

It's okay not to be okay

By [Juanita Pienaar](#)

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The state of mental health in modern workplaces is bleak. We all work under intense pressure, especially in creative industries where job-induced anxiety, depression and burnout is rife.



Melinda Fouché, a clinical psychologist, Tarryn Pickup, marketing manager for Joe Public United and a non-medical hypnotherapist, Sam Wilson-Späth, head of digital and social media at Woolworths marketing, Natasha Reddy, who was the HR business partner at HelloFCB+ and Tinyiko Mageza, who was the executive manager: marketing V&A Waterfront.

At a recent SheSays event held in Cape Town, Anelde Greeff, director at SheSays, said that for those already living with mental illness, the environment can make their conditions impossible to manage. What's more, the stigma (those who direct the stigma) forces people to suffer in silence. So, what can companies do to really help and how can we combat burnout in our industry, confront toxic social dynamics and create a more supportive working environment?

Greeff shared that the topic was also a personal one for her, as a medicated anxiety sufferer, she realised that the things that are happening in our industry are looking promising. More and more people are talking about it but she said that she was not sure that we were there yet and that the aim of the evening's event was to unpack this.

On the panel was Tarryn Pickup, marketing manager for Joe Public United and a non-medical hypnotherapist; Sam Wilson-Späth, head of digital and social media at Woolworths marketing; Tinyiko Mageza, who was the executive manager: marketing V&A Waterfront; Natasha Reddy, who was the HR business partner at HelloFCB+; and Melinda Fouché, a clinical psychologist.

Greeff kicked off the session by asking Fouché to explain the difference and connections between stress, burnout, depression and anxiety.

She said that she sees mental health as the combination of external and internal resources and how that is balanced with external demands or environmental demands. Mental disorders are really the diagnose of all conditions. Your cluster of symptoms on a spectrum of severity. Those include things like depressive disorders, bipolar, anxiety, psychotic disorders and should be treated by healthcare professionals.

So what is the difference between depression and burnout? Fouché explained that sometimes the two were used interchangeably. "The symptoms of depression are low mood, appetite changes, increased irritability and, then, often it's accompanied by thoughts of suicide or death. Theoretically, you can say burnout is something different from depression but often they are very much linked."



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So with burnout, you can take the person out of the environment, hypothetically speaking, and the symptoms will go away. Whereas with someone with a major depressive disorder, whether they at home or at work, the symptoms are going to persist.

But in the end, what we see is that the one sometimes fuels the other. A person who has burnout is probably more susceptible to developing depression. And a person who has a predisposition to developing a depressive disorder is probably going to be more sensitive to develop burnout.

Greeff continued and asked why we think mental health and discussion around it has come up so often now and why now is a good point in time to talk about it.

Reddy said she doesn't think we have spoken about it and it's time. She said that she and her colleagues are often overwhelmed by how many people have some form of anxiety, depression or stress. "It is just coming to a head. A lot of staff comes to my office and they are scared and asking how this is going to impact on their jobs and if they are going to lose their jobs. But at the same time, they have to address it because they can't carry on like that. And that's why I think it's now come to a head."



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Wilson-Späth added that life has changed so much and, at some point, you just can't cope anymore. She agreed with Reddy and said that as a manager, people come to her and tell her that they can't cope with the pretty ridiculous amount of work and life stress and attention-grabbing elements of their lives that they are supposed to keep up with.

Mageza said we wouldn't be having a full conversation if we didn't take into account; yes, there is a global phenomenon, but you also have to remember the South African nuances. "I know many of you come from communities where the topic of mental health and mental illness is stigmatised and trivialised and ridiculed. That's the first thing and then the second thing is a lot of us are first-generation or second-generation graduates."

“ Part of the so-called born-free generation. Our parents were limited in terms of their opportunities from a job perspective. So the fact that we are able to make choices around what our career opportunities look like – there is the added pressure of being grateful. So if you go to your mom and tell her, 'I'm feeling burnt out.' She'd just say, 'Hai wena, sleep it off.' There is that extra pressure to feel that sense of gratitude, it put so much pressure on us to suppress and not talk about it. ”

Greeff asked the panel if they thought that it's worse in the creative industries. She asked: "What is it about advertising, marketing and media that really turns up the levels of anxiety?"

Reddy said that there is a constant pressure to deliver at such a high level. The expectations that you put on yourself, the expectations from your peers and the expectations from the client. Also, not forgetting the economy that we're in. You're left with, "I really just need to keep going because I can't afford to lose my job. So, I have to do whatever it takes. I have to put the long hours in, I have to deliver."

Pickup added that the resilience arc becomes lower and lower. "And even though we are under a lot more pressure, let's not forget that we're all humans at the end of the day," she said. "It really doesn't matter what environment you're in. Because of the pace and the sophistication and how we've evolved and what stress means to us now versus what it was in cavemen eras. Now it's mum-in-law and the boss, and the colleague, etc."

She said: "Ultimately if you as a human is low in an internal resource, it doesn't matter where you are, you're never going to have that resilience and you are never going to be able to bounce back. It doesn't help when you are in an environment that's incredibly pressured."

Mageza said that people also tend to romanticise this work-hard-play-hard-Mad-Men-sniff-cocaine type of jobs. She said: "I have never worked in agencies before, full disclosure, but I have always worked in a marketing department in corporate. And there is this assumption that the marketing people are the yellow team, the sunshine. Always high energy, always happy." Mageza said it's exhausting.



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Sam Swaine 11 Apr 2018



In a recent Ad Age article, Aaron Harvey who is the founder of a digital agency called, Ready, Set, Rocket said, "This industry makes money entirely of our brains and creativity and the ability to live under intense pressure. So agencies need to take some responsibility for the mental welfare of the people who do their work." Greeff asked how can agencies and all employers take responsibility for their employees' welfare?

Pickup said; "I look at the internal mechanisms that happen within agencies and, at Joe Public, it is really about finding accommodations for people who have mental issues and challenges, etc. The agency is quite 'woke' to the fact that that is a real thing. And we are humans and we do have feelings. Joe works with a company called Smart Money, who helps with our employees' financial wellness – which is a huge aspect of wellness in general. It's not just your physical wellness or your mental wellness, there are various different types of wellness in terms of employee wellness, the types of relationships you have with people, spiritual wellness, etc."



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So when you are ticking boxes, like working with guys such as Smart Money with financial wellness, instead of people winding up in therapy because they can't deal with their money issues. Having certain external suppliers, we also use ICAS as well. Being open and honest with your line managers, so your managers have full disclosure and awareness of what your coping mechanisms and abilities are.

This way, your line managers have full disclosure and awareness of what your coping mechanisms and abilities are. Not feeling that you are somehow going to be stigmatised because you're not able to cope. There are various things about creating accommodations. And I think South Africa is getting there. We're not there yet, but it is very much part of this day and age, etc.

Being honest with your line manager about your concerns and your issues and a lot have been written about coming out with your mental issues. Greeff asked how do we help people talk about it?

Wilson-Späth said: "As somebody who manages people and, I have also been medicated and clinically depressed for 15 years now, as a line manager, you also got to be open with the people that work with you about your own issues."

She said: "For me, if you're depressed, you just have less petrol in your tank and you have to ration your petrol accordingly. This image makes it less about the fact that you are wrong in some way. You just have less petrol at the moment or you are walking uphill or whichever image works for you."



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29 May 2019



She continued and said she doesn't really believe in the old concept of there being a division between your personal life and your professional life. "I am just me, you hired me. I'm not going to arrive with some bouncy, Teflon version of me. I do that with my team as well. So I tell them to stop thinking about the differences between your personal or professional life. You are here and we are here for you. So whatever you need to share, you can share and we'll all work through it because no one knows how to deal with this stuff. You have to do it case by case and, as a group, sharing your experiences, to me, has been the best way to normalise and find ways of coping."

Fouché agreed and added that what Wilson-Späth said about managers investing in their own internal processes and insight is very important, might be even more important than focusing on what you can do for your employees.

"As managers, you need to be aware of what you are bringing and how you relate with the employees." She said she always thinks of the analogy of a container – any space that you feel safe is like a container. So there is always this negotiation of space and boundary.

"And maybe people in the creative industry need a little bit more space but it doesn't negate the boundaries. I think creating space would be something similar to individuals making things known that are not known. For example, talking about culture, making things explicit."

“ There needs to be space for everyone to be who they are individually but the boundary is also important and people need to know what that is. Having these two things create safety for people to be able to talk about their emotional stuff. ”

Mageza added to the topic of boundaries by saying that the greatest gift she gave herself was creating those boundaries. "But before I could do that, I had to come to the realisation that the organisation, the ship will still sail with or without me. It was like a bucket of cold water because I felt that the world revolved around me. You know, like if I am not in the office from

sunrise to sunset this thing is going to fall apart."



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She explained a scenario where she was booked off sick for three weeks and when she returned to work, she realised that everything was fine and everyone just moved on. Mageza said that it was at this point that she asked herself, "Am I replaceable?" And she realised she actually is replaceable and that is okay. But what that did is that it gave her permission and the freedom to set boundaries for herself.

“ I had to create those boundaries. Don't expect your line manager and the executive committee to tap you the shoulder and say, 'I think you need to take those leave days. Just take a mental health day, girl.' It's not going to happen. I need to own it because delegating that responsibility to my line manager you are not guaranteed that those people know what your boundaries are. ”

Pickup said that when you're ill or when you are meant to be off, don't let people cross the boundaries because she said you don't do anything for the business when you are in that frame of mind and vice versa.



South Africans owe it to themselves to take leave

16 Jan 2018



Reddy agreed and explained that your leave days are there for you to use, don't let it pile up. She said if you're sick, you should not switch on your laptop. It's your manager or employer's responsibility to manage your workload.

Wilson-Späth said that one way to do that is to make your team cross-skilled. So that anyone can pick up the other person's work if they had to. "Yes, you each have your own jobs and you responsible for them but you are also responsible for each other."

She said otherwise people feel like, "Yes, I have been told to leave the work and to get off my computer but how?"

Greef asked how managers or employers can facilitate mental wellness?

Reddy said it is about being open and that managers and employers sometimes need to start the conversation. Because the other person doesn't want to start it because they are too scared. And that is the starting point. It's about communicating and having powerful conversations. She said that especially in advertising there is this constant fear that the employee wrestles with about losing the account or losing their jobs. She said she does believe that it is the employer that needs to drive the conversations.

Mageza mentioned "baseline hygiene interventions" like [ICAS](#), an employee wellness programme, which an organisation can contract – an outsource resource for employee wellness. "It's a nice cheat for organisations which are not ready to invest in the overheads of creating that type of resource."

She said that we should also as employees be each other's allies and create these type of forums (for wellness) within the organisation that enables the surfacing of these type of conversations.

Reddy mentioned [Careways](#) as another resource – which will give employees financial advice, psychological advice and advice for marital problems. She said that companies need to set the tone and that culture is so important because it allows the employee to reach out and speak up when they feel overwhelmed.

Here ends my coverage of the event. For more on this particular talk, click [here](#) and to view future #SheSays events click [here](#). Entry is free but space is limited, so RSVP to secure your spot.

ABOUT JUANITA PIENAAR

Juanita is the editor of the marketing & media portal on the Bizcommunity website. She is also a contributing writer.

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