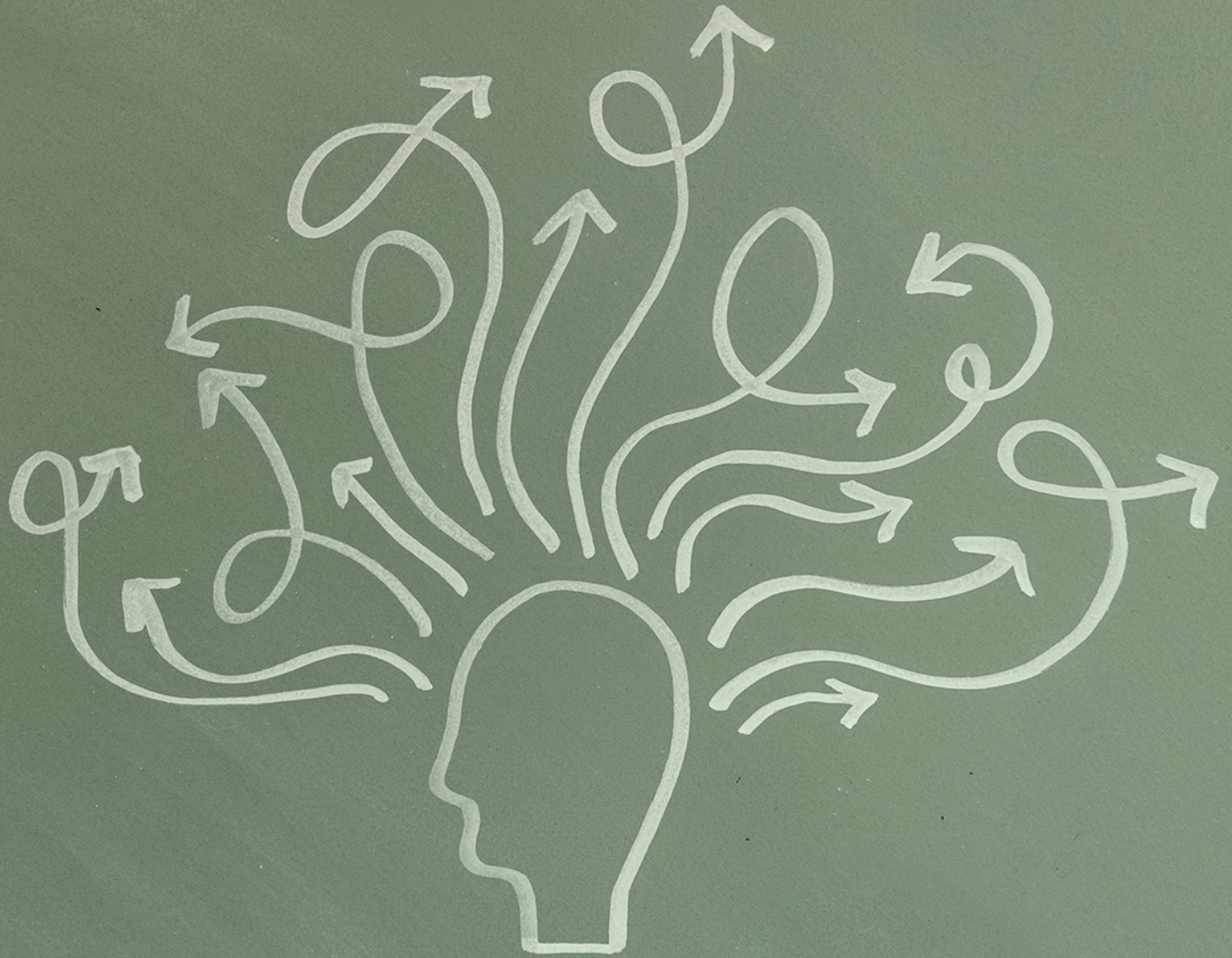




**CIPRIANI COLLEGE**  
OF LABOUR AND CO-OPERATIVE STUDIES



# **WORK MATTERS**

**COLUMN**

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# Workers' Well-Being Shouldn't Be a Workplace Casualty: Prioritizing Mental Health

In the working world of never-ending deadlines and constant urgency, where tasks and meetings blur into one fast-paced stream, mental well-being can easily get left behind. Whether you're behind the desk, in the field, on the factory floor or hospital ward, your job shouldn't come at the cost of your well-being.

Mental health has long been a taboo subject in the Caribbean, and even more distressingly, it has been socially, economically, politically, and culturally neglected. The reality is that we are trailing behind the rest of the developed world at a terribly slow pace.

Many occupations, such as those of emergency responders, healthcare workers, social workers, and teachers, involve high-stress situations that can significantly impact workers' psychological well-being. However, mental health issues can extend into various other industries, aggravated by the pressure to meet deadlines, navigate office politics, adapt to organizational changes, and manage work-life balance.

Workers struggling with mental health issues often feel isolated and unsupported, significantly impacting their engagement, behaviour and overall satisfaction at work. This not only creates a negative work environment but also poses safety risks. The pandemic exacerbated these issues, bringing additional challenges such as increased workloads, technological barriers, screen fatigue, blurred work-life boundaries, and job loss.

Increasingly, research is highlighting the significant impact of occupational mental health issues on productivity, absenteeism, presenteeism and employee turnover. What's more, policymakers and health professionals are turning up the heat, making it clear that mental illness is not just a personal issue but a pressing concern within organizations.

Organizations and employers are starting to recognize that safeguarding mental well-being isn't just a moral imperative, but that it makes good business sense. Ac-

ording to the WHO (2022), mental health issues result in significant economic costs. Reduced productivity due to these conditions amounts to a global annual loss of US\$1 trillion, with twelve billion working days lost each year.

Employers have the legal duty to safeguard the health and safety of their employees, and while Employee Assistance Programmes (EAP) provide some support, there is still much work to be done. During the launch of the 'Review of the Assessment Phase EAP' in July 2023, a startling revelation came to light. A study of over 1000 public servants revealed that the majority believed that their employers did not prioritize their mental well-being.

The institutionalized stigma on mental health causes workers to devalue their own mental well-being, for fear of being perceived as incapable. They may feel ashamed or embarrassed to seek help. They may also have concerns that sensitive health information will not be kept confidential or be dismissed altogether.

To address these challenges, employers must create an environment where their workers feel comfortable discussing their mental health concerns without fear of stigma or reprisal. This can be achieved by ensuring that managers receive sufficient training and by conducting workshops to raise awareness of mental illness at work. Additionally, employers should provide access to counseling and therapy services and foster a culture of trust, openness, and support.

Organizations must also transform the existing systems that contribute to mental health issues, prioritizing prevention. This includes improving company policies to promote work-life balance, reduce excessive workloads, and adopt hybrid work, which are universally proven systems for enhancing productivity.

Employers should also explore new, innovative approaches that are proving effective in boosting employee morale and mental well-being. Investing in nature therapy is another valuable option, as nature-based

recreation has been found to improve well-being and decrease anxiety and depression (Lackey et al., 2021). Given that many workers spend a significant amount of time at their desks, incorporating nature into office spaces or creating relaxation zones in common areas or breakrooms could be beneficial.

In developed countries, therapy dogs are successfully employed to assist individuals with physical and psychological disabilities, while visitation animals aid patients in various healthcare settings. In the Caribbean, there is growing acceptance of pets as emotional support animals, and attitudes toward them are improving. Organizations should consider introducing animal therapy in workplace settings, as research shows it significantly reduces stress and improves overall well-being.

Whether employers choose to implement such innovative strategies or improve traditional methods, it's a step in the right direction. By taking a holistic approach to mental health in the workplace, companies can create an environment where employees feel valued, supported, and empowered.

Addressing workplace mental well-being in Trinidad and Tobago, and across the Caribbean, is undeniably challenging, but it is a challenge we can overcome. While it requires a concerted effort from both employers and employees, the primary responsibility falls on the employer to ensure that workers operate in a safe environment that is free from health risks. By working together, we can prioritize mental health, and create healthier and more productive work environments for all.

**Sangeeta Barath, Research Fellow, CCLCS**