

ALEXANDER FORBES PUBLIC RELATIONS

INCREASED CLAIMS FOR MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS AT SA CORPORATES

The Covid-19 pandemic has increased the number of mental health issues experienced by employees at many large South African corporates, according to Alexander Forbes Health Management Solutions. Their data shows that 60% of companies experienced an increase in disability claims for mental and behavioural medical conditions.

Employees experience more stress, anxiety, depression, domestic violence, loneliness or isolation and musculoskeletal-related medical conditions are rising, says Paresha Kala, senior consultant at Alexander Forbes Health Management Solutions. With a constrained mental healthcare system, many employees do not have access to optimal treatment.

The South African Society of Psychiatrists reports that mental health is the biggest threat in 2021. The high level of stress associated with the pandemic is making people more vulnerable to depression and anxiety. As many as one in six South Africans present with anxiety, depression or substance abuse according to the SA Depression and Anxiety Group.

Rise in musculoskeletal conditions at work

“Work-related musculoskeletal conditions have increased in employees, especially where their equipment at home may not be sufficiently set up during lockdown,” Kala says. According to the Occupational Health and Safety Act, employers must ensure employees are familiar with basic ergonomics principles and train all employees who are exposed to ergonomics risks. With many companies looking into hybrid working, employers should ensure that their employees understand ergonomic risks. Health and safety committee members, representatives and employees need to contribute to developing and implementing programmes in relation to ergonomics.

We need to protect our employees’ physical and mental well-being as best as we can. A health risk manager can look at an organisation and implement solutions or processes to mitigate health risks and diminish negative impacts during the coronavirus pandemic. Kala advises on the following programmes for an employee who presents with a medical condition that affects their ability to perform their work duties:

- **Disability claims management**
Manage claims effectively.
- **Incapacity and case management**
Determine a management strategy for the employee and sick leave absence from work.
- **Absenteeism monitoring and reporting**
Use policies and procedures to reduce unplanned absenteeism and boost employee productivity and well-being.
- **Employee assistance programme**
Identify any personal and work-related challenges that affect an employee’s quality of life and work productivity early. Increase access to EAP programmes because of global health challenges.

- **Ergonomics**

Assess the work environment so that employees can work or do other activities more efficiently and comfortably. Good ergonomic practices in the workplace can improve employee productivity and morale and decrease injuries, sick leave, turnover and absenteeism.

- **Employment equity verifications**

Identify people with disabilities within the workplace to promote equal opportunity and fair treatment in employment in line with the Employment Equity Act. Retain the skills of employees with disabilities and make sure that they can work without discrimination as an employee of the diverse workforce.

- **Extended sick leave assessment**

Help employees access extended sick leave benefits according to company policy. This applies to employees who have depleted their normal sick leave and are still unable to perform the duties of their job as a result of a medical condition.

- **Policy reviews**

Align all health-related policies so that they “talk” to each other.

“The pandemic has certainly changed our focus in terms of the mental and physical well-being of our employees. Employers are looking to provide solutions to mitigate health risks. They must take charge of looking after their employees’ health more than ever before, creating a dynamic work culture, promoting productivity, reducing absenteeism, providing a sense of well-being and striving to be an ‘employer of choice’.”

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