

# BREAK THE STIGMA OF MENTAL ILLNESS IN PNG WORKPLACES

ROXY AILA

## Mental Health in PNG Workplaces | What Papua New Guineans said.

*"People think they might lose their job if they talk about things such as depression or domestic violence... our society is not built for such where we are open to talk. People are scared of being judged."*



# INSIDE

---

Welcome | Page 4

Break the stigma | Page 5

Stigma | Page 6

Shame | Page 7

Speaking up | Page 8

What next | Page 9

Wellness | Page 10

What can companies do? | Page 11

Employee programs | Page 12

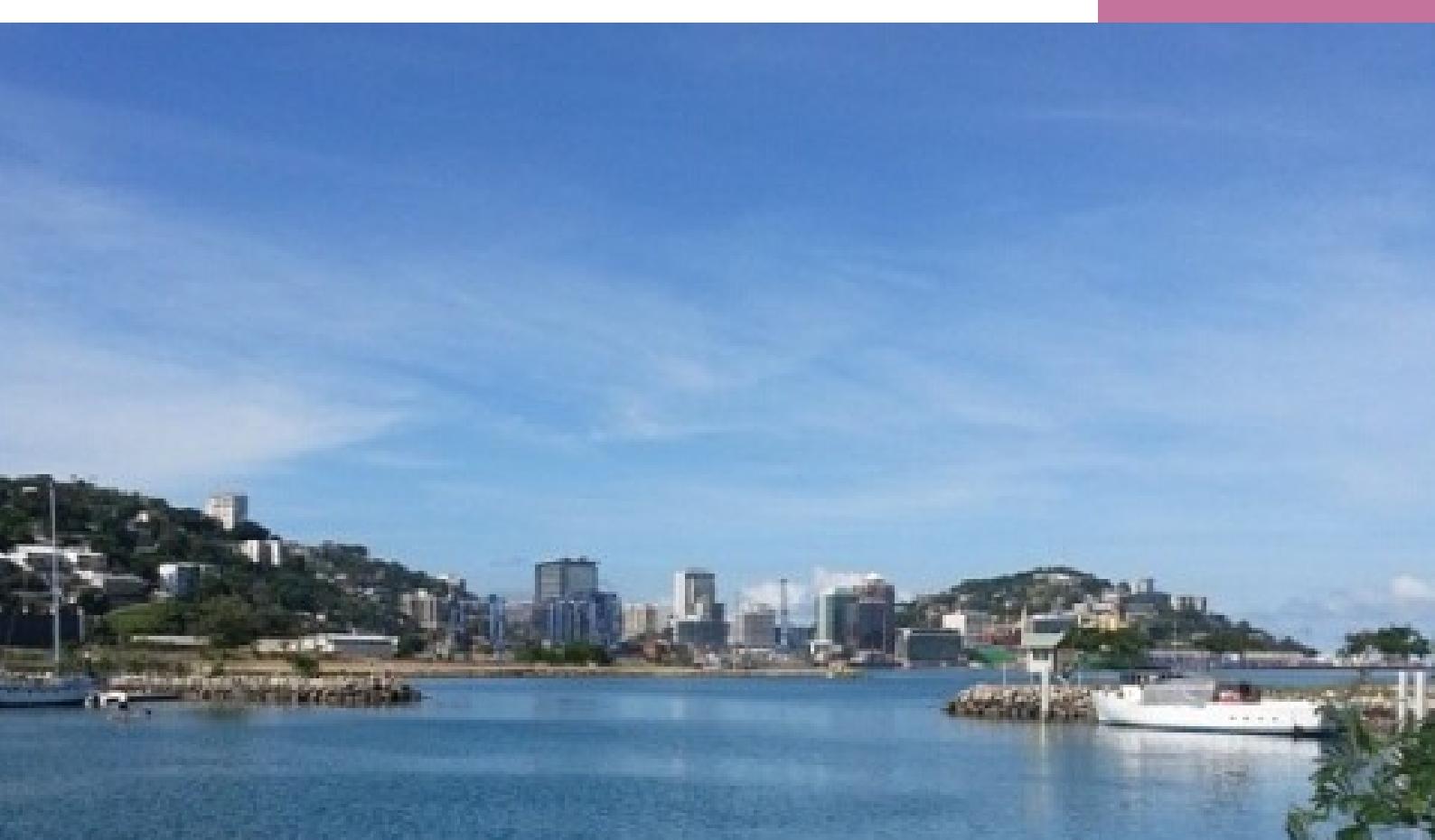
Drive the change | Page 13

Wellness at work | Page 14

Support in PNG | Page 15

References | Page 16

Thank you | Page 17



# WELCOME

Hi there!

---

My sincere thanks for downloading this mental health paper I prepared for PNG organisations. The intention is to place Employee Assistance Programs on the agenda to drive awareness about mental health, mental illness and take the next step to implement practical programs at work to support teams to thrive.

**Massive thank you** to people I interviewed to inform recommendations and steps organisations can take to encourage a high performing and happy work culture.

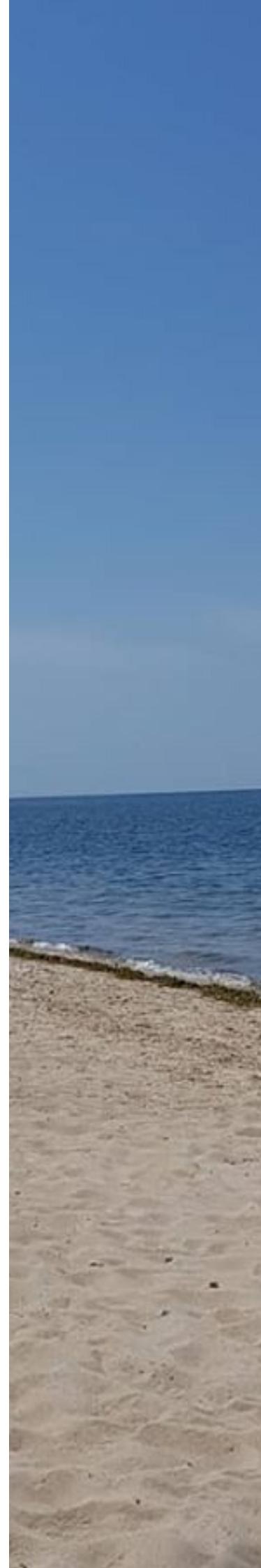
**Who is this for?** This is for anyone who would like to gain an insight into the relationship between mental health and performance plus break the stigma that comes with mental illness in PNG workplaces.

**Who am I?** I am from Milne Bay and Kairuku in PNG and a mental health advocate. I am a marketing consultant, writing student, yoga teacher ... and I am addicted to chocolate (fun fact).

**Why do I care about mental health?** I believe your mental state influences every aspect in your life. Including work life. I would love to see a greater focus on mental health at work in PNG to better support the workforce.

KIND REGARDS

ROXY AILA



# BREAK THE STIGMA

***Mental Health in PNG Workplaces. What Papua New Guineans said.***

*"There is absolutely no workplace mental health support. I do not feel supported."*

*"I am not aware of a mental health and wellness package for staff. What does that mean?"*

*"Yes, I experienced mental illness at work. No, I would not feel confident speaking to a Manager."*

*"No, I would not let my Manager know if I was struggling at work."*

*"No, there is no support for mental health at work."*



# STIGMA

---

## **My heart fell as I collated feedback from participants.**

Fear of judgement in Papua New Guinean workplaces can hold people back from seeking help when they are experiencing depression or anxiety. This is not unique to PNG. Globally, there is stigma and shame associated with mental illness that World Health Organisation estimates costs the global economy US \$1 trillion. The data and resources in PNG to identify numbers of people affected by mental illness is not available. Even so, the lack of quantitative reporting does not mean mental illness does not occur.

PNG has amongst the highest rates of violence in the world as reported by Human Rights Watch in 2017. If you are living in PNG, you know about engrained violence in PNG culture. We don't need Human Rights Watch to tell us about violence in PNG. So, we can take it for granted that staff members turning up to work have experienced some level of personal hardship and trauma. Is it the employers' place to pry and ask what trauma each staff member has endured previously? No. However, employers have a duty of care for employees. Not the HR "I'm going to cover my tail legally. We are good from a company standpoint. We asked. We are ticking the box." kind of duty of care or grand gesture....

Rather, a genuine look at systems, processes and culture to build an environment for teams to be safe, thrive and achieve commercial objectives.

The National News Publication interviewed Dr Uma Ambi, Directorate of Social Change and Mental Health Services in PNG. In 2019, Dr Ambi highlighted the need for support services for mental health because of the increasing rate of mental illness in PNG.

I interviewed a small group of people working in PNG to understand their experience. I have not included real names of interviewees in this work for privacy reasons. The sample data from my interviews shows mental health support and wellness for employees is generally missing from organisations in PNG. People are employed to do their job with the mentality that people need to manage themselves effectively, leave any issues at the door, don't take unnecessary emotion into the workplace, manage their own mental health, perform and go home.

# SHAME

---

Research participants shared their experience of mental illness, health and wellness in PNG and said:

*"Mental health is unheard of, a non-practised area of HR or Performance in PNG organisations. It is a misunderstood concept and mistaken for a negative concept." Kila\**

*"Mental illness is not a disease seen seriously. I believe due to the culture, mental health support is more of a talk and it's dusted." Helen\**

I did more digging and found people who work in the health sector or large national or international organisations often have Human Resource teams dedicated to supporting staff, performance and wellness at work.

It was interesting to observe where there is an existing structured wellness program, people said they would feel comfortable approaching their Managers if they felt mentally or emotionally unwell. Further, the sector people work in influences whether they will speak to their Manager or not.

For example, a healthcare worker would be comfortable approaching Management because of their work in the public health space whereas a worker in corporate sales would generally not feel able to escalate mental health concerns. Of course, this is not the case for every single corporate sales professional. However, many people I interviewed would not feel able to approach their Managers out of fear of job loss or the concern their responsibilities would be taken away and take-home pay decreased. Not all companies have employee mental health support plans in place at work. This is an issue for organisations. It's a red flag, yes. It's an opportunity for companies to address to care for staff and potentially increase overall staff wellbeing, productivity and company earnings.

# SPEAKING UP

This is what participants shared about mental health at work in PNG...

*"I would feel comfortable approaching those at management level, working in the health sector means people are more understanding about health issues."*

*"We just want to keep it in the family. It's a sensitive issue and don't want many people to know about mental illness."*

*"I was sent to the village doctor and we had a ceremony to take my mental illness away. The ceremony didn't work."*

*"My friends said my eyes were really tired and asked if I was over depression yet after one day of disclosing mental illness. I didn't feel able to talk about my mental health at work or at home."*

*"People told me to snap out of it and don't think too much....but it was really hard. I didn't know what was happening to my body."*

*"I felt shame and didn't want to bring it up or get my jobs taken away from me, so I didn't say anything to anyone."*

As a Melanesian and islander, I understood immediately about shame culture in PNG. Research participants frequently referred to culture at work and culture in PNG influencing their decision to not reach out to co-workers or managers for support.

PNG is diverse, rich in traditions, language and culture. Layered on top of this is a young and developing country steeped in religious and village culture beliefs with a lack of information about mental conditions. Where there is a lack of information and knowledge can lie fear and shame. Beyond Blue is a non-profit organisation which works to break stigma associated with mental illness in Australia.

In 2015 Beyond Blue released a paper entitled Stigma and discrimination associated with depression and anxiety. The paper delved into the different types of stigma associated with mental illness which includes:

- Personal stigma
- Perceived stigma
- Self-stigma
- Structural stigma



# WHAT NEXT

---

Research participants highlighted they generally would steer away from seeking help or support for mental illness support at work because of stigma, shame and fear.

*"Help is offered for when you need to chat but PNG mentality, we don't like to bother the Managers and this with other issues."*

*"Wari bilo yu kind of mentality."*

Help is offered...but the general feeling is that you will be shamed, you are incompetent and may well lose your job for showing signs of emotional or mental distress.

## **Where to from here?**

Mental wellness is a sensitive topic because businesses need to perform consistently and hit organisation objectives otherwise there is no job to go to for anyone. By the same token, how can you hit commercial milestones if your workforce is unwell?

Clearly, there is a need to put mental health on the agenda in PNG workplaces, provide further mental health education, be culturally sensitive, break the stigma that comes with mental illness and create workplaces to enable people to thrive at work.

# WELLNESS

---

**One of my research participants raised the Pillars of Wellness and how this translates to performance.**

**The 8 Pillars of Wellness** includes physical, nutritional, emotional, social, spiritual, intellectual, financial and environmental surroundings. Wellness extends to emotional and mental wellbeing rather than seeing someone as purely physically fit and assuming they must be well in all aspects of their life. The Pillars of Wellness collectively impact someone's state of being and mind. Whether someone is happy, sad, engaged, disengaged, productive or inefficient...it is all connected.

## **How can companies drive wellness and performance at work?**

It is not fair to expect people to be trained therapists at work and to know how someone is instinctively and know what kind of support to offer. What came through strongly in my discussions with research participants is the need for Emotional Intelligence at work. The employer's care factor or 'Give a damn' quotient beyond commercial objectives. Healthline Media indicates Emotional Intelligence relates to self awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills. By combining Emotional Intelligence with practical solutions, companies can develop and implement a systematic approach to addressing wellness at work. Research participants shared various ideas to support staff at work in PNG.

# WHAT CAN COMPANIES DO?

---

Key initiatives include educating team leaders and team members about the pillars of wellness, what wellness means and what it looks like. Plus, education around what mental illness looks like in terms of equipping staff with the skills to feel confident to self-identify as mentally unwell and to recognise signs in a co-worker who may be displaying signs of mental illness.

Through education and information companies can drive conversations around overall wellness, mental health, mental illness and provide practical steps people can take to create an environment for people to thrive. This conversation is crucial to break the stigma of mental illness to encourage people to seek support early.

In terms of creating an environment for people to thrive at work, implementing and promoting wellness programs and access to qualified anonymous counselling support can nurture and support talent.

Companies stand to win commercially at work when overall wellness and mental health is prioritised. Decreased staff absenteeism, increased productivity at work and lower staff turnover collectively contribute to increasing revenue when staff wellness is put at the forefront alongside commercial objectives.

Emil Shour explored employee happiness in United States and the results are incredible in terms of examples of what companies, regardless of country, can achieve commercially when they invest in talent.

Shour's research for his article 11 Shocking Employee Statistics in 2020 That Will Blow Your Mind showed:

*"Companies with happy employees outperform the competition by 20%.*

*Happy employees are 12% more productive.*

*67% of full-time employees with access to free food at work are "extremely" or "very" happy at their current job.*

*Happy salespeople produce 37% greater sales."*

# EMPLOYEE PROGRAMS

---

**Employee Assistance Programs are instrumental in driving happiness, mental wellness and productivity at work.**

Established companies in the mining, manufacturing, banking and finance space generally have HR teams and Employee Assistance Programs available. An Employee Assistance Program enables staff to access free counselling and has had a positive impact on employee comfort and satisfaction at work levels in terms of feeling confident to reach out to management for support early.

Participants who have employee assistance at work said:

*"Yes, I 100% feel supported by my workplace."*

*"I work in health, so free counselling is available here."*

*"I have never needed mental health support, but we have a gym on-site and regular medicals. Management make it their business to support staff."*

Large companies generally have the resources available to develop specific Employee Assistance Programs which support mental health and wellness programs. It was excellent to learn about organisations which offer regular chaplaincy services for employees, discounts with wellness providers, on-site meditation classes, corporate sponsored yoga classes, seminars about nutrition, budgeting, corporate retreats, free snacks, management retreats, team outings and volunteer days. These organisations are the exception rather than the rule. EAPs are largely driven by a wellness ambassador in the office, rather than driven by the overall business strategy.

# DRIVE THE CHANGE

---

## **Would you like to implement an Employee Assistance Program at work?**

I recommend initial research with teams to understand the kind of EAP support that would be effective for your organisation. Ongoing team surveys, collaboration and regular communication is core to equipping teams with practical support. The PNG Human Resources Institute is an incredible resource to develop tailored programs for your team to thrive personally, professionally and for your organisation to deliver and exceed commercial objectives.

In 2018, HR Technologists highlighted there are many tell-tale signs in terms of how companies are tracking and supporting employees and productivity. These culture metrics include employee referrals, internal transfers, employee assistance programs, attrition rates, wellness and work-life balance and of course productivity.

# WELLNESS AT WORK

---

## **Lastly, how do you foster wellness and productivity at work?**

A three-pronged approach to tackling wellness at work has the potential to deliver strong results in terms of employee wellness, happiness, productivity and achieving organisational objectives.

1. Education and training around mental wellness and the link to performance, the 8 pillars of wellness, mental illness and equipping people to recognise the signs of mental illness at work is key to empowering teams to drive performance, create a high performing work culture and understand support available for people who may be mentally unwell.
2. Specific programs designed to support employees demonstrate commitment to fostering an environment and culture that is safe and set up to enable employees to thrive rather than survive at work.
3. Tailored support frameworks which informs all employees about the process they can go through if they self-identify as mentally unwell, or recognise a co-worker who is displaying signs of ill health is a fundamental part of fostering wellness and productivity at work.

Collectively, PNG organisations can drive positive change to address the increasing rate of mental illness in the islands. We can put practical steps in place to break the stigma that comes with mental disease, drive mental health at work and support teams and organisations to perform at a high level to thrive.

# NEED SUPPORT? REACH OUT

---

**Where can Papua New Guineans go for mental health support?**

**Mental Health Hotline** 7907 4944

**Port Moresby General Hospital Accidents and Emergencies** 324 8239

**St John's Ambulance for emergencies** 303 1000

**Papua New Guinea Human Resources Institute** 323 5084

**Email** pnghri@gmail.com

# REFERENCES

---

\* Asterisk denotes responses from survey participants and fictional names to protect the privacy of interviewees.

Ask The Scientists. (2020). *The 8 Pillars of Holistic Health and Wellness*.  
<https://askthescientists.com/pillars-of-wellness/>, 2020.

Beyond Blue. (2015). *Stigma and discrimination associated with depression and anxiety*. <https://www.beyondblue.org.au/docs/default-source/policy-submissions/stigma-and-discrimination-associated-with-depression-and-anxiety.pdf>, August 2015.

Health Line Media. (2018). *What you need to know about Emotional Intelligence*. <https://www.healthline.com/health/emotional-intelligence#components>, 2018.

HR Technologist. (2019). *5 culture metrics you should be tracking in 2019*.  
<https://www.hrtechnologist.com/articles/employee-engagement/5-culture-metrics-you-should-be-tracking-in-2019/>, 5 December 2018.

Human Rights Watch. (2017). *Papua New Guinea Events of 2016*  
World Health Organisation. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/countrychapters/papua-new-guinea>, 2016.

Shour, Emil. (2020). *11 Shocking Employee Statistics in 2020 That Will Blow Your Mind*. <https://snacknation.com/blog/employee-happiness/>, 12 February 2020.

The National. (2019). *Mental Health Needs Swift Action*.  
<https://www.thenational.com.pg/mental-health-needs-swift-action/>, 6 September 2019

World Health Organisation. (2020). *Mental Health in the Workplace*.  
[https://www.who.int/mental\\_health/in\\_the\\_workplace/en/](https://www.who.int/mental_health/in_the_workplace/en/), May 2019.

# THANK YOU!

**Yay! You made it this far.** Thank you so much for reading. I am so grateful to my sample of interviewees for being so forthcoming. I appreciate it is not always easy to share personal experiences. My heartfelt thanks because the findings helped me to write this paper and also submit this for my assignment through university. I am studying writing through Deakin University.

I really wanted to make my university paper practical for PNG organisations to gain employee insights about mental health at a time that is particularly stressful globally, nationally and locally.

I chose to focus on mental health in PNG workplaces because the mental health support for employees is generally not available. My intention with sharing this is to start the conversation about mental health and wellness in PNG and how this relates to worklife. Further, I have practical steps in here for organisations to start to implement Employee Assistance Programs.

From my heart to yours, take care and wishing you the best of mental health and wellness at what is a hectic time globally.

Roxy



STAY  
CONNECTED  
WITH YOURS  
TRULY

---

ROXY AILA XO

