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CORPORATE WELLNESS
For People Who Matter By People Who Care.

THE COST OF COPING: FINANCIAL STRESS, GAMBLING AND EMPLOYEE WELLBEING

By Serenity Corporate Wellness

Financial stress does not always announce itself loudly in the workplace.

Sometimes it looks like an employee who is unusually distracted.
Sometimes it shows up as irritability, conflict, fatigue or repeated absenteeism.
Sometimes it is the colleague who is physically present, but mentally calculating how to stretch one salary across food, transport, school fees, debt, family obligations and unexpected emergencies.

And increasingly, financial stress is showing up in another worrying way: employees searching for quick relief.

For some, that relief may come through high-interest loans, repeated salary advances, borrowing from friends and family, withdrawing savings too early, avoiding creditors or turning to online betting and gambling in the hope of "catching up" financially. This is not simply a personal finance issue. It is a workplace wellbeing issue.

WHEN PRESSURE NARROWS DECISION MAKING

Financial stress changes how people think, feel and make decisions. When someone is overwhelmed, their focus often shifts from long-term planning to immediate survival. The question becomes less, “Is this a wise financial decision?” and more, “How do I get through this week?”

That is where risky coping can begin.

A person who would normally be cautious may take out another loan.
A person who understands the risks of gambling may still place a bet because the possibility of quick money feels emotionally relieving.
A person who is ashamed of their debt may avoid asking for help until the situation has escalated.
This does not mean employees are careless or irresponsible. It often means they are under pressure, overwhelmed and trying to cope with limited emotional and financial capacity.

Recent reporting on Old Mutual’s Savings and Investment Monitor has highlighted that a significant number of working South Africans are gambling frequently, with many using gambling as a way to bridge monthly shortfalls rather than purely for entertainment.

THE HIDDEN WORKPLACE IMPACT

Employers may not see the debt, the unpaid bills or the late-night betting. What they may see are the symptoms.

These can include:

- Reduced concentration
- Increased mistakes
- Mood changes or irritability
- Conflict with colleagues
- Fatigue and sleep disruption
- Absenteeism or lateness
- Presenteeism, where the employee is at work but not fully functioning
- Withdrawal from team engagement
- Increased requests for salary advances
- Declining performance

The danger is that these symptoms are often treated only as performance problems, when the underlying issue may be financial distress, emotional strain or unhealthy coping.

The World Health Organization has warned that depression and anxiety cost the global economy an estimated 12 billion working days every year, amounting to US$1 trillion in lost productivity. It also identifies job insecurity, excessive workloads and poor working environments as risks to mental health.

Financial stress sits directly within this broader mental health picture.

WHY GAMBLING DESERVES EMPLOYER ATTENTION

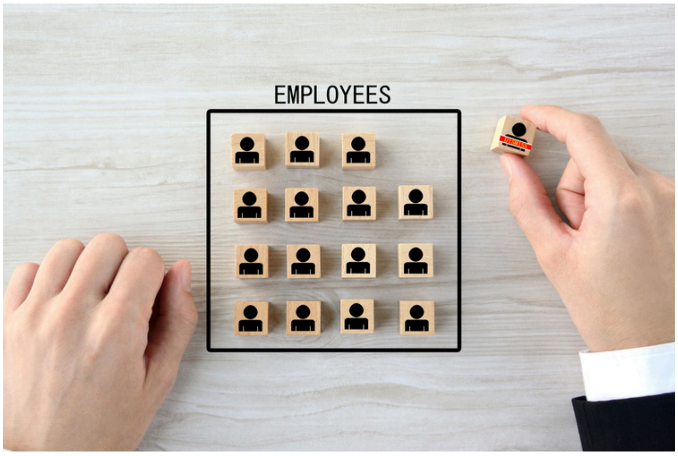
Gambling is often misunderstood as simply a matter of entertainment or self-control. But in times of financial pressure, it can become a desperate strategy. The emotional pull is powerful: the hope of one win, one payout, one moment of relief.

But for many people, the result is deeper stress, more secrecy, greater debt and increased shame. This can affect the employee's family life, emotional regulation, sleep, concentration and ability to function at work.

Across Africa, online gambling has been growing rapidly, with governments including South Africa responding through proposed tax and regulatory measures. Reuters has reported that economic desperation is one of the factors driving gambling behaviour in several countries.

For employers, the issue is not to police employees' private lives. The issue is to recognise that risky coping behaviours can become part of a larger wellbeing and productivity challenge.

FINANCIAL STRESS IS EMOTIONAL STRESS



Money problems are rarely only about money. They are also about dignity, identity, responsibility and fear. Many employees support children, parents, extended family members and households on one income. Some are silently managing debt. Others are dealing with the emotional weight of being seen as the "provider" while privately struggling.

This can create shame- and shame is one of the biggest barriers to help-seeking. An employee may be more comfortable saying, “I am tired,” than saying, “I am drowning financially.”

This is why workplace support needs to be confidential, non-judgemental and practical.

WHAT EMPLOYERS CAN DO

Employers do not have to solve employees’ personal financial problems. But they can create support structures that help employees seek assistance earlier, before stress becomes crisis.

This includes:

1. Normalising financial wellbeing conversations
Financial stress should be discussed as part of holistic wellbeing, not as a personal failure.

2. Providing confidential EAP access
Employees need safe channels where they can speak to a professional without fear of judgement or workplace exposure.

3. Offering financial counselling and education
Budgeting, debt management, responsible borrowing and family financial conversations are practical tools that can reduce distress.

4. Training managers to notice distress without prying
Managers do not need to become counsellors. But they should know how to recognise warning signs, respond with empathy and refer appropriately.

5. Addressing risky coping behaviours compassionately
Gambling, substance use, emotional withdrawal and conflict may be signs of deeper distress. A punitive response alone may miss the real issue.

6. Making support visible and easy to access
Wellness programmes only work when employees know they exist, trust them and understand how to use them.

THE SERENITY CORPORATE WELLNESS VIEW

At Serenity Corporate Wellness, we believe employee wellbeing must respond to the realities employees are actually living through. Financial stress, debt, gambling and emotional overwhelm are not separate from workplace performance. They affect how people think, relate, lead, concentrate and cope.

A healthy workplace is not one where employees never struggle. It is one where employees know they do not have to struggle alone. For employers, the opportunity is clear: move from judgement to early support, from silence to practical intervention, and from crisis response to prevention.

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FINANCIAL WELLBEING IS WORKPLACE WELLBEING.