

mental health &  
well-being in the  
*non-profit* workplace

**Authors:**

Ara Johannes  
Priti Sridhar  
Raj Mariwala

**Published:**

November, 2020

Mariwala Health Initiative

# mental health is a spectrum, ranging from: well-being to a common/ severe mental health condition

In many ways, mental health is similar to physical health: everybody has it and we need to take care of it.

Good mental health means being generally able to think, feel and react in the ways that you need and want to live your life. But if you go through a period of poor mental health you might find the ways you're frequently thinking, feeling or reacting become difficult, or even impossible, to cope with.

Mental health problems affect around **one in four people** in any given year.

They range from common problems, such as depression and anxiety, to more severe problems such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder.

Mental health is important at every stage of life, from childhood through adulthood and can deeply affect daily life, relationships and physical health too.

The World Health Organization defines mental health as: **'a state of well-being whereby individuals recognize their abilities, are able to cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively and fruitfully, and make a contribution to their communities.'**

# a psychosocial approach

Psychosocial means looking at mental health as influenced by psychological factors and socio-cultural contexts.

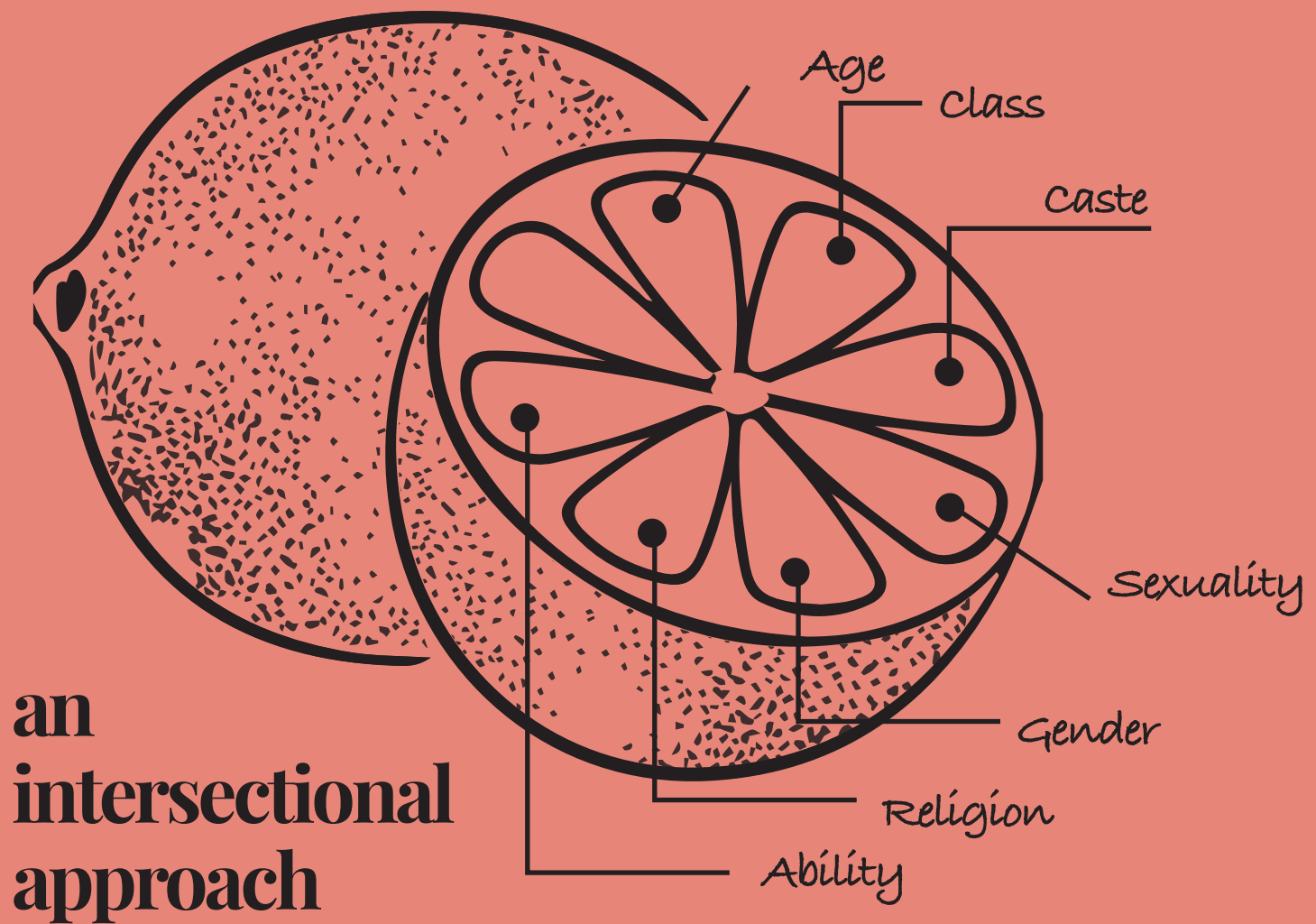
Taking into account socio-cultural contexts as influences on a person's mental health is critical in providing support and care.

Additionally, providing social support or non bio-medical interventions is essential and can be preventative and/or care-based in nature when it comes to mental health.

mental health



context



**a intersectional approach to mental health necessitates looking at how structural & systemic discrimination affects people and communities**

Poor mental health is both a cause and a consequence of poverty, compromised education, gender inequality, physical ill-health, violence and other global challenges. It impedes an individual's capacity to work productively, realize their potential and make a contribution to their community.

Mental health issues cannot be considered in isolation from other areas of development, such as education, employment, emergency responses and human rights.

# unique stressors

At the most basic level, stress is our body's response to pressures from a situation or life event. What contributes to stress can vary hugely from person to person and differs according to our social and economic circumstances, the environment we live in and our genetic makeup.

Stressors are situations that are experienced as a perceived threat to one's well-being or position in life, especially if the challenge of dealing with it exceeds a person's perceived ability.

Common workplace stressors include excessive job demands, job insecurity, conflicts with teammates and supervisors, inadequate authority necessary to carry out tasks, lack of training necessary to do the job, making presentations in front of colleagues or clients, unproductive and time-consuming meetings, commuting and travel schedules etc.

Employees within the non-profit or development sector experience certain stressors that are unique to them. These include:

- **Threat to personal safety**
- **Job security concerns on account of funding limitations**
- **Limited capacity building resources available**
- **Possibility of frequent change in programs/role**
- **Burnout due to the nature of work**
- **Limiting narratives around the role of social workers**

Source: [mentalhealth.org](http://mentalhealth.org)



Threat to Personal Safety



Job Security Concerns



Limited Resources



Frequent Role Change



Burnout



Limiting Narratives

# The first step towards addressing workplace mental health, is to look at an organization's culture and how it might amplify or reduce stressors among employees.

Organizations that have inclusive, supportive cultures tend to have the following commonalities:

- **Diverse teams** comprising persons from different backgrounds, cross-cutting gender, caste, sexuality, religion, education and geography. A strong diversity and inclusion policy can reduce the amount of stress employees experience.

- **Great policies!** Starting with a hiring policy that is transparent and based on providing 'Equitable Opportunities'.

- **A thorough on-boarding program** for new employees across different levels and not just for management / graduate trainees. Along with a mentorship program, assigning mentors to new employees to facilitate their transition into new roles.

- **Sensitized leadership** – a senior leadership team that openly talk about their own mental health challenges, reducing workplace mental health related stigma. It is important that heads/senior levels of the team acknowledge their own mental well-being and break the stigma around workplace mental health.

“More than 50% of the staff who have sought counselling, have done so for family or other personal issues, not just work-related stress.”

— Dr Nayreen Daruwalla, SNEHA

Measures such as (i) providing a mental well-being allowance so that the team can access professional mental health practitioners and (ii) creating structures of supervision and support within teams — are steps that a few organizations working in crisis situations have implemented to enhance employee well-being.

Employees at SNEHA and iCALL deal with cases of domestic violence, mental illness, depression, trauma etc. on a daily basis and

therefore could experience high-levels of distress themselves.

SNEHA ensures that employees are provided with access to professionals, whether counsellors, psychologists, or psychiatrists — allowing for the opportunity to discuss non-work-related issues and stressors as well.

In addition to a well-being allowance, iCALL also provides supervision support to team members, by way of a process where counsellors

meet regularly with a supervisor to discuss any concerns they might have around their interaction with clients, and are able to receive due support whenever required.

Informal support groups, ‘buddy systems’, regularly scheduled sessions with counsellors, and other similar practices can encourage team members to share, talk about their work, their lives, and any challenges they are facing.



# reasonable accommodation

We must always bear in mind that it takes a tremendous amount of courage for an employee to share their mental health concerns. An environment that stigmatizes mental illness or a lack of confidentiality, among other factors – amplifies stress.

If we are in a position of authority and an employee has disclosed their mental health status, we must prioritize their well-being, keep the information shared confidential and provide support in accordance with the employee's stated needs.

Organizations can implement the following provisions related to mental health:

- Having policies that include: Flexible working hours, Sabbatical options, Short term loan for emergency situations, Bereavement leave etc.
- Possibility of role change for few months or longer depending on the needs of the employee
- Access to Employee Assistance Programs where the employee can speak to mental health professionals outside of

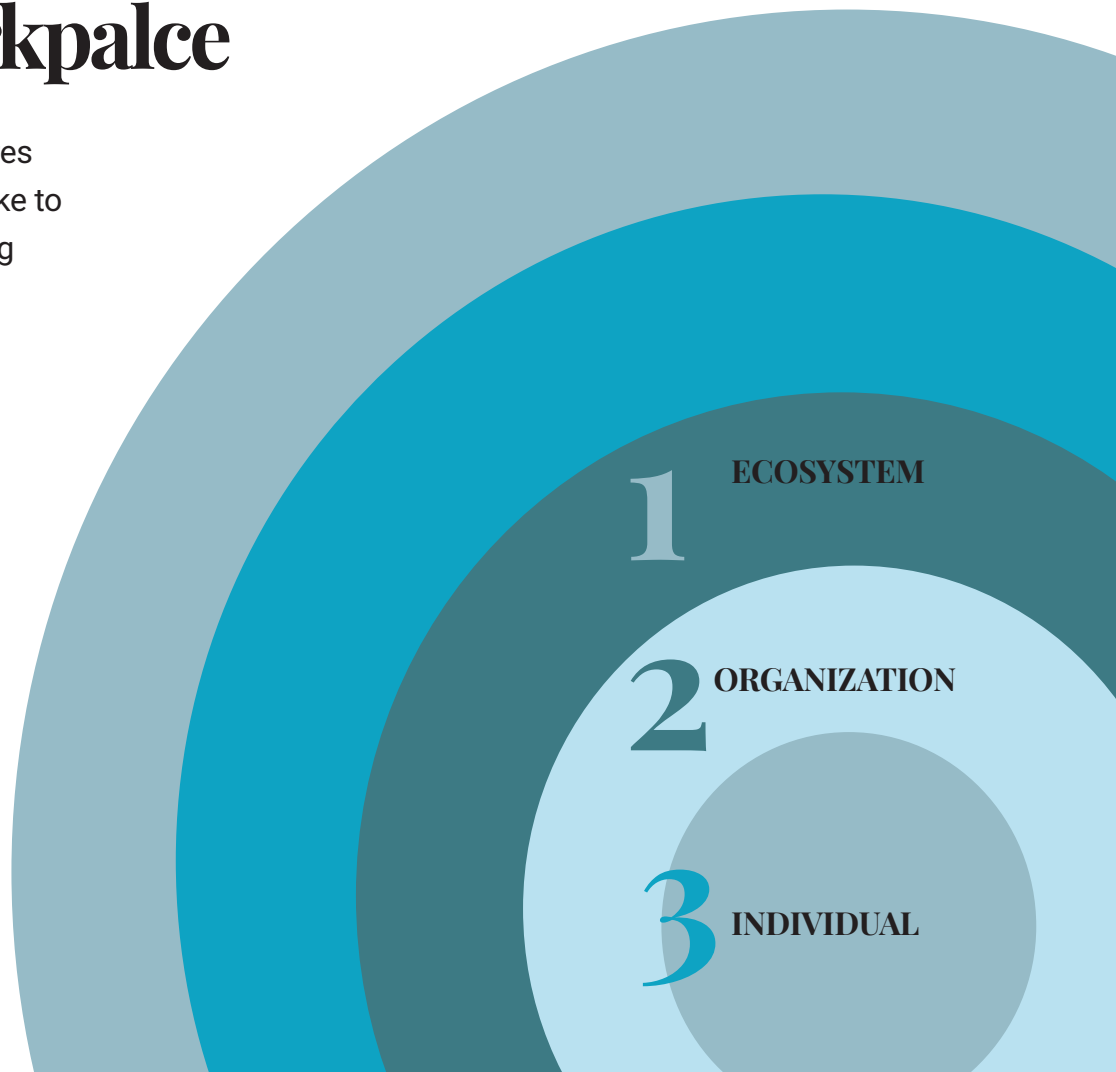
the organization – where “who spoke” and “what they discussed” is not shared back with the organization

- Providing for a ‘No Questions Asked Mental Health Allowance’ for seeking professional support
- Ensuring that group health insurance covers mental health benefits

# enhancing well-being and mental health at the workplace

There are several measures that organizations can take to improve mental well-being and mental health at the workplace within the development sector. These measures can be taken at three levels:

- *The Ecosystem*
- *The Organization*
- *The Individual*



# *implementing measures for well-being*

## **1) Understand your Ecosystem:**

- Identify unique stressors that other organizations engaged in similar work experience. This has to do with the type of work that you do, if the stress level is high. For example: working in humanitarian crisis.

- As founders / organization leadership team, acknowledge this stressor, only then will you be able to put systems in place to identify and manage the stress.

## **2) Understand your Culture:**

- What do you say/do contributes to part of the culture that can lead to stress among your employees.

- Are your employees experiencing more stress than employees of other organizations doing similar work?

- Are there any aspects of your culture that you want to change? For example: Is it necessary for all employees to be available at all times to provide crisis intervention to clients or can employees take turns to do this work?

- Is your organization truly inclusive? If the culture of the organization is discriminative based on gender, sexuality, caste, religion, educational qualifications, years of experience or even years within the organization – then, mental health issues

are bound to be experienced by the employees who are discriminated against.

## **3) Provide Support:**

- What policies can you provide as support to your employees given the type of work you do and the size of your team? (Remember policies come at no cost.)

- What financial support can you provide to an employee with mental health issues?

- What is the cost of not providing this mental well-being support? (ex: absenteeism, higher attrition.)

# *initiating conversations with funders*

- Provide feedback on how the grant making process can be made less stressful to new grantees.
- Negotiate monitoring & evaluation processes that are flexible and accommodating of the grantees' needs/limitation. (For example: making reports by all funders at calendar quarters).
- Mention mental well-being as a risk within the organization given the type of work.
- Seek funding within the program for mental well-being and funding for a mental well-being allowance.
- Seek funding for benefits that organizations need to provide as per the law: maternity benefits, ESIC etc.
- Seek funding for group insurance – health & life.
- Budget for staff welfare

“People assume that investing in mental health and well-being costs a lot, but putting down sound policies does not need to be expensive.”

— Raj Mariwala, MHI

Mariwala Health Initiative (MHI) believes mental health is inextricably linked to structural inequalities, as well as the everyday environmental and social stressors people face. As a result, MHI’s policies are based on an examination of the environment it creates for its non-profit partners.

Because there is a clear power dynamic between funders and the organisations that apply for a grant, MHI emphasizes the need to explore ways in which to reduce stressors

for grantee organisations and make itself more accessible.

For example at the grant application stage, MHI allows flexibility with regards to how organisations can send in concept notes, details about budgetary allocations, and other forms needed, as well as what language they send it in. Allowing non-profits to submit forms in a format followed for another donor—saves the organisation a lot of time

and stress. The same flexibility is given for program reports.

Other measures that MHI takes include being transparent about the process of proposal evaluations/funding timelines, clearly articulating reasons why a proposal was rejected and keeping lines of communication with grantees open.

