



August 2024

EMPOWERING TIMES



THINKING ALOUD

An Unseen Epidemic?

Jay

PODIUM

Sushil Eapen

CEO, Silver Oak Health



WE RECOMMEND

Hamara Rahul

Tarun Das & Kiran Pasricha

Reviewed by Jay

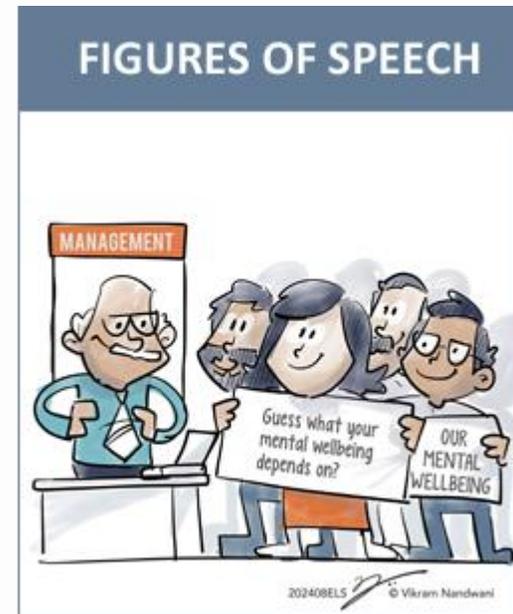
Dear Reader,

In the post Covid world, the landscape of mental health challenges has evolved dramatically, particularly in the workplace. The pandemic has not only heightened awareness of mental health issues but has also reshaped how organizations approach employee well-being. With the rise of hybrid and remote work models, the traditional boundaries between work and personal life have blurred, leading to increased stress, isolation, and burnout among employees. The shift has underscored the urgent need for employers to adopt proactive strategies that support mental health in this new environment.

Technology, particularly AI, has emerged as a powerful tool in addressing these challenges. AI-driven platforms provide personalized mental health support, making it easier for individuals to access resources and care. This technology-driven approach not only democratizes access to mental health support but also allows for real-time tracking of progress, ensuring that individuals receive the help they need when they need it most.

For employers, fostering a supportive work environment in a hybrid or remote setting requires a multi-faceted approach. Key strategies include regular check-ins, promoting work-life balance, and providing access to mental health resources. Employers must also cultivate a culture of openness, where employees feel safe discussing their mental health without fear of stigma or judgment. Offering mental health days, flexible working hours, and access to counselling services are practical steps that can make a significant difference in employee well-being.

Employees who are struggling with mental health issues but are hesitant to seek help should remember that taking the first step is crucial. It's important to recognize that seeking support is a sign of strength, not weakness. Whether through a trusted colleague, a mental health professional, or an AI-driven platform, reaching out for help can lead to meaningful improvements in both personal and professional life.



Leaders and managers play a critical role in identifying early signs of mental health issues within their teams. By maintaining open lines of communication and being attuned to changes in behaviour, such as decreased productivity, withdrawal, or mood fluctuations, managers can intervene early and offer support. Training in mental health awareness is also essential, equipping leaders with the tools to recognize and respond to potential issues before they escalate. It's a conversation that is not only timely but necessary, as we all strive to adapt and thrive in the face of ongoing challenges. By embracing technology, fostering supportive workplaces, and encouraging open dialogue, we can better navigate the complexities of mental health in this new era.

This month in Empowering Times (ET), we delve into the theme of ***"Dealing with Mental Health Challenges in the Post Covid World."***

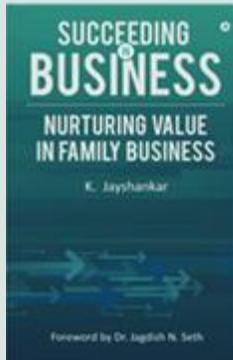
In the **Thinking Aloud**, Jay highlights the growing awareness and impact of mental health issues among sports professionals and workers, revealing a widespread crisis exacerbated by modern stressors and workplace conditions, and emphasizes the need for supportive environments and effective mental health programs. On the **Podium**, Sushil Eapen, CEO, Silver Oak Health discusses the evolution of workplace mental health post Covid-19, strategies for supporting employees' mental well-being in hybrid or remote settings, the role of technology in enhancing mental health services, and the importance of early detection and support for mental health challenges. In the **We Recommend** section, Jay reviews **Hamara Rahul** authored by Tarun Das & Kiran Pasricha which reflects Rahul Bajaj's impactful legacy as a fearless and visionary leader who transformed Bajaj Auto into an iconic brand, while also highlighting the socio-political challenges he navigated and the lasting admiration he garnered across various spheres.

In **Figures of Speech**, Vikram's toons join forces for a mental well-being win!

Please also [Click Here](#) to check out our Special issue of ET, which is a collation of selected themes that were featured over the years highlighting the changing landscape of the business world. This special edition has been well received and can be [Downloaded Here](#) for easy reading and is a collector's item.

As always, we value your opinion, so do let us know how you liked this issue. To read our previous issues, do visit the Resources section on the website or simply [Click Here](#). You can also follow us on [Facebook](#), [LinkedIn](#), [X](#), [Threads](#) & [Instagram](#) - where you can join our community to continue the dialogue with us!

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THINKING ALOUD

An Unseen Epidemic?

Jay

The big story emerging from the world of sport in recent times is that a number of sports persons (women and men) have been battling a hidden enemy, deeply enmeshed in themselves. Unfortunately, this is not a competition that all of them win. Some succumb to this nefarious competitor, paying the ultimate price, choosing to end their lives. Two recent cases that come to mind are the cricketers Graham Thorpe (England) and David Johnson (India). The unspoken enemy in both cases was mental illness.

Many others have been tormented too, and it takes courage for them to speak out about it. Case in point being, Robin Uthappa and Ben Stokes (cricketers) who have gone public with their personal mental challenges. Amongst other leading sports persons, two cases that hit the headlines is the case of the multi-award-winning Olympic gymnast, Simone Biles (who battled 'twisties' and had to step away during the Tokyo Olympics) and Virat Kohli (who sought help from experts and other senior sportsmen when he battled depression) – but thankfully, both have recovered well and scaled greater heights in their careers. In days past, no one would believe that such champions would be afflicted with mental health challenges. However, by coming out into the open with this unknown aspect of their life, and casting aside the façade of unblemished superstardom, these individuals have thrown light on a subject that has been misunderstood for long – mental health.

The World Health Organization (WHO) views mental health as 'a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community.' This really is an all-encompassing view that gives credence to a survey in 2022 conducted by CNN and Kaiser Family Foundation that projected that 90% of Americans believe that the country has a mental health crisis. That this is not just a crisis created by the American lifestyle is indicated by WHO's finding in 2019 that over 970 million people

across the world were victims of mental health challenges, the most common being anxiety and depression. This number has only jumped since the pandemic as covid fueled a host of new cases, many of which still linger even today. Examining these disorders is beyond the scope of my piece, but here's an illustrative list for you to consider: anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), schizophrenia, eating disorders, disruptive behaviour and dissocial disorders, neurodevelopmental disorders, etc. Suffice it to say that this subject is not taboo any longer given its widespread prevalence.

The causes for this rise are plenty. Human lifestyles have changed in our lifetime, as we all know, and today stress is our faithful, daily companion. Devising ways to destress include taking a break from work and moving away on vacation, but the tools of technology that we carry with us everywhere ensure that triggers for stress do not leave our side at all. This is true for all age groups. The reality of childhood is remorseless academic expectations from a society that goads us to be successful in our earliest days, and technological tools are a route for this achievement. One of the unintended consequences of this process is the rise of isolated and individualised living. Connecting with a machine is far easier for many over working incessantly in building interpersonal relationships. Yet another provocative element is the rise of recreational drugs, which have taken its toll over a generation that seeks easy pleasure over the challenges of navigating the daily grind. The opioid crisis may seem an America episode but is also playing out in other parts of the world. All this without considering the health issues that are natural conditions with the onset of advanced age.

Most adults thrive during their decades at work, largely in the 20-50 years age bracket. However, with the changes in society that we mentioned earlier, they carry their mental challenges to their workplace, too. Hence, employers are seeking solutions to this malaise after decades of denying that the challenge exists, or even that they could be the source of the problem. Whether it be the poor quality of workspaces, or the hazardous nature of tasks, the factory or office environment has a major bearing on one's physical and mental state. Add to these elements like a toxic boss, hostile work place, heavy workload, gender discrimination, job insecurity, long working hours, etc., and you have a recipe guaranteed to cause mental breakdown. The result in the extreme is violence at the workplace, and in a passive form, 'quiet quitting' where you have unproductive, reluctant, disengaged workforce clocking hours but not ensuring quality service. The desire to cut themselves away from the workspace is so high today in some countries that they are enforcing it through legislation. The latest example is the new Australian 'right to disconnect' law, which bars employers from reaching out to their staff post office hours in the quest to provide an elusive goal, 'work life balance'.

While there is the story of human tragedy writ all over this scenario of a broken workplace populated by zombie workforces, what is also visible to a perceptive eye is the ineffective and costly production process. No rational management would like to run an enterprise where unmotivated employees go through the motions and produce shoddy goods and services which are rejected at the marketplace. In their search for answers, some of them have turned to unique Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) which seek to ameliorate the travails faced by employees at the workplace. It may be seen as a balm but done right, it can turn away suicidal thoughts in employees and also become an avenue to distress someone who wants to vent issues through counselling sessions. Smart employers who analyse data points emerging from these early warning signs can detect trends and use them for better decision making about their office culture, policies, practices, and managerial personnel.

Arguably, it is not up to the employer alone to tackle the social challenge of mental health. Nevertheless, recognising that an environment where humans spend a third of their day (or more, in many cases) can be a wholesome atmosphere which provides an invigorating experience through interpersonal exchanges, should be a goal worthy of a firm. Only then can superstars perform without anxiety and deliver their best on a consistent basis. Turn to Michael Phelps, Lady Gaga, Naomi Osaka, Serena Williams, Simone Biles, Ben Stokes, Virat Kohli, Abhinav Bindra, and many others, to understand that becoming a champion did not mean turning away from seeking help from seasoned medical professionals to battle an insidious competitor hidden deep inside them. On the contrary, with good guidance, they could give wings to their better self, and thus bring joy to others and to themselves.

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Podium

Sushil Eapen

CEO, Silver Oak Health



Sushil Eapen is the Founder and CEO of Silver Oak Health, India's leading Employee Assistance Program (EAP) provider for corporates. Formerly, he was the Country Manager (India) of Pearson Clinical and Talent Assessment, a global publisher of psychological assessments. He was instrumental in establishing Pearson's Clinical Assessment business in India. He is passionate about the delivery of mental health services using digital technology. He has networked with a large number of mental health professionals in India and abroad. Sushil earned an MS from Kansas State University and received an MBA in Marketing from Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University, USA.

ET: How has the landscape of mental health evolved in the post Covid world, especially in the workplace, including Factory settings?

SE: The Covid-19 pandemic has altered the landscape of mental health, which was previously overlooked by most employers. Post Covid-19, the shift is evident in the workplace, including factory settings. One of the changes we are observing is that many smaller companies are now offering Employee Assistance Program (EAP) for employees and family members. The demand for onsite counselling at factories have also increased after Covid. The widespread adoption of remote work has created mental health challenges for many office employees. While work-from-home offers flexibility, it can also lead to isolation, blurred work-life boundaries, and increased stress. The pressure to be constantly available and productive has intensified, leading to increased burnout rates. Many employers are recognising these challenges and have started offering confidential counselling and proactive resilience building programs through EAP. Some companies have started asking employees to return to office and

with that employers are demanding onsite workshops and events to spread the awareness of mental health challenges and availability of EAP programs.

ET: What are some of the key strategies you recommend for employers to support their employees' mental health in a hybrid or remote work setting?

SE: Lack of face-to-face contact with colleagues can lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness. Many employees feel that they are overworked since the lines between work and personal life can become blurred, leading to increased workload and burnout. Some may find it difficult to switch off after work hours. Compound to that, excess screen time and virtual meetings can cause mental exhaustion for many employees. Employers must demonstrate genuine care and empathy for employees' well-being. They should encourage open dialogue about mental health, reducing stigma and creating a safe space for employees to share their experiences. In addition to EAP services that offer confidential counselling services, they can also promote wellness programs, including fitness challenges, nutrition workshops, and stress management techniques. By implementing these strategies, employers can create a supportive work environment that prioritizes employee mental health and well-being, leading to increased job satisfaction, productivity, and overall organizational success.

ET: How can leaders and managers identify early signs of mental health issues among their teams?

SE: Recognizing early signs of mental health challenges is crucial for providing timely support to employees. Managers should be given sensitisation training to recognise signs of stress among their team members. The symptoms could manifest in the form of behavioural, emotional or even physical changes. Frequent absences from work, isolation from colleagues, reluctance to participate in team activities, becoming more withdrawn are some of the typical behavioural symptoms. Managers may notice that some employees deliver lower work quality, show lack of focus and consistent deadline misses. In some cases, it might be noticed that the employees may appear tired all the time, or express sleep challenges. In other cases, the employees may exhibit lack of enthusiasm, or may even react strongly to feedback. Managers must be trained to approach these observations with empathy and sensitivity.

ET: What advice would you give to employees who are struggling with mental health issues but are hesitant to seek help?

SE: Mental health challenges are very common at workplace and most employees will experience stress, anxiety, or other issues at some point in their lives. Stress is also a normal part of everyone's life, especially when people work in a fast-paced work environment. The key is to develop coping skills that help them manage it effectively. If employees find that stress is becoming too much to handle on their own, it is best not to let get all bottled up. It is important to reach out for support. If the company offers Employee Assistance Program (EAP), employees can reach out for confidential counselling. EAP offers complete privacy and are usually completely free of cost to employees. We recommend everyone to use these services—they're there to support well-being and help employees thrive both personally and professionally. If any of the employees do not want to speak to a counsellor face-to-face, there are other ways to communicate like through phone calls or chat services. We recommend to employees to take it one step at a time. By breaking the stigma around mental health and being open about their experiences can encourage others to seek help as well.

ET: What role does technology, particularly AI, play in Silver Oak Health's approach to mental health?

SE: Artificial Intelligence is transforming mental health support by providing highly personalized solutions. We have recently launched one of the most advanced EAP app for our growing employee user base. Using machine learning, our app will analyse individual user interactions like the mood patterns, to create tailored mental health plan. For example, if someone consistently reports high stress levels related to work or personal life, our app will suggest mindfulness guided practices, Yoga videos, or even suggest professional counselling. AI will learn from emotional responses over time, refining its recommendations as it better understands the user's unique needs. This means that the suggestions the users receive will become more precise and effective the more the users interact with the app. For instance, if the app notices that the user respond well to certain activities or specific types of content, it will prioritize those in its future suggestions. By offering what the users uniquely need, Silver Oak Health's EAP app will ensure that the mental health resources provided are not only relevant but also resonate with each individual on a personal level, making the support more impactful and user-friendly. Additionally, the app also facilitates 24/7 support through a trained chatbot, providing employees with real-time assistance and guidance whenever they need it.

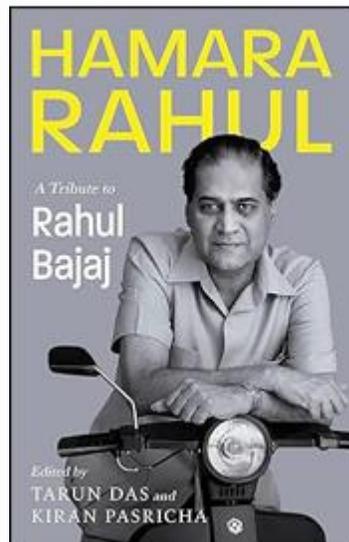
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We Recommend

Hamara Rahul

Tarun Das & Kiran Pasricha

- Reviewed by Jay



Icons of Indian industry have rarely captured the imagination of the general public. As I have often maintained, in fact industry leaders have been more reviled than respected in the public mind, save the rare few, chiefly the Tatas. This is the consequence of the decades of socialist thought that pervaded India psyche where those with capital were presented as the villains squeezing the working class and keeping them in abject poverty. What a rotten trick the political class played on the country – but then that was the period where the gods of communism were powerful, and leftists thrived milking the government's largesse. Few remember that our economic laws included such pearls as Monopolies & Restrictive Trade Practices Act (MRTP) and Foreign Exchange Regulation Act (FERA), amongst a slew of terrible laws meant to shackle production without a thought to the shortages and black economy that were the consequence of ill-conceived economic principles.

This was not always so, economic historians remind us, as the first industrial successes in India were built by visionaries like JN Tata, Kasturbhai Lalbhai, Walchand Hirachand, GD Birla, TVS Iyengar, and others, in the pre-independence days. Some of these visionaries even crafted a development plan in 1944 (more well-known as the Bombay Plan) which included a role for both government and private sectors to fast track economic growth post-independence. But when India turned left, the dark days of government intervention in every aspect of economic, social, educational life continued (or I dare say, still continues) culminating in a spate of nationalization of private businesses in the sixties and seventies. It took an

economic crisis in the late eighties for the government to finally let go of well-preserved shibboleths and loosen its grip over economic activity when liberalization was finally attempted in the early nineties.

One of those firms that survived these changes and thrives even today is the legendary Bajaj Auto. Led by the intrepid Rahul Bajaj, the two-wheeler company became an iconic brand, Hamara Bajaj, that resonates in the marketplace even today. It is strange that a product that was a symbol of all that was wrong in the marketplace – constrained by the license-raj and not permitted to grow and hence had a waiting list of over a decade – was also an aspirational product because of its superior quality.

When Rahul Bajaj passed away on 12th February 2022, it marked the end of an era of Indian economic history, and he was mourned by friends and competitors alike. The book at hand, ***Hamara Rahul***, is a tribute by 80 disparate voices who share their vivid memories of a colossus who bestrode India's business landscape as few had done before him. Scion of an illustrious family, rooted in Gandhian philosophy, Rahulbhai (as he was known widely to his friends) was unique in multiple respects. Vignettes of his life come through from the episodes and experiences narrated in the pages of this book, and what emerges is a towering figure, both physically and literally, who owned every room where he was present. Fearless to a fault and sometimes seen to be irascible, he had the best of global education and used his charms to build a wide network of associates and friends across the globe. As evidenced from the book, the best part about him was his India-first mentality that made him the spokesperson for the nation at many global fora. In fact, he explored platforms like Davos before others did and then generously inducted many other Indian industrialists into his network for the country's benefit.

Rahul Bajaj's courage was legendary, and he didn't brook rough language or treatment from anyone, least of all politicians. The book mentions episodes when he stood up to bothersome Chief Ministers and Central Ministers alike, while also unhesitatingly lecturing his industrial peers to stand up to authority. Generous with advice to youngsters (his message that NK Narayan Murthy recounts is classic, *'Realize that competition in the marketplace is the best management guru'*), and always willing to support causes, his philanthropic role is also highlighted in the book.

The contributors range from industrialists, academicians, politicians, policy makers, to social and office colleagues, and the wide range of homage exhibits the multiple roles he played in life. Be it in academic circles, or the parliament, or to the media, at Davos or at Harvard, amongst businessmen or at private gatherings, when the giant

figure of Rahul Bajaj walked in, the world listened. With his voice silenced now, even critics miss his presence though there is admiration all around that he implemented his succession plans skillfully after taking the Bajaj Group to new heights. Thus, a visionary's work lives on even when the giant has rested. Read, and be inspired.

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THROUGH THE LENS



Nature photographer **Rupesh Balsara** spots the Pacific Golden Plover, a striking migratory shorebird that visits India during winter inhabiting coastal regions and wetlands. It travels from the Arctic to warmer climates in South Asia, where it feeds on insects and small invertebrates, foraging methodically in fields using its sharp eyesight and beak. The Pacific Golden Plover is not extinct and is currently classified as a species of least concern, indicating that it has a stable global population despite facing some localized threats.

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