

Discovery COVID-19 podcast series

Transcript: Prof. Christoffel Grobler – **Our mental health at work before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic**

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	Speaker	Dialogue	
00:00	Dr. Grobler	Hey. This is Dr. Stoffel Grobler again. I am a Psychiatrist and today I'm going to talk about workplace mental health	00:09
00:09	Dr. Grobler	You all have been affected in some way by the corona virus pandemic, and possibly the biggest change that you may have experienced is around your work. This podcast will address your mental health at work before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Yes, you heard right. There will be an after. Even though we may not think it at the moment, there will come a time where we will be able to look back. Of course, we don't know when that will be but it's a perspective, I keep reminding myself about	00:40
00:40	Dr. Grobler	So, let's start with before. I would like to talk about before because mental illness is obviously not new, but I've never seen so much talk in the media about psychological health and wellbeing since this pandemic. The pandemic has created an opportunity to talk about common mental disorders and with this podcast, I would like to tell you just how common mental illness actually is. For the past number of years, I've been giving many presentations at different platforms about the prevalence of mental illness in general as well as in the working population. But before I go there, maybe it will help to explain why I am personally so passionate about this particular subject.	01:22
01:24	Dr. Grobler	My private work consists mainly of what is called independent Psychiatric impairments assessments for the insurance industry or as it is more commonly known: Disability assessments for medical boarding. This work made me realise how many people suffer from common mental disorders like anxiety and depression without knowing it. Many of them would have had these disorders for a number of years before they see me. They may have gone to their GP from time to time to ask for treatment for the physical symptoms of common mental disorders, like fatigue or muscle tension headaches or insomnia or possibly even saying that they are feeling stressed, not realising that these symptoms are actually the physical symptoms of a possible anxiety disorder or even depression. Unfortunately, they tend to get symptomatic treatment for the physical symptoms without the primary cause ever	3:14

		<p>being diagnosed, until it starts to affect their work, or some event takes place in their lives making the person feel completely overwhelmed. In my experience, the next sequence of events that follows this scenario is a visit to the GP, followed by a referral to a psychologist or psychiatrist and then being booked off work for an extended period of time. A little-known fact is that the chances of returning to work after 8 weeks of sick leave is only 50% and 85% of people who have been booked off for work for 6 months or longer will never return to work. People don't realise that even though work can be a source of stress and distress for all of us, it also has a lot of benefits apart from the obvious like your salary. But work gives meaning to your life. We are social beings and we get to interact with others and make friends. Work gives you a sense of your identity, improves your self-esteem, gives you a sense of purpose and makes you feel that you are making a valuable contribution to the world.</p>	
03:15	Dr. Grobler	<p>Allow me to quickly put work and mental health in perspective though, and don't get me wrong, I'm not saying everyone should continue working in spite of struggling with significant mental illness. I'm saying that if you knew more about mental illness and are able to get the right kind of help earlier in the course of mental illness, you might never end up in a place where you possibly have to be booked off and not be able to continue working. Did you know that up to 1 in four females and 1 in six males will in a lifetime have a depressive episode? And 1 in five people will have an anxiety disorder but less than 50% of people with an anxiety disorder will actually even get treatment. The reason is in my opinion is because they did not realise, they have an anxiety disorder. That is so sad for me because it really sucks to feel anxious all the time. Trust me, I know, because I have an anxiety disorder myself. Doctors are perfectionistic by nature and this type of personality is prone to anxiety. Another interesting fact is that female doctors are at higher risk than the general population to have a depressive disorder. The point I'm making is that doctors are not exempt from having mental illness.</p>	04:26
04:27	Dr. Grobler	<p>So back to the statistics. Consider this: one in seven people at work will have a common mental disorder at any given time. This is the commonly quoted statistic before the corona virus pandemic struck. I cannot help but wonder how that will change after people start returning to work considering ,the impact on our mental health caused by the lockdown and financial pressures</p>	04:50
04:50	Dr. Grobler	<p>So, let's now consider mental health at work during lock down. A lot of you listening to this podcast are probably working from home and it</p>	06:32

		<p>would have had an undeniable impact on your daily routine and how you fulfil your work responsibilities. I'm not going to go into too much detail as this is a topic on its own, but suffice it to say, it took you probably some time to get used to it and I will not be surprised if you are still not used to this new way of working. Running a home, cooking, cleaning, looking after the kids, trying to stay in a work routine, getting interrupted whilst working, getting used to online meetings and freezing screens, resisting the urge to be online and available all the time and switching off at the end of the day. Sound familiar? This is not normal by any stretch of the imagination and definitely enough to make anybody feel stressed. What I find interesting is that so many people are now having conversations about how the lockdown and working from home has been affecting them psychologically. It would appear that there is a change in the way people are talking about their stress and my hope is that, in a sense, this pandemic will open the door for all of us to start talking more openly about our mental health challenges without feeling judged by others because of the stigma associated with mental illness. This is the reason most people shy away from this conversation. By the way, another interesting statistic is that 2 out of three employees will not disclose to their manager or their employer that they have a mental illness for fear of being judged, seen as being lazy or being looked over for promotion. This brings me to what message you should take to your place of work after lockdown has ended and everyone starts to return to work.</p>	
06:33	Dr. Grobler	<p>Recently I listened to a webinar. Life after Lockdown: Good work mental health and workplace wellbeing; and the speakers made a number of excellent points. One of the themes that stood out is the importance of middle managers in future and how their roles will change and that they will have to start speaking up about looking after the mental health of employees. CEOs were encouraged to develop a better understanding of their business and their people and to consider things like why does everyone have to be at work at the same time? A remark that I especially liked is that instead of appointing a Chief Happiness Officer but so many big corporations are doing these days, maybe they should be appointing a Chief Listening Officer. We cannot all be happy all the time and I've always wondered about the expectations and responsibilities a poor Happiness officer has to carry. My word, how does one keep everyone happy all the time? But a chief listening officer makes a lot more sense. We all want someone to listen to us from time to time. So, what will the workplace look like in future? Your guess is as good as mine. I do hope however, that employers are going to take the mental health of their employees a lot more seriously</p>	07:52

		and take the necessary steps to create a working environment where people feel comfortable talking about their mental health issues.	
07:52	Dr. Grobler	Thank you for listening to this podcast and please let us know what your thoughts, views and experiences are related to workplace mental health issues.	08:00