



VOICE

Keeping Abreast with
Human Resource Management



Mental Health and COVID-19

VF INC'S VOICE: Issue # 5

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We thank you for your feedback, encouragement and support on Issue #4. This week, we focus on Mental Health and COVID-19.

Mental Health is defined by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as a "State of mental well-being in which people cope well with the many stresses of life, can realise their own potential, can function productively and fruitfully, and are able to contribute to their communities."¹ The United Nations warns that the coronavirus could lead to a global mental health crisis, as millions of people worldwide are surrounded by death and disease and are forced into isolation, poverty and anxiety by the pandemic of COVID-19.

Mental health is often viewed negatively, and many do not want to talk about it. There is a lot of stigma attached to mental health, and this may be even higher in the Caribbean. This stigma prevents people from even acknowledging mental health issues and so it follows that treatment is limited or non-existent. Dr. Oluwakemi M Linda Banks, a Clinical Psychologist from

Anguilla asserts that many people don't talk about their stresses, because of stigma and they are more inclined to minimize them by saying, "It is God's will." She states that people need to begin to talk about and acknowledge their feelings.

After Hurricane Maria devastated Dominica and several other Caribbean Countries in 2017, I stated that every person who experienced Maria should receive counselling for Maria affected us in ways that many, including employers, never acknowledged. I am sure many people, including myself, never sought counselling. We just worked our way through it. Part of the denial may be due to the stigma attached with seeking help for mental health issues.

COVID-19 has put mental health on the front burner and highlighted the different levels of mental illness. The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) President and CEO, Mr. Johnny C. Taylor, states that COVID-19 is taking a toll on our minds and emotions in a million little ways. Now more than ever employers should double down against stigmas and ensure

that employees are aware of the resources, benefits and accommodations available. Dr. Jessica Gold, Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at the Washington University of St. Louis, writing in the "Time Magazine," May 13, 2020 issue, posits that COVID-19 is actually what mental health needed to stop being stigmatised and to start being valued.

Mr. Antonio Guterres, Secretary General of the United Nations, argues that mental health is at the heart of our humanity, and enables us to lead rich, fulfilling lives and participate in our communities. He identifies a number of ways that COVID-19 is increasing psychological suffering:

1. Grief at the loss of loved ones
2. Shock at the loss of jobs
3. Isolation and restrictions on movement
4. Difficult family dynamics
5. Uncertainty and fear of the future

He goes on to add that mental health problems, including depression and anxiety, are some of the greatest causes of misery in the world. He identified the most

¹ Quoted from the United Nations "Policy Brief: COVID-19 and the Need for Action on Mental Health," May 13, 2020.

at risk in the COVID-19 era as, “Frontline healthcare workers, older people, adolescents and young people, those with pre-existing mental health conditions and those caught up in conflict and crisis,” (UN News, May 14, 2020).

Mr. Guterres *urges governments, civil society, health authorities and others to come together to urgently address the mental health dimension of this pandemic.*

Dr. Banks posited that healthcare workers, including persons in the mental health field, are overwhelmed, as they have to deal with their own issues, that of their clients and new clients and patients being served during COVID-19. Parents, children and teachers, she asserts are experiencing heightened levels of anxiety and stress, with online learning, remote work, the economy and the COVID situation. Parents and teachers are complaining about the stresses, while children do not enjoy the role shift involved in having their parents and grandparents teaching them.

One grandparent reported that her granddaughter said with tears in her eyes “I don’t want you to be my teacher. I want you to be my grandma again.” Parents and grandparents now find it challenging to balance their other responsibilities with their new role as teacher, especially now when some of them are resuming their regular workload as well. Dr. Banks stated that children are finding out that their parents may not be as knowledgeable as they previously thought, and this may undermine their confidence in them.

Dr. Schyuler Esprit, at the beginning of the “Stay Home Orders,” and curfew in the Caribbean, on her Facebook Page on March 25, 2020, exhorted parents to not stress over the online classes and focus instead on spending quality time, building memories and making their children feel safe, content and loved. She encouraged parents to honour and validate the feelings and needs of their children.

Teachers are also under tremendous pressure with longer days and greater demands from parents trying to cope and they are lamenting the absence of support services for them. In Anguilla, she states,

there is a feeling of the “invisible enemy,” and persons are anxious about when it will strike and how long will it last. Social distancing is creating much emotional turmoil, especially among the older population and families unable to visit their families. The separation from families at the time of their death and inability to attend their funerals are also a major source of mental anguish.

So, what is the state of mental health globally, as a result of COVID-19? A study among employees in the United States conducted by SHRM revealed that work-related concerns left more than 40% of employees feeling hopeless, burned out or exhausted as they grapple with the changes in their lives caused by COVID-19. The World Health Organisation reported an increase in the prevalence of distress: 35% in China, 60% in china and 45% in the US. WHO also reported 33% prevalence of depression and anxiety in Ethiopia’s Amhara Regional State; a threefold increase compared to pre-pandemic levels (UN News, May 2020)?

An Internet search did not reveal any published numbers for the Caribbean. However, it is safe to believe that there is an increase in worry, anxiety, hopelessness and depression in the Caribbean. VF Inc hopes to be able to provide some data within the next few weeks as it begins the administration of a COVID-19 Impact Survey among Caribbean companies.

As we focus on the impact of COVID-19 on mental health, we need to pay particular attention to the workers who were and are at the frontline during the COVID-19 pandemic. We have to do more than just clap or sing our support and appreciation for our frontline workers for the fatigue, stress and depression are real among them. These workers had to still their fears for themselves and families as they braved the outside daily.

The healthcare professionals have to deal with the sick, the dying and death, providing even more care and love as they are the only ones who are able to see and be there for the patients. We read of accounts of nurses and doctors who face-timed relatives so they could see their

loved ones before they left this world; of nurses and doctors who broke down in tears, faced with the reality they could do nothing more to save a patient, and faced with mounting deaths and an overwhelmed health system.

Nurse Nita Scotland, a Dominican working in New York on May 8, posted on her Facebook Page, “Nights like these is the reason why I decided to take the two-weeks’ vacation my hospital offered us. I feel mentally and emotionally drained. The past weeks took a toll on my body. Without the prayers and support from my mom, family and other moms, I don’t know where I would be. I am also grateful for my friends who are always there checking on me and ensuring I have PPEs...”

She embarked on a two-weeks “Journey of Self-Love, embracing my Caribbean Culture.” Today marks Day 12 of her journey of renewal, rejuvenation and rebirth, in which she has immersed herself in her Dominican and Caribbean culture through food, music, plants, walks, hikes and celebrating with her fellow Caribbean people. We salute Nurse Nita and pray for God’s continued Peace on her journey of self-love.

We encourage all health professionals to take the time out for renewal, as the figures with respect to the mental health of that sector are of concern. The data confirms that medical professionals and other key workers have experienced significant mental health problems linked to the COVID-19 emergency. Ms. Devora Kestel of WHO informed that :“There were some surveys that were done in Canada where 47 per cent of healthcare workers reported (the) need for psychological support – which is almost half of them. In China, we have different figures for depression: 50 per cent, anxiety 45 percent, insomnia 34 per cent. Pakistan 42 per cent to 26 per cent.”

These figures paint a bleak picture and Dr. Gold (2020) asserts that almost half of all adults in the US will experience mental illness in their lifetime, similar to people who suffer from heart disease. According to her, physicians have one of the highest rates of suicide in any profession. Dr. Gold

attributes this in part, to fear of seeking treatment because of what it might mean for their license and other work repercussions. She goes on to state that, “These are the messages we send about mental health – that disorders are somehow a weakness or even your fault, that having one makes you different or not as capable at your job, and that you should be able to get better with treatment.

COVID-19, however, she argues is a sort of equaliser as everyone is self-isolating at home, trying to work while managing a household, dealing with uncertainty and grief, and to some degree everyone is experiencing life with anxiety. Management has to not only deal with their stresses, but also that of their employees.

It is however noteworthy that the Ministry of Health officials throughout the Caribbean, from early were paying attention to the mental health of citizens. In Dominica, at many of the press briefings, persons were urged to guard their mental health by limiting access to social media and the messages they listen to, eating healthy diet, exercising, staying connected with family through the many media available. The same can be said of the health officials in St. Kitts & Nevis, Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica and the other Caribbean countries.

We are fortunate in the Caribbean as we have managed well the COVID-19 pandemic to date, with only 84 deaths across 20 counties (BBC World News Report, May 17, 2020, [uwivt.org](http://www.uwivt.org)). The Eastern Caribbean Currency Union recorded 128 confirmed cases, 111 recovered, 4 deaths, 11 active cases, including 1 new case as at May 20, 2020. Anguilla, Dominica, Montserrat, St. Kitts and Nevis and St. Lucia now stand at zero cases (ECCB). This, however, does not mean we are COVID-19 free and the threat is gone.

This point has been stressed by the Ministry of Health officials in their briefings and the government has launched community testing in Dominica. Dr. Lynora Fevrier Drigo, one of the doctors on the COVID-19 frontline in Dominica on her

May 17 posting cautioned, “Stay vigilant! Zero active cases does not mean we are Covid Free! Community testing for the win!”.

We will now look at some the strategies for protecting the mental health on two fronts: employers and employees/individuals.

Strategies for Employers:

Kathy Gurchiek of SHRM offers the following advice to employers:

1. Prioritise mental health in your benefits plan and remind employees of the offerings that may be especially useful.
2. Use technology to offer tele-medicine services including providing mental health resources, such as counselling services via phone or e-platforms, and seminars on stress management.
3. Stay in Touch with employees through email and chat. Some companies have online exercise & meditation classes and “lunch-room” chats. This helps to maintain connection and a sense of belonging and value.
4. Offer emotional support, especially for employees going through a difficult time coping with being laid off, being sick or managing grief caused by the illness or death of a relative.

Other Strategies for Employers include:

1. Executive and senior management support for health and wellness programmes, to put people first and really understand their needs (Andrew Heath-Richardson).
2. Return to the workplace with a renewed sense of empathy and compassion, born from society’s experience during the pandemic.
3. Create a culture of kindness and support, which will strengthen the mental health of employees (Ben Channon).

4. Introduction and/or extension of health insurance, which covers mental health, for all staff and not just management staff.
5. Recruitment of a psychiatrist, clinical psychologist or counsellor, on retainer or on staff to provide mental health support for employees.
6. Provision of transitional support for employees laid off or made redundant to equip them to re-enter the workforce. The transitional support includes counselling, training on managing adversity, budgeting, money management.

VF Inc was recruited to develop and implement a “Transitional Career Training Programme,” by Colgate Palmolive (Dominica) Ltd and Ross University School of Medicine (RUSM), when operations ceased and employees made redundant, respectively, following the passage of Hurricane Maria in Dominica.

Strategies for Employees/Individuals

Employees/individuals can do a number of things to protect their mental health and include the following, in addition to points mentioned above:

1. **Seek help.** Dr. Banks served her clients in the height of the COVID-19 curfews and lockdowns using WhatsApp video. Anxiety was heightened during the lockdown period, coupled with the social distancing and Dr. Banks informed that some of her clients had suicidal ideation. Fortunately, none acted upon it.

Dr. Banks strongly advises that we Pay attention to the mental health of our children. Give them an opportunity to talk about everything including their fears about the present and their future, their concerns about the changes around them. Develop new routines for them, including spirituality and spend time with

them creating memories in fun and interactive ways. At all times demonstrate discipline through love and caring, while still ensuring that you maintain your role as the parent.

2. **Introspect** and write down the things that are causing you worry, anxiety and depression. Be as brutally honest with yourself as possible, then write down a plan to tackle those issues. Many people's biggest anxiety is finance, either because they have lost their job or are fearful of job loss, and they worry about their loan and other payments and their ability to meet their needs and that of their family. Prepare an asset, liability and income listing and create a plan to reduce liabilities. You may discover that your financial situation is not as bad as you envision. One of the options may be a sale of some assets. A clear picture may motivate you to seek and find solutions.
3. **Guard your mental health** by setting boundaries on information sent to you by others and the information you seek. Watch the conversations you hold, especially the internal conversations with yourself.
4. **Build or strengthen your network** of support, so there are always persons you can call upon to listen, to pray and offer advice.
5. **Look for the opportunities** that COVID-19 has created. Focus on the silver lining. There may be things you wanted to do but could not find the time before COVID-19.

COVID-19 has provided me with the opportunity to commence this newsletter, which I had been on my "To Do List," for years; commence work on my book, "Employee Engagement in the Caribbean," that is three years late; create a VF Inc's YouTube Channel, that Nixon George of Quick Links Production, VF Inc's

"Resident Videographer," has been urging me to create for more than ten years! Quick Links Production is international in reach. However, I lay claim to them!

6. **Find a Hobby** Baking and cooking maybe the two most indulged activity because of COVID-19, so much so that one of my friends, Celia Delauney posting on the "Dominica's Food," FB page feared that with all that baking, bakeries will become bankrupt! Even I, have now learnt, how to make pastry, pizza dough from scratch and cheese straws, items I always claimed I could not make.

Music is therapeutic, relaxing and enjoyable. Now, may be a good time to learn to play an instrument or brush up on rusty skills. Exercise, meditate, do yoga; they are good for sound mental health.

7. **Be Thankful.** A thankful heart and spirit helps to keep one's heart at peace. Amidst all the anxieties and worry, look every day for at least 5 things to be thankful for, and this will change your perspectives on things. Focus on the positive.
8. **Pray & Praise.** My good friend, Helen Mellow in 1991, gave me a mug and coaster set, which read, "I do my best and leave the rest to God." This advice has served to steady my heart through many of my challenging and valley moments.

God beckons to us to come to him all who are weary and heavy-burdened, and he will give us rest. We must play our part, however, now is a good a time as any to seek that rest in God. There are many scripture readings, and I am sure you have your favourite ones, which serve as a source of strength for you. Turn to them and at the same time, give God all the Thanks and Praise, for as St.

"Instead of looking at the post-COVID-19 mental health future through a lens of inevitable doom, we can, and should, use this moment as the impetus for the changes that mental health care has always pushed for... Let's finally enforce parity and make mental health coverage and reimbursement equal to physical health care. And, let's say once and for all that having a mental illness is a disease that requires treatment, just like any other illness," Dr. Jessica Gold

Paul admonishes us, "In all things, Give Thanks."

We welcome our first guest author, Mrs. Jennifer Robertson, Executive Manager, Risk at the Grenada Co-operative Bank Limited, who will explore the topic, "COVID-19 – New Leadership Realities on Resiliency," for Issue #6.

We look forward to hearing from you with comments on this article, suggestions for topics to be covered and sharing of your HR experience, especially during the COVID-19 era. Please feel free to share this Newsletter with your contacts.

Please send us your questions, comments and share your experience managing in the COVID-19- era at info@vfinc.org. You may also reach us by telephone: 1767275 0566/6170566

Until next week, May God continue to Keep us in the Palm of His Hands.