

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

MENTAL HEALTH

**IN THE WORLD OF WORK
AMID COVID-19 WEBINAR**

17 APRIL 2021



INTRODUCTION

The Mine Medical Professionals Association (MMPA) in partnership with the Masoyise Health Programme hosted a webinar to discuss the impact of COVID 19 on mental health in the workplace. The purpose of the webinar was to share experiences in the industry and professional knowledge from various stakeholders that will further assist on how the industry can improve mental health care support in the workplace as the world returns to the “new normal”. The webinar was attended by various stakeholders in the sector including labour organisations.

Facilitating the session was, Mr. Simphiwe Mabhele, Technical Specialist on Health, HIV and TB in the World of Work for East and Southern Africa from the International Labour Organisation (ILO) with presentations by, Dr. Joseph Mwangi, Country Manager from the World Health Organisation (WHO), Professor Zukiswa Zingela, from Walter Sisulu University, Dr. Tshepo Sedibe, Principal Health Officer at De Beers, Ms. Safia Joseph, head of Employee Wellness Programme at Life Healthcare and Dr. Thuthula Balfour, Head of Health at the Minerals Council South Africa.

Welcoming the participants, Dr. Dipalesa Mokoboto, MMPA President, Department of Mineral Resources & Energy expressed enthusiasm that on the centenary of the association it remains relevant to its members. She added that the webinar was an effort by the MMPA and Masoyise to capacitate mine health professionals as the industry accustoms itself to the impact of COVID-19 withing the work environment. Also welcoming the participants was Ms. Zanele Matlala, Chair, Masoyise Health Programme & Vice President Minerals Councill South Africa, reaffirmed the critical need for the industry to share professional knowledge and expertise on mental health to help support employees so that they in turn can have positive impact withing the communities they live in.

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS

The common thread in all the presentations was the acknowledgment that already as a country South Africa has a serious mental health issue due to existing societal conditions the population lives with. The discussions detailed that:

- The South African public health system was not adequately resourced, both at primary and tertiary levels of the mental health services provision.
- There was both policy process disjuncture and service level incoherence making it even more difficult for the population to access adequate and much needed assistance.
- There was consensus that COVID-19 led to greater mental health consequences because it triggered isolation, depression, anxiety, adjustment disorders, increased use, and abuse of substances, and aggression amongst employees and within the family and community environment.
- The lack of public information and awareness was also driving deep stigmatization of people living with mental health conditions, often leaving families out of depth in providing support.

- Emphasised that proactive workforce wellness needed to be intentionally planned and managed and that this approach does not only benefit the employee but the organisation/ business in the long term.
- The creation of a healthy psychological environment in the workplace is beneficial for business and is an imperative as it improved productivity.

The learning from De Beers presentation was that organisations should put in place mechanisms that seek to:

- Promote mental health awareness and remove the stigma.
- Support colleagues and encourage openness.
- Create and sustain a safe environment.
- Build and maintain a positive workplace.
- Monitor, review and improve mental health services.

The discussions and comments highlighted that:

- Healthcare workers, practitioners, and other frontline workers have been the most affected by COVID-19.
- The trauma of grave illness and high deaths, lack of personal protective equipment (PPE), inadequate work facilities, and shortage of medical supplies have impacted the mental health state of healthcare workers.
- Much focus is needed in proactively managing mental health and actively championing destigmatisation.
- That health practitioners needed to also undertake self-care during this pressurized, high workload environment. The setting of boundaries and keeping to them in so far as taking time out, attending to personal health was pointed out as imperative. One of the experts suggested that each person needs to define one's "stress signature" and acknowledge it when red flags present.
- Being aware of maladaptive or self-destructive behaviors was also important.

Participants made inputs that employers should consider sessions for their frontline workers that would give them an opportunity to relax and assimilate self-care as they continue to give care to the population at large. The concluding presentation highlighted that vaccination was the only feasible option for the world to return and gave an overview of the vaccination plan as it pertained to the mining industry. There was consensus that the information shared during the webinar must be elevated to the broader industry tripartite forum for further discussion as this would assist those in leadership to better support workers on mental health issues.