



CMHA HK MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING BULLETIN Q&A: CARMEN YAU

Carmen Yau is a registered social worker; chairperson of the Association of Women with Disabilities Hong Kong and a committee member at the Equal Opportunities Commission. She is a leading player in the community of the disabled. She devotes her time and energy to enhancing social and workplace inclusion for the disabled by providing seminars and corporate training on disability confidence.

Can you define people with disabilities, specifically, within a workplace context?

Let's first define the concept of persons with disabilities. People with disabilities implies people with diversities. Conventionally, we may think of physical disability, hearing impairment, visual impairment, or intellectually challenged. However, there are more diverse groups of people with special needs in the workplace context. There are people with invisible disabilities. For instance, adults with special educational needs (e.g. ADHD, dyslexia, autistic spectrum symptoms), adults with psychosocial disabilities (e.g. depression, anxiety and other mental health issues) as well as those living with chronic illness (e.g. kidney problems, cardiovascular disease). In the workplace, we should also look at people who acquire different forms of disabilities and challenges due to an accident or illness (e.g. spinal cord injury, amputation and even stroke).

Please can you share information about the work you do at the Association of Women with Disabilities Hong Kong?

People with disabilities are generally vulnerable to stress, trauma exposure and mental health issues which are often left unaddressed. Research conducted in 2019 by the Association of Women with Disabilities Hong Kong made some significant findings. Among the 100 respondents of our online survey, 57% showed depressive and anxiety symptoms. Interpersonal support is a significant protective factor for the mental health of people with disabilities.

There are several crucial factors which may cause people with disabilities to be prone to stress and mental health issues. Firstly, people with disabilities face different types of stressful experiences and sometimes even traumatic scenarios. For example, their limited mobility and challenges in accessing information may cause constant frustration in their everyday life. They might encounter traumatic experiences such as childhood maltreatment, medical treatment and abusive episodes. In our study, 40% of our respondents score 7 out of 10 on their chronic pain. These experiences may cause their self-identity to be inferior and vulnerable as well as affect their perception of reality.

What challenges do persons with disabilities face in workplaces in Hong Kong?

There are two perspectives, the hardware and the software. In regard to hardware, people with disabilities face different forms of inaccessibility in terms of transportation, access to offices and other work-relevant premises such as banks and post offices. In Hong Kong, people using wheelchairs mainly rely on buses and MTR (train) for transport. They face a lot of stress and unfriendly treatment when they compete with other passengers during peak hours. Accessibility to the workplace should not be restricted to space and environment accessibility but should include universal design and the necessary adaptive tools in the workplace to enable people with sensory limitations to work independently. The restroom, pantry, printing room and other office facilities may not be accessible for people with diversities—for example, lighting facilities for low-vision individuals.

Looking at software challenges, people with disabilities face difficulties working with colleagues, especially when the consensus of building a friendly and inclusive workplace

culture is not fully established. Although they may not encounter direct discrimination and criticism, they may face subtle discrimination (e.g. being excluded in meetings, not being invited to informal gatherings, absence of/over support, minimised job opportunities). Some well-meaning supervisors or colleagues may treat them differently or put them into uncomfortable scenarios. Colleagues may not fully understand and recognise the challenges of colleagues with invisible challenges, particularly people with low vision or hearing. Also, people with disabilities may find it challenging to arrange specific care at the workplace. For example, someone with quadriplegia may need the support of a personal assistant when they are at work or someone with visual impairment who needs to bring their guide dog to the office. These challenges can adversely impact the mental health of people with disabilities in the workplace, and affect their career journey including job hunting, job interviews, getting on-board at the workplace and pursuing career advancement opportunities.

How could these challenges negatively impact on the mental health of people with disabilities in the workplace?

Besides common stress symptoms shared by many employees, people with disabilities face additional stress in adapting to rigid work protocols and work arrangements (e.g. work time, work location and communication arrangement). Employees with disabilities find it challenging to negotiate with their employers to make accommodations which support their productivity and wellbeing. They often find it stressful to justify their special needs to their supervisor and colleagues. They are also concerned that these requests may hinder their job opportunities and career development.

Another major challenge among employees with disabilities is their self-stigma. Instead of being stigmatised by others, employees with disabilities may have a higher expectation of their job

performance and will put in additional time and effort to prove their “abilities” and “value” as a contributor in the workplace. I describe these thoughts and actions as “compensation for their disability”. For those who acquired disabilities through illness or injury, they may undergo a state of adaptation in the workplace. They often compare their job performance before and after their disability. Even if they can deliver tasks to a good standard, they may still find dissatisfaction and incompetence in their workplace. The sense of incompetence is related to their cognitive thinking and low self-esteem. The fixated idea that “I won’t be good enough” causes additional stress, anxiety and depression in the workplace.

In the research mentioned previously, interpersonal support is a crucial protective factor. Employees with disabilities often face challenges getting social support in the workplace. As they come from different paths, some may lack social and interpersonal experiences in the workplace such as communication, negotiation and etiquette. Some may find it stressful to participate in informal social gatherings with colleagues and business partners. Interpersonal issues and conflicts are particularly common among employees with autistic spectrum symptoms.

As a consequence, employees with disabilities may face the common symptoms of burnout over their absenteeism, job performance and health condition. However, they may not be aware of these red flags as they may attribute these symptoms to their disabilities and health conditions. People with disabilities are also hesitant to seek professional help. According to the study, people with disabilities worry about being diagnosed with more sickness and to be “double stigmatised”. Based on my observations, these challenges may be an obstacle for people with disabilities to pursue a job opportunity and develop their life-long career. This then becomes a challenge for corporates and employers to create a diverse talent pipeline and retain employees.

What in your opinion should workplaces in Hong Kong be doing in order to support the mental health and wellbeing of their employees with disabilities?

Firstly, the executive and management board should commit to developing a workplace culture of equality and diversity. It is crucial to build a consensus on reasonable accommodation and adjustment for people with diversities (e.g. arrangement at home office/workplace or flexible work hours). Also, they should have a consensus on the level of stress at work as “Risk Assessments” for all. It is important to have a consensus of the unacceptable levels of stress at work and measures in stress management and reduction.

Secondly, the HR department should develop inclusive HR and stress management policies. For instance, on the recruitment and orientation of new employees with disabilities and those who are returning to work with acquired disabilities. Orientation and preparation meetings can enhance communication and negotiation between supervisors and employees with disabilities. Also, HR should provide training on disability confidence to equip staff with a general understanding of people with diversities

to eliminate stigma and discrimination in the workplace. HR should also monitor occupational health and stress of employees, including a general screening of stress in different departments. This helps to inform follow-up and

support such as confidential stress management. Some employees may require further work adjustments such as temporary or permanent changes of job role, an adjustment in workload or a phased return to work.

Words by Carmen Yau

For further info:

<http://www.awdchk.org/> Association of Women with Disabilities Hong Kong

3 December marks the International Day of Persons with Disabilities

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City Mental Health Alliance HK

The City Mental Health Alliance Hong Kong is a collaborative venture founded by city businesses. Championed by senior leaders, the Alliance is business led and expert guided and aims to create a culture of good mental health for workers in the city of Hong Kong, share best practice and increase mental health understanding.

Visit www.cmhahk.org for further information.

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