



Breaking the Silence

With one in six Hong Kong residents suffering a diagnosable mental health issue, it's essential for employers to ensure their expat staff have the right support to counter the impact of a life-changing move.

– By Kevin Jones

Recent studies have shown that one in six Hong Kong residents has a diagnosable mental health issue. The scope of the problem may be larger, as many individuals still do not seek help – an unfortunate side effect of longstanding mental health stigmas. Fortunately, much-needed discussions are beginning to emerge, especially around employee wellness and the duty of the employer. This is an important new development in a city with some of the longest working hours in the world.

We would like to shine the spotlight on expatriates in Hong Kong. Working in an unfamiliar environment, removed from friends and family, or simply meeting heightened work demands and employer

expectations, can significantly impact mental well-being.

Gauging the problem

Yet, few expats worry about mental health before they embark on their new overseas assignments. Our 2016 survey of 5,000 globally mobile individuals found that just 6% expressed concern about mental health issues. While most expats have risk-taking mindsets, an unhealthy by-product is less willingness to have health-related tools and safeguards in advance. This poses a real risk of assignment failure to both the employee and employer, which may occur due to stress, anxiety, depression, or other unaddressed mental health issues.

Practical advice for employers

Employers can reduce the odds of assignment failure due to stress-related concerns by mitigating them through preparation and support.

When finding the right candidate, remember to have a frank discussion with the employee about areas of concern unrelated to work, including securing employment for an accompanying spouse or finding a school for their children. Then, consider mental health first-aid training to equip them with the ability to identify and seek help in times of emotional distress.

At Aetna International, we believe in going above and beyond to offer options that address the expat's unique safety and wellness needs. Our Employee Assistance Program (EAP) makes resources such as in-person or telephone counselling as well as wellness resources (including stress management techniques) readily available to members. Members can seek counselling on a range of issues, including work-related stress, caregiving concerns, financial strains, and so on. This is on top of our members' standard medical benefits, which enable them to receive the ongoing psychological treatment needed to successfully manage their mental health issues.

Before they leave:

Take the time to consider the challenges that will confront them within and outside of the workplace: Arrange for and subsidise language classes for them, walk them through expectations by providing plenty of information in advance about cultural, legal and political norms in their new location. Also, suggest preventive care by encouraging them to learn and practise behavioural health techniques.

Once they're abroad:

Workplace stress leads to less productive employees. It is in your best interest too to keep tabs on assigned workload and informally check in on stress levels. Also, connect them to resources and social networks as well as encourage their involvement and participation in activities. Lastly, give regular reminders to them of EAP and other available resources.

Collective effort


At Aetna International, the work does not stop here. We want to accelerate the destigmatisation of mental health issues in Hong Kong. In July, we partnered with a non-profit organisation, Mind HK, to promote awareness of mental health issues among Hong Kong residents. This relationship comes on the back of the launch of Aetna Insurance (Hong Kong) Limited that month. One of the first joint efforts of this relationship is a study of the current perceptions around people who suffer from mental illness in Hong Kong today, and the stigma that people face here. As we work to raise awareness, we are equally focused on developing solutions for people who need help – things like enhancing primary care offerings and using technology to make access more easily available.

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As a global healthcare provider, supporting corporates and their efforts to promote good mental well-being is close to our heart. There is no single solution to mental health issues. Data mining, employee assistance programmes, pre-assignment screening, and schemes for better work-life balance all help, but ultimately we must work together to break the silence and beat the stigma. 



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Aetna International serves more than 800,000 members worldwide, including expatriates, locals, and business travellers. Its global benefits include medical, dental, vision, emergency assistance, and life and disability. Aetna International also offers customised technological and health management solutions enhance the quality of care and contain costs. For more information, contact us at AsiaPacSales@aetna.com or call +852 2860 8021.

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