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Wellness in the Workplace:

Boosting organisational immunity to HIV/AIDS

Project Empower

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INTRAC
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Introduction

HIV/AIDS policies are not enough. Without a conducive work environment, policies will make little difference. Many organisations are vulnerable to the effects of HIV/AIDS because they are already unhealthy – their immune systems are weak. Creating a workplace that encourages 'wellness' is arguably the most important step an organisation can take to develop its resilience to HIV/AIDS. The good news is that many of ways forward do not cost anything.

This paper is the product of a Project Empower workshop with 12 South African civil society organisations (CSOs). The workshop aimed to find ways for CSOs to manage the impact of HIV/AIDS on their organisations. But it revealed the disturbing reality that instead of organisations actively trying to improve the health of staff living with HIV/AIDS, the working conditions in many NGOs were contributing significantly to staff leading less healthy lives.

This paper identifies the factors making CSOs' workplaces unhealthy; articulates participants' understanding of wellness; and highlights practical ways to encourage wellness in the workplace.

Stressful lives

The Eastern Cape is one of the poorest parts of South Africa. CSOs exist in strained circumstances. Workshop participants described the high stress they experience working in deprived and impoverished communities. The high HIV/AIDS prevalence adds hugely to this stress. Many have difficulty sleeping and often feel hopeless. Some have resorted to using their own resources to help people to alleviate the despair.

In addition, their organisations are resource poor. They are able to offer little in the way of benefits (health insurance and retirement or disability insurance) and job security. None of the organisations in the workshop are in a position to consider offering ART to their staff members, many of whom are living in the same poor and struggling communities they serve. Workshop participants easily identified the consequences: 'The pressure of work means that I do not look after myself. I need to learn how.'

Unhealthy workplaces

Participants reported that their organisations and the way they work add to the stress they experience. They highlighted:
- poor pay
- poor working conditions such as long hours, not enough leave
- shabby, poorly equipped office space

- o bullying or punitive superiors
- o no job security; uncertainty
- o competitive and undermining relationships between peers
- o gossiping
- o favouritism
- o no support for people involved in stressful work such as counselling and home based care
- o not being able to challenge superiors
- o high turnover of staff
- o not being treated fairly
- o no policy guidelines
- o HIV/AIDS all around us
- o fear of failure, not being good enough

So instead of being supportive work environments that help alleviate illnesses, many organisations actually contribute to a person's sense of poor physical and mental health. This is particularly concerning given the context of organisations living with HIV/AIDS and the relationship between stress and immune dysfunction.

What is wellness?

Health is not just a matter of the body, or a physical concern, but includes the emotions, mental and spiritual health. A general definition emerged from the workshop:

> 'Wellness is the consequence of an optimum set of conditions existing for the individual. Some of these are directly related to an individual's own abilities, motivation and attitudes, such as exercising, while others are further away from their locus of control, such as not having to worry about money, or even totally removed, such as clean air and water.'

Stress is not gender neutral. Female participants highlighted the extra burdens they bear. They have to try and address even those conditions that are beyond their control. One said: 'Whereas a man might feel truly frustrated at the lack of certain services (such as water), a woman cannot just stop at being frustrated. She has to provide the water even if that means walking miles irrespective of her health'. Participants went on to explore the different aspects of wellness: physical, emotional and mental, and spiritual.

They identified a number of cost-effective ways to encourage staff to be well and healthy in all aspects.

Physical wellbeing

All people, whether HIV positive or not, need a healthy body. Fitness and good nutrition, however, were seen as remote ideals by participants. They felt that most people, especially older people, had no idea what went into a healthy diet or what exercise to do. For women, exercising was seen as a time waster. In the busy lives of working wives and mothers even a 20 minute walk three times a week was asking too much. Participants also did not have a good understanding of how to treat basic infections, information which can often be life-saving for people living with HIV/AIDS.

Participants identified a number of actions CSOs could take to address this:

> **Workplace responses to improve interpersonal relationships throughout the organisation**
> - negotiating and conflict resolution, teaching and practicing the principles of transactional analysis in the workplace
> - teaching and practicing good listening and basic counselling skills
> - encouraging openness and support seeking in the workplace
> - encouraging regular professional and personal debriefing.
>
> **Workplace responses to encouraging staff to keep physically fit and healthy**
>
> - diet and nutrition
> - encouraging learning about managing infections and illnesses
> - exercise, stretching – making brief exercising a part of the office routine, followed by stretching – an example to the whole community
> - setting body goals for each person – making these part of the review of each person's contribution.

Emotional and mental wellbeing

Physical wellness is not enough on its own. Wellness also has an emotional and mental component. Participants identified the following elements as important for emotional and mental health.

1. Good relationships

Good relationships are at the core of emotional wellness. People need a sense of belonging with others. They need to love and be loved. They need to be accepted socially, with space to be with friends.

Empathy is an essential part of emotional wellbeing. Families and colleagues are

increasingly losing loved ones to HIV/AIDS and it is therefore more and more important to understand how to live with grief and bereavement.

Women in the group highlighted the need to put their needs first. They understood the ability to mediate one's own interest as the key for women's wellness.

2. Health information

Knowledge about health is also important, especially having information about HIV/AIDS and knowing how to manage stress. This is because many HIV positive people have heard the injunction 'Do not allow yourself to become stressed', without any further information being given about how to do this. The result is simply that people living with HIV/AIDS become more stressed.

> **Workplace responses to support information sharing**
>
> - encouraging learning about managing infections and illnesses.

3. The physical environment and circumstances

Poverty is clearly an obstacle to wellness: all participants said that one needed money and some financial stability to be well. But living and working in a good, clean environment is also important. Most participants came from impoverished communities with poor infrastructure and overcrowded homes. Working environments are not much better, CSOs often do not have the resources to alter the buildings, nor bother to paint them or repair broken doors, windows or toilets. Participants also mentioned the value of getting out into the natural environment:

several people mentioned their need to 'be in place where I am surrounded with green and water.'

Workplace response to creating a clear and orderly physical work environment

- encouraging staff to personalise their workspaces
- making an effort to ensure that the office space is clean and tidy and clutter free
- making sure that the workplace is physically safe and secure
- painting and fixing the building and furniture
- small flower beds outside can do a lot to brighten the environment.

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4. Positive reinforcement

Some participants defined wellness as having the opportunity to 'shine and be bright' – for people to notice their uniqueness and contributions.

Workplace responses to encourage positive reinforcement

- commending staff members who are doing well and providing and adequate support and encouragement for those who are struggling in their work
- recognising staff member's contribution to the organisation, in both their personal and professional capacities.

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5. Personal development

For many work is a place where the higher needs of personal development and creative expression can potentially be met. But for many CSOs these aspirations operate within a very fragile environment, in organisations with insecure funding and future. Not surprisingly staff development opportunities are limited. The overriding insecurities give rise to tensions between colleagues and between managers and workers. People are terrified of losing their job and becoming simply a menial manual labourer. So while some people looked to their work places to meet their needs for personal development and recognition, many workplaces actually offered the opposite, increasing stress levels and undermining individuals.

Workplace responses to creating space for creativity, and personal development

- asking staff to draw up personal mission statements and working towards a synergy between personal and organisational mission statements
- promoting feedback and participation in all spheres of the organisation
- encouraging innovation and creativity
- encouraging openness and support seeking in the workplace
- setting realistic goals and managing workloads.

Spiritual wellbeing

Most participants also agreed that having a healthy spiritual life was also essential to their wellbeing. They highlighted the importance of having meaning and purpose in their lives. From their experience they suggested a fulfilled spiritual life could be helped by:
- quiet time listening to your soul, reading bible, praying, meditation;
- being at peace with inner being (forgive myself about unwise decisions in past – move on)
- to love myself unconditionally

- to be a doer not a theorist
- stop being conscious of old age,
- getting rid of pessimism, becoming optimistic.

Workplace responses to encouraging spiritual wellbeing

- using work as a place where meaning and purpose can be found
- allowing time for meditation or mind calming techniques.

Conclusion

Responding to HIV/AIDS in the workplace is more than just developing an HIV/AIDS policy. It is about creating a healthier workplace. This includes matters of physical health and nutrition, but is much more than that. It includes encouraging staff to address their mental, emotional and spiritual health too. Even at this one workshop, it was clear that there are many ways in which an organisation can address these issues – and most of them do not cost anything. Taking such measures will not just making the organisation more resilient to the ravages of HIV/AIDS, but it will also lead to a more motivated and higher performing workforce – one better equipped to fulfil the CSO's mission.

Checklist for promoting wellness

1. Encouraging staff to keep physically fit and healthy
2. Improving interpersonal relationships throughout the organisation
3. Positive reinforcement
4. Creativity, exploration and personal development
5. Creating a clear and orderly physical work environment
6. Managing stress in the workplace
7. Creating clear and consistent policy, including job descriptions and review mechanisms.

Further information