

BRINGING THE EXPERIENTIAL & THE UNUSUAL

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EDITORIAL

The Therapy Stigma

The past two years have been some of the most eventful in human history. Countless articles have been written about the emerging effects of the pandemic on human life. Looming over all of this is one major issue: mental health. For Pakistan, the problem is as great as any, given how mental health has only recently become a topic of discussion.

Many argue that achieving work-life balance has become increasingly difficult. Employees are accessible now more than ever thanks to technology, with the pandemic accelerating the use of online services in the professional sphere.

It's easy to espouse mantra of mental health and use hashtags but when our social culture doesn't fully acknowledge the existence of such issues, why would our working culture?



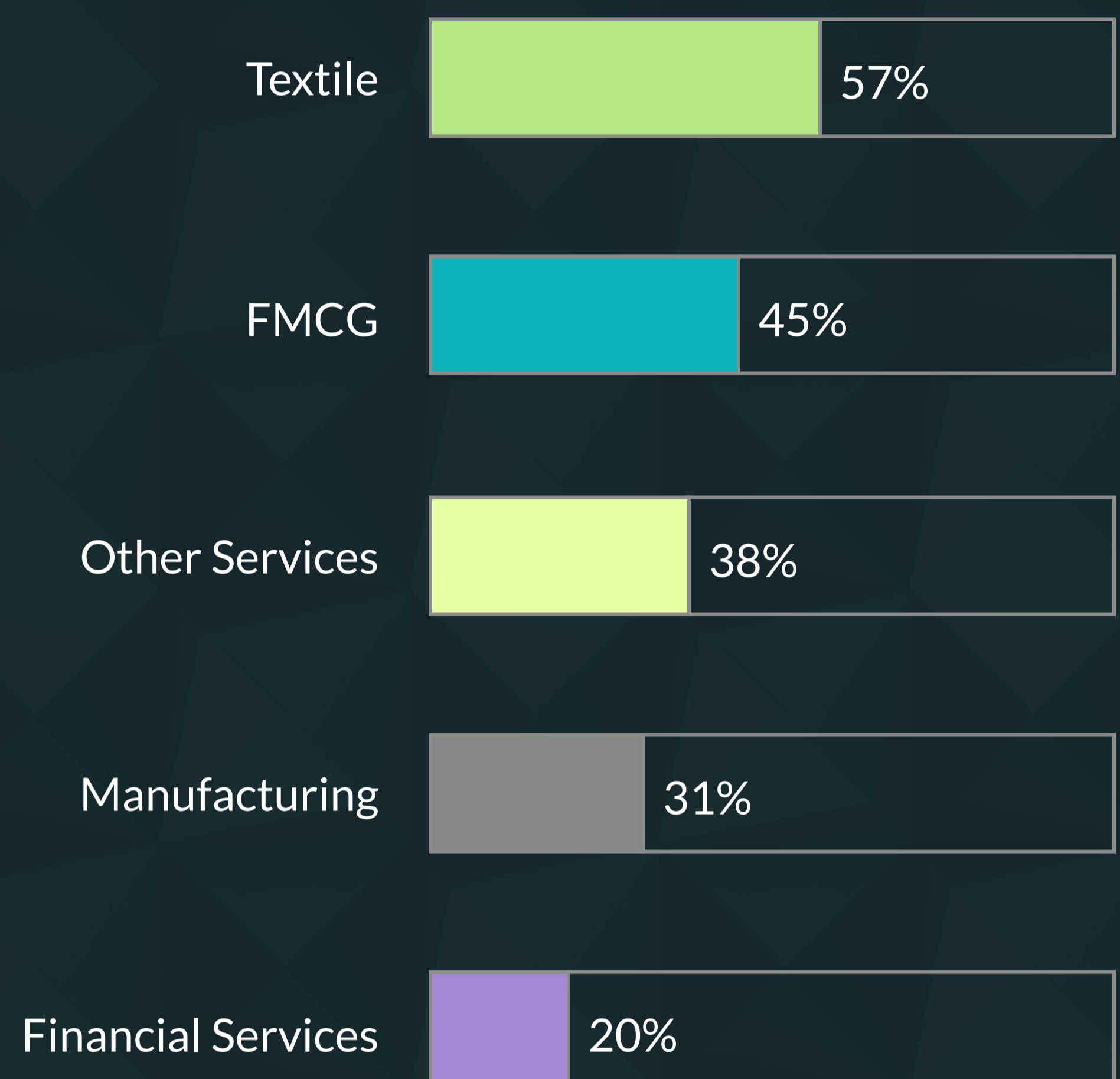
If an employee is struggling, there is often no structure to assist them. In workplace culture, there is no concept of counselling, or even schemes by which to compensate employees who seek out therapy. Unfortunately, therapy is not seen as a key part of human health.

Even if employees have the means to prioritize mental health, they are often unable to do so. Given the expectations of the modern workplace, scheduling time with a therapist can be near impossible, even with online therapy sessions being abundant after the pandemic. Those who do attempt to do this may develop a poor reputation, for leaving when others are still at work, or taking days off while others don't. This, despite being highly productive workers.

This is something organizations can take the lead on, offering packages and paid leave for people suffering. In-house counselling will also be beneficial, although individual initiative will be required to request it. Yet, despite the effort it will take, if services are offered, some people will benefit. As the culture shifts, these services may become an integral part of every workplace's morale and long-term goals for growth. Mental health is an integral part of human health, and treating it as such could be the most profitable decision a company makes.

NUMBERS TELL A STORY

Financial Services Sector: Weak Position on Childcare Support in Workplace

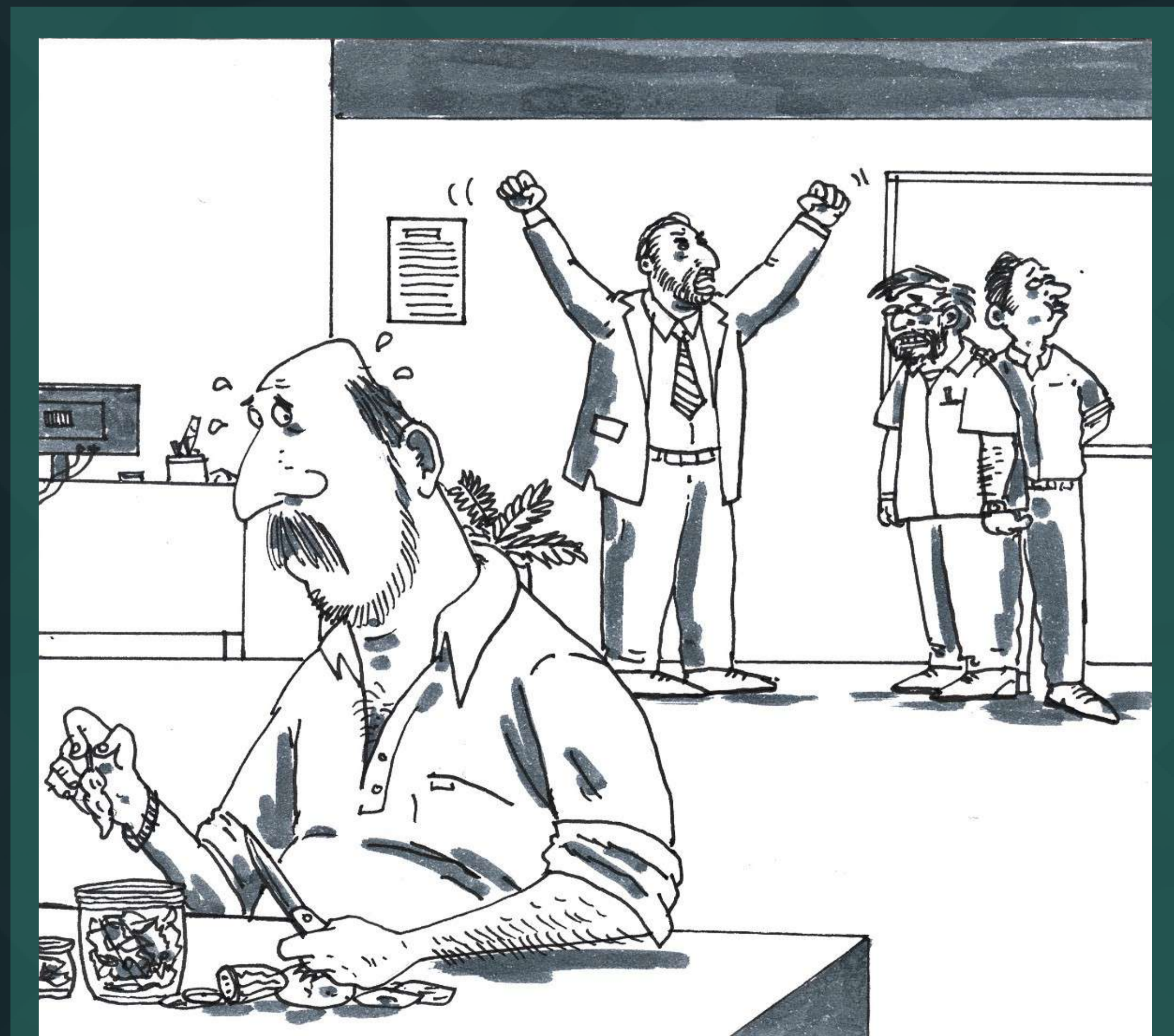


All the "developing" countries which have made significant socio-economic gains in the last few decades, such as, Malaysia, China, South Korea, Indonesia and others have done so by enabling greater participation of women in their workforce, so that they can have equal opportunities and prosperous lives. In South Asia, Pakistan has the lowest participation of women in the labour workforce (23% vs 36% for Sri Lanka and Bangladesh). A recent study by IFC indicates that among the major industries employing women workers in Pakistan, such as Textile, FMCG, Manufacturing, the Financial Services industry has one of the lowest rankings of childcare support services in place. Given the relatively higher number of women working in this sector, the financial industry needs to significantly improve their support for women's participation and increase support for childcare services at work.

Source "Tackling Childcare in Pakistan: Creating Family-Friendly Workplaces" for IFC & PBC by AASA Consulting.

WIT'S END

Zain Ashir



"I said get an HR consultant, not an achar consultant!!"

TAKE 5

Dr. Kazmi on Workplace Mental Health

This interview has been edited for length and clarity



Dr. Mehdi Kazmi is a Neurologist and Psychiatrist who has trained in psychiatric and behavioral diseases. In psychiatry, his interests include mood disorders, anxiety disorders and neuropsychiatry. He is also the founder and was CEO of AsiaCare Health & Life Insurance Company. Dr. Mehdi currently lives and works in New York City, New York. He sees patients in Bronx and Yonkers, and is a Clinical Assistant Professor at Albert Einstein College of Medicine, in Bronx, NY.

1. Top 2 to 3 mental health workplace challenges in Pakistan.

The number one issue is that people from various backgrounds come to the workplace, it's hard to find a common thread apart from the company. We have a socioeconomic caste system. It's very hard for people to connect with each other. That lack of connectivity and isolation is a very big issue.

In the majority of places there's a lot of job insecurity. The sense that you have a job as a right, and that you're bringing something very valuable and are a valued person that makes the whole show work, that sense is lacking there. And just the fact that mental health issues are not recognized. You, as a person, as a psychological being, need to be recognized more, with your feelings, with your emotions.

There is no real attention [put on] the social aspect to being in the work place. There is a mindset from both the superiors and the juniors that needs to be reset and those boundaries need to be defined. That you come here to work, you have to deliver certain things, but when you come here you bring some emotional needs that also need to be satisfied in the workplace. If things don't go right in that social work environment, then it can have an impact on an individual, i.e., job dissatisfaction can lead to depression.

2. Balancing your work and personal life, given our unique cultural context.

Well, the first thing is, the recognition that there is a work life and a personal life. In Pakistan, by and large, people tend to blur those boundaries. It's primarily because a lot of people don't have the luxury. You want to give it your best at work, because of this background sense of work insecurity. In Pakistan, your work becomes your identity. Then there is a tremendous fallout, because human beings are built to live life and not just 'live work', it's a simple psychological equation. So that recognition has to be there first.

Freud once said that 'the definition of mental health is being happy at work, love and play'. So, if you're happy at work, love and play, it's a very simple thing, you're mentally okay. In Pakistan, the love part is our families and then the play part is mostly neglected, because it's your work and your families that you focus on. Given the emotional energy that goes into work and our families, we don't have the idea of 'this activity is solely for myself and I can't share it with somebody else, particularly my family'. It's sort of looked down upon, that you're doing something which is taking time away from your family. I think that's essential.

3. Types of toxic work cultures in Pakistan, and how to counter them.

First, we need to define the toxicity present in the workplace. Most toxicity comes from a lack of recognition, leading to financial insecurities. 'I am not being recognized for what I bring to this setup. And hence, I am not being paid enough'. In Pakistan, we have a very ownership-driven outlook of business, i.e., the 'Sait Sahib' culture. This is a mindset, the 'Sait' owns a business, or a shop. The employees, who spend 8-10 hours in a place every day, don't have any sense of ownership. Whereas, even if the employees don't own the business, they do own the process of work. This is not recognized by the employer. Instead, the idea is that the employee is not worth much because they don't own the business. This is toxic and compromises their sense of well-being. And without a sense of well-being, you can't be a good worker. Chronically dissatisfied employees are not a good thing. The employee can redefine what they bring to the workplace. That their presence and output is of value, 'I take pride in what I do here, I make things work here in some way also.'

4. Recognizing a personal mental health problem at work.

People feel anxiety in different ways, becoming edgy, jittery, unable to concentrate. And if that is the case, then you need to recognize if it is coming from your work situation. This can also lead to depression. I know many people who start having a panic attack when they come to work because they are not sure of their employer's expectations. They aren't sure of their personal interactions, have a persistent sense of failure. Hence, leading to anxiety and depression.

Recognizing that something is wrong within ourselves is an uncommon trait in Pakistan, because of our unique socio-cultural outlook. It is particularly difficult for men to recognize their pain and their weaknesses. It is unrealistic to say that people are psychologically strong or weak. Nobody can be competent and emotionally capable of dealing with all situations. We need to recognize our strengths and weaknesses.

In spite of this culture of not being able to verbalize what an individual is going through, I think in every workplace there is someone you can verbalize it to and not feel like you're being criticized. Sharing is important, because we are social beings. To be able to share your suffering and negative feelings is in itself a coping mechanism.

5. Older versus younger generation: the debate on mental health or a lack of toughness.

I'm not sure that the younger generation, by and large feels [that mental health is an everyday challenge], because the younger generation absorbs the value system of the older generation [which believes that mental health issues come from a lack of toughness]. Younger people can cope with this by recognizing that toughing it out is not the only option, that they have other possibilities, too. Like talking to a group other than the family, or receiving counselling to help devise healthy coping mechanisms. It is important to remember that things change, and life moves on. When somebody is in a troubling situation, this idea or thought is not visible. They feel stuck, hopeless and that they will never be able to get out of the situation.

When I was growing up the only recourse that you had to any problem within or outside yourself was the family group. But now it's the work environment, it's a group of friends, other families, now these ways can be recruited to help you cope.

LEARNING & DEVELOPMENT

Pivot, Pivot, PIVOT: Becoming Comfortable with Uncertainty

Ayesha Tarek

Job uncertainty is much like being told that there is a 50% chance of receiving a painful electric shock. Ouch! These days, unemployment has become more common due to a drop in the economy and the effects of the pandemic. So, what do you do when there is so much unpredictability? To put it simply: accept it.

In the words of John Allen Paulos, the mathematician, "Uncertainty is the only certainty there is." Once you acknowledge that, most of your anxiety will subside. This does not mean you stop planning—it just means your strategy is more realistic. Accepting what is not in your control will leave you with a lot of energy to focus on more doable options.

Additionally, talk to your immediate supervisor when feeling a lack of certainty at work. Sometimes we're just overthinking due to a lack of clarity, and a lack of communication. Don't be afraid to ask for what is your right.

Learn to be flexible, the world will not work according to you all the time, and having such an expectation will only leave you disappointed. So, save yourself the heartache and PIVOT!

HOW TO PIVOT



React to change by thinking of the next possible steps.



Consider a few options for tackling a major obstacle.



Communicate openly with a willingness to compromise.



Ask for clarity when there is confusion about a task.

HOW TO GET STUCK



React to change with only frustration and annoyance.



Attempt to learn every possible detail and outcome before making decisions.



Refuse to communicate and be unwilling to accept a compromise.



Attempt to carry out a task with little understanding of what it entails.

READERS TALKBACK

Transport and Women's Woes

Tooba Butt

Life in Karachi is its own unique experience. Residents deal with several concerns, like water, sewage, and transportation issues. The daily grind of city life is even more challenging when prices start skyrocketing. So, which of these factors affect women more than others? Water and sewage issues are equally challenging for both genders. However, transport is an area where men can take advantage of two-wheelers. I do not mean that this advantage is wrong. However, all-inclusive transportation will be more helpful and encourage social harmony.

A dearth of suitable public transport is fueling an unintended lack of access to good employment opportunities, services, and even socio-economic movement, which is the primary concern for anyone who is struggling. Inadequate public transport and expensive private transportation affect women in particular, with limited mobility that stands in the way of women's empowerment. Already, social taboos and increasing crimes make this a handicap for women. Either they can protect themselves, or by pay hefty amounts for safe transport among the limited options.

There are actions that can provide support until a permanent long-term solution for public transport is reached. One of these is to give subsidies and impose regulations on private transport suppliers. Moreover, investment in women-focused transport startups, which will support women's employment and empowerment.

QUOTE OF THE MONTH

"Corporate culture matters. How management chooses to treat its people impacts everything - for better or for worse."
Simon Sinek



Simon Oliver Sinek is a British-American author and inspirational speaker. He is the author of five books, including *Start With Why* and *The Infinite Game*.

WORK OPPORTUNITY

Data Entry Operator (full-time position):

- **Education qualification:** Inter-pass and above
- **Skills:** Intermediate to advanced user of Microsoft Excel, fast typing skills and ability to perform data entry related duties
- **Experience:** 1 year experience of data entry
- Please send in your CV to info@asaconsulting.com with the subject line of: Data Entry Operator CV

Consultants (project-based position):

- We are looking for subject specialists in Gender, Economics, Law/Legal, Finance and Communications with relevant past experience and at least 5 years work experience.
- Please send in your CV to info@asaconsulting.com with the subject line of: Consultant and [your area of expertise].

FEATURE STORY

The Gift of a Teacher: Reflections from a Government School in Larkana

Syed Maroof Ali

After a 6-hour bus drive from Karachi to Larkana for a field visit, I was met with the bittersweet surprise of interacting with a truly amazing government school teacher. The school she taught at was in a condition that accurately reflected the status of education in Pakistan. The building was *ancient*, with broken chairs and tables arranged in an orderly fashion with a backdrop of ill-furnished walls. There was no electricity and an overall atmosphere of adversity and ruin. Yet, one thing was peculiar in this bleak picture: the enthusiastic students and their smiling teacher.

I discovered that she was the graduate of a reputable university in Karachi, after which she chose to settle down in this village on the outskirts of Larkana city. Her goal was to teach the future generations of this underserved area. The teacher went on to reflect on her nostalgic memory of university life and how the obvious contrast between a rural and urban setting may be unsettling for many, but not her. Why? Because her sense of purpose and fulfilment was realized after meeting these students seated in the old and damaged classroom.



Her gleeful eyes and optimistic smile were almost contagious. What’s more was the sense of excitement in her students. Young girls and boys roughly between the ages of five and twelve who immediately responded in unison after I asked them, “Are you all enjoying the class lesson?” with a loud and happy “YES!” It was as if the strong will and dedication of the class teacher was reflected in her students, who were grateful to study, even in those conditions.

This is not to assert that passion and dedication is the only ingredient in reforming the education landscape of Pakistan. Far from it. We ought to make a comfortable and conducive environment for teachers to grow and prosper. This way, both students and teachers can enjoy the learning process. Nevertheless, the class teacher and her wonderful students left a lasting impression on me, reminding me of a great saying,

“It’s the teacher that makes the difference, not the classroom.” – Michael Morpurgo

READERS TALK BACK

Please reach out and share your thoughts & feedback with us on info@asaconsulting.com. We are also looking for content writers who can contribute articles for which they will be paid if the article is selected for publication. All content must be 250 words, preferably accompanied with graphics and visuals. We look forward to featuring your words and growing from your unique insights in the coming issues!

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