

# EOC NEWS

**Equal Opportunity Commission**  
*Promoting Equality*

**APRIL 11TH 2022 ISSUE 11**

## EOC launches TV Series

*It is official: The EOC now has a programme on TTT entitled, **Sex and Prejudice**.*

On the first Tuesday of every month, the EOC, in partnership with TTT will bring together a panel of advocates to drum up conversations and offer solutions for sex and gender-related issues. It is a six (6)-part series, that will be broadcasted live from TTT's studio. You can also catch the one-hour episodes on TTT or EOCTT Facebook pages. Dike Rostant is the host of the series.

The first episode was aired on Tuesday 5 April EOC, discussing **Words Can Hurt: Gender-biased language and behaviour that impact women and girls**. It is a play on the adage, sticks and stones, can break my bones, but words can never hurt me.

The panel of speakers highlighted and discussed how seemingly casual language and behaviour perpetuate stereotypes that can affect women and girls and limit their opportunities. They also examined the dangers of implicit bias.

For T&T to achieve a more gender equal society, the panel offered solutions such as ending violence against women and girls, breaking normative barriers in the job market; encouraging women into non-traditional vocations; sharing household chores and childcare equally as well as using more gender-neutral language in conversation and legislation, amongst others.

### **The first panel featured:**

Terry D Ince, Founding Director and Convener: CEDAW Committee of Trinidad and Tobago (CCOTT) discussed, the international framework of CEDAW and its local implementation. Crystal Brizan, National Representative: Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action (CAFRA) addressed, **State Sanctioned Sexism: the way in which words reinforce gender stereotypes**. Dr Gabrielle Hosein, Senior Lecturer: Institute for Gender and Development Studies spoke about the effect of implicit biases and language use. Oraine Ramoo, Women's Counselling Psychologist, who educated viewers on "The Mechanism for Shame in the Psyche"



*Stay tuned for the second episode in the series, where a panel of advocates will discuss the **Role of Men in Gender Equality**. Date: Tuesday 3 May. Time: 11:00a.m. Network: TTT.*

# ENSURING WORKPLACE INCLUSION FOR LGBTI+ EMPLOYEES

If employers are serious about creating a truly equal organisation, they should consider implementing a workplace policy that promotes LGBTI+ inclusion.

Haran Ramkaransingh, Director Legal Services of the Equal Opportunity Commission (EOC) highlighted this progressive managerial approach during an animated and interactive public education session with the Trinidad and Tobago International Financial Centre (TTIFC).

He said, “an LGBTI-inclusive workplace ensures that all employees are treated fairly and have equal access to career opportunities, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or gender expression. It recognizes, understands, and tackles the unique challenges that both LGBTI women and men face during recruitment, in daily workplace interactions and in advancing to senior leadership positions”.

Furthermore, he pointed out that recent research has shown that employees who work in inclusive workplaces report greater job satisfaction, regardless of their sexual orientation.

Organisations that need guidance on LGBTI+ workplace inclusion, are encouraged to adopt a Model LGBTI+ Workplace Policy for Trinidad



**Haran Ramkaransingh**  
Director Legal Services

and Tobago created by Caiso: Sex and Gender Justice in collaboration with the EOC and the British High Commission for their workplace and adapt it to their environment.

While the Equal Opportunity Act does not cover gender or sexual orientation as status grounds, the EOC works with different bodies to promote equality for all.

This model policy gives advice to employers on how to modify their workplace policies on issues such as discrimination and harassment; privacy; official records, names, and pronouns; dress code; restroom accessibility; how to deal with employees transitioning on the job; sex-segregated job assignments; workplace benefits; worker assistance programmes; training and how to deal with complaints.

Staff members of TTIFC were grateful for this engaging session which underscored the importance of inclusivity and

diversity in the workplace.

Ms. Francisca Hector, Marketing & Communications, TTIFC, revealed “the invaluable information received from this session can fill in or highlight any gaps that may be present in our understanding about what the types of discrimination that are present in the organisation and avenues for recourse”.

She also explained that this initiative is part of the company’s thrust is to facilitate professional and personal development activities for staff which would add to their depth of knowledge as they navigate their career.

The informative virtual education session took place on Wednesday 16th March with fifteen (15) members from the TTIFC. To request a virtual session, send an email: [communications@eoc.gov.tt](mailto:communications@eoc.gov.tt).

**Facebook page:** @EOCTT 

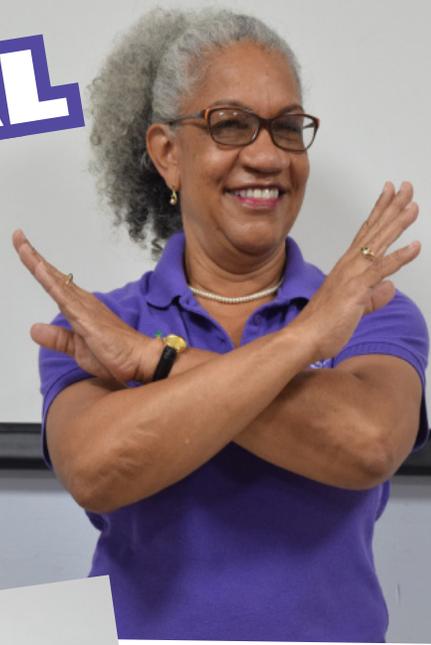
**LinkedIn page:** Equal Opportunity Commission Trinidad and Tobago 

**YouTube:** Equal Opportunity Commission TT 

**Website:** [www.equalopportunity.gov.tt](http://www.equalopportunity.gov.tt)

**Weekly column:** Online Newsday

# INTERNATIONAL WOMAN'S DAY



EOC staff wore purple and crossed their arms to show solidarity in commemoration of International Women's Day.



# Proud to Collaborate

On Sunday 27 March, the Equal Opportunity Commission (EOC) presented at PrideTT's workshop, **"Towards a Just Society."** Haran Ramkaransingh, Director, Legal Services at the EOC conducted a portion of the training, educating participants on the Equal Opportunity Act ('the Act') and the work of the EOC. Haran spoke about the status grounds and categories covered by the Act and indicated that sexual orientation is not yet covered. He did point out, however, that the EOC made a recommendation to the Attorney General for the Act to be amended to include same. Other proposed amendments to the Act include:

- AGE as a status of discrimination.
- The expansion of the definition of DISABILITY to include HIV / AIDS, Cancer, and Multiple Sclerosis.
- The inclusion of CO-HABITATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS on the grounds of marital status.
- The inclusion of HALF-BLOOD RELATIONSHIPS in the definition of family. Participants were eager to ask questions, having access to Haran, who is also a humanrights attorney. They also took the opportunity to share their perspective on, among other things, further amendments that could be made to the Act, to adequately cover the needs of the LGBTI + community. The EOC is aware of the discrimination faced by the LGBTI+ community and their limited access to opportunities. Even though the Act does not currently cover sexual orientation, the EOC works with partner organisations to partner to raise awareness on discriminatory practices and how we can go about working towards an inclusive society where all are treated with dignity, fairness and respect.



# WORLD DOWN SYNDROME DAY



***Staff of the EOC  
commemorated World  
Down Syndrome Day  
by rocking their  
colourful socks!***

# Agla Minister Visits EOC

On Friday 4th March, Senator the Honourable Renuka Sagrarsingh-Sooklal, Minister in the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs (AGLA) visited the Equal Opportunity Commission (EOC).

The Minister was given a tour of the building and was also introduced to staff. She was thrilled to meet and greet members of staff and expressed heartfelt appreciation for the warm welcome that she and her team received at the EOC's offices.

In her final words of inspiration, Minister Sagrarsingh-Sooklal encouraged staff to continue their dedication to working toward the elimination of discrimination and promotion of inclusivity.



Senator the Honourable Renuka Sagrarsingh-Sooklal, Minister in the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs chats with Ms. Debbie Ann Trotman, Administrative Officer IV of the Equal Opportunity Commission.

Senator the Honourable Renuka Sagrarsingh-Sooklal, Minister in the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs chats with Ms. Christine Cole, Conciliator/Mediator of the Equal Opportunity Commission.



# HOLI / PHAGWA



*EOC staff joined together to celebrate Holi, the most joyous and colourful Hindu festival.*

**SHELLY DOLABAILLE**  
Editor - in - Chief:  
[shelly.dolabaille@eoc.gov.tt](mailto:shelly.dolabaille@eoc.gov.tt)

**EWAN HEADLEY**  
Writer:  
[ewan.headley@eoc.gov.tt](mailto:ewan.headley@eoc.gov.tt)

**LEON BAIN**  
Graphic Designer:  
[leon.bain@eoc.gov.tt](mailto:leon.bain@eoc.gov.tt)

**EOC publishes a column every Monday on page 14 of the Newsday.** In case you missed it here is our column that was published on Monday 7th March

# Break the bias against women

DATA AT the Equal Opportunity Commission (EOC) shows that since its inception, the most complaints that are lodged at our offices are by women in the category of employment. This is supported by data from International Women's Day Global, where almost 60 per cent of women experience bias at work. Whether it is deliberate or unintentional, biases make it harder for women to get hired or promoted in certain fields.

On Tuesday, the world will observe International Women's Day (IWD) and the 2022 theme is #BreakTheBias. While employment-related discrimination consistently ranks as the most lodged complaint, this does not mean that discrimination is confined to the workplace. There are many studies that indicate that the workplace is a microcosm of society and to learn what is happening in society one can turn to the workplace where societal values are reflected.

The term "glass ceiling" describes invisible barriers that hold women back from career advancement. To understand this concept it is important to understand implicit bias. This is unconsciously having a particular attitude towards a group of people – for the purpose of the column, women – and associating stereotypes with them. There are multitudes of examples to pull from, such as: women can't drive, women are too emotional, women don't know what they want; and when these are said often enough, they are treated as a fact.

These stereotypes translate to the workplace. For instance, the unfounded claim that women do not excel at science, technology, engineering or maths (STEM) can prevent women from pur-



**While employment related discrimination consistently ranks as the most lodged complaint, this does not mean that discrimination is confined to the workplace.**

suing a career in this sector; and they can receive fewer honours or be promoted less frequently to critical positions.

There are also covert or subtle forms of sexism at the workplace, where there is unequal and harmful treatment of women and men in a hidden or concealed manner.

These sometimes go unnoticed and can result in organisational tolerance of discriminatory behaviour and attitudes. We are all responsible for breaking the biases against women in our homes, communities, workplaces and schools. Here are some ways you can be part of the solution.

**Be self-aware:** A good place to start is to look within ourselves and examine how we may have implicit bias towards women and actively work to overcome these biases.

**Try to focus on seeing people as individuals,** rather than focusing on stereotypes that define them. We should also take time to reflect on potential biases

and replace them with positives.

**Educate yourself:** There is heightened activity for IWD and many organisations are raising awareness and hosting various virtual webinars and activities. Read the publications, attend the events and share them with friends and family. The first step to self-awareness is education. Front line of changing these biases. Parents should embrace talking to their children about gender equality and women's rights. By doing so we are setting them up to lead the way for a better future for all.

**Equal opportunity policies at the workplace:** Organisations should develop equal opportunity policies and an anti-harassment policy with written guidance for managers on harassment and discrimination, as well as an internal complaints procedure. New incoming staff should be made aware of these documents as part of their orientation. Existing staff should undergo sensitisation training and refresher training at a later point. Lastly, HR staff and other managers should be trained in monitoring compliance and in handling complaints.

**Access services:** If you have been discriminated against you can lodge a complaint at the Equal Opportunity Commission. We will receive, investigate and conciliate your complaint.

Also, the EOC offers free guidance to organisations that need assistance to develop their policies/procedures. To request a free webinar on inclusivity for your organisation, send an e-mail to [communications@eoc.gov.tt](mailto:communications@eoc.gov.tt) The EOC has also published guidelines for employers, which are available on the EOC's website:

[www.equalopportunity.gov.tt](http://www.equalopportunity.gov.tt)

Monday 14th March

# Categories covered by the act

**THE MOST** lodged complaints that the Equal Opportunity Commission (EOC) receives at its offices are under the category of employment. This has consistently been the trend since the inception of the EOC; sometimes outweighing all other categories combined. However, the Equal Opportunity Act covers four broad categories: provision of goods and services, provision of accommodation, employment and education. It is important to understand the categories contained in the act so that members of the public can access the full range of coverage.

Discrimination under each category must also be tied to a status ground covered by the act. These are: sex, religion, marital status, origin including geographic origin, disability, race and ethnicity.

## Provision of goods and services

It is in contravention of the act to discriminate against a person who is seeking to obtain goods, services or facilities by refusing to supply same. Also, the vendor must not alter the terms or manner in which he/she supplies the goods, provides the facilities or performs the services.

The act lists the following examples:

- (a) access to and use of any place which members of the public or a section of the public are permitted to enter;
- (b) accommodation in a hotel, guest house or other similar establishment;
- (c) facilities by way of banking or insurance or for grants, loans, creditor finance;
- (d) facilities for entertainment, recreation or refreshment;
- (e) facilities for transport or travel;
- (f) the services of any profession or trade, or any statutory authority or municipal authority.

## Provision of accommodation

People who have occupied an accommodation or are trying to access ac-



commodation shall not be discriminated against, in accordance with the act. This includes the terms of offer, refusing application or placing that person on a lower order of precedence on any list of applicants for that accommodation.

For instance, a landlord is prohibited from denying a person access to an accommodation based on that person's marital status. However, there are exceptions contained in the act based on relatives living on the property, the number of units on the compound, and a few other exceptions.

Even after the person has occupied the accommodation, the act prohibits discrimination against that person by denying access or limited access to any benefit connected to the accommodation, evicting the person or subjecting them to any other detriment.

## Employment

The act prohibits employers and prospective employers from discriminating against a person. This means that the act covers discrimination even at the recruitment stage and employers are not permitted to hire or overlook a person based on their status. For instance, listing "female workers only" in a vacancy ad for a security officer.

However, the act contains an exception, where being of a particular sex is a genuine occupational qualification for employment, promotion, transfer or training. Vocational training is also covered by the act and employers are prohibited from discriminating against a person who is seeking or undergoing training.

## Education

In the same way employment covers prospective employees and employees, the category of education applies to applicants and students. The act prohibits educational establishments from "discriminating against a person by refusing or failing to accept that person's application for admission as a student; or in the terms and conditions on which it admits him as a student."

Further, educational establishments are not permitted to deny or limit a student's access to any benefits, facilities or services provided by the educational establishment based on any of the status grounds covered by the act; or by expelling the student or subjecting the student to any other detriment.

The act also lists a couple exceptions in the category of education:

\* Non-admission of students of a particular sex by an educational establishment which admits students of one sex only.

\* A student or prospective student would "require services or facilities that are not required by students who do not have a disability and the provision of which would impose unjustifiable hardship on the educational establishment."

There is also an exception for what has been agreed to between the State and any religious education board, such as what has been provided for in the Concordat of December 1960.

**If you have been discriminated against, you can lodge a complaint at the Equal Opportunity Commission on its website [www.equalopportunity.gov.tt](http://www.equalopportunity.gov.tt) or via e-mail: [complaints@eoc.gov.tt](mailto:complaints@eoc.gov.tt). We will receive, investigate and conciliate the complaint.**

Monday 21st March

# Magnifying voices against racism

TODAY marks the United Nation's observation of International Day for the Elimination of Racism. The 2022 theme is "Voices For Action Against Racism."

As the leading state advocate on equality, the Equal Opportunity Commission (EOC) joins United Nations members to magnify the voices of those who experience racism, whose opportunities are limited and who struggle to enjoy basic human rights. Data at the commission shows that complaints filed based on the status grounds of race and ethnicity are the most lodged complaints that we receive at our offices. In Trinidad and Tobago and in the world, racism exists in undertones and overtones. The keyword, if you would allow us to play on that word, is tone, relating to our voices.

What can we do?

Research has shown that accurate information, when shared in social relationships, are received and processed from a place of trust and allows people to explore a different perspective.

A conversation is a powerful combination of information and human connection that can educate and mobilise for change. Using our voices we can teach our families, keep our circles accountable and speak on behalf of those who

This also helps with addressing implicit bias.

There are people who are sometimes unconscious of the biases that they hold and conversation is critical in helping those people become more self-aware so that they can change



## About International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination

The International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination is observed on March 21 every year by United Nations members. It engages the public through #FightRacism, which aims to foster a global culture of tolerance, equality and anti-discrimination and calls on each one of us to stand up against racial prejudice and intolerant attitudes. According to the United Nations, the theme this year, "Voices For Action Against Racism," highlights "the importance of strengthening meaningful and safe public participation and representation in all areas of decision-making to prevent and combat racial discrimination; reaffirming the importance of full respect for the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly and of protecting civic space, and recognising the contribution of individuals and organisations that stand up against racial discrimination and the challenges they face."

their attitudes and behaviours. Another way we can be part of the solution is by providing a safe space where people who have experienced racism can speak up and be heard so that their concerns can be acted on. Sometimes it is difficult or uncomfortable to discuss any form

of discrimination, but these conversations must be had to rectify injustices.

Organisations also have a part to play in ensuring that vacancies are filled and opportunities for promotion are given to individuals based on opportunities for all. To build gender equity, we must come together to raise our voices to advocate for a world free of all forms of racial inequality, be it institutional, social, or otherwise. We all play a critical role in dismantling systemic racism.

The EOC can help.

Holding people accountable can also be a mitigating factor and catalyst for change. At the EOC, we provide a mechanism for members of the public to do just that. If you have been discriminated against based on your race, lodge a complaint at the Equal Opportunity Commission. We will receive, investigate and conciliate the complaint. The conciliation process brings together all parties involved to resolve the matter. If the matter is not resolved at conciliation, it can be taken to the Equal Opportunity Tribunal.

The tribunal is an independent and separate body from the EOC but it was also established by the Equal Opportunity Act as a superior court of record. It is a critical component in the implementation of the act and levies fines and awards compensations to victims of discrimination.

Monday 28th March

# Quality Education for all

ON APRIL 2, United Nations signatories will observe World Autism Awareness Day. The theme is “Inclusive Quality Education for All.” Autism is a developmental disability and autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and may sometimes co-exist with other conditions like Asperger’s, a form of ASD, or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and other learning disabilities that sometimes require special educational provisions.

Young people on the autism spectrum may experience barriers to receiving a quality education. These barriers may include discrimination and prejudice, bullying, limited teacher training and teacher preparation, limited human and material resources and limited administrative support.

This is exacerbated by the covid19 pandemic. According to the UN, “many students with autism have been especially hard hit and studies show that they have been disproportionately affected by disruptions to routines, as well as services and supports that they rely on.” People with ASD contribute to society in meaningful ways, and a quality education in an inclusive environment can only empower them to unlock their truest potential.

There are people with ASD who are gifted and there are studies worldwide dedicated to determining the correlation between the two. Many notable and influential people have ASD and have made significant contributions to science, technology, law, society and changed the way we view the world. It is widely believed that Albert Einstein, Charles Darwin, Leonardo da Vinci and Jane Austen all had ASD. They all existed before ASD was diagnosed in the 20th century and a diagnosis could not have been confirmed. More recent examples include actor Sir Anthony Hopkins; Satoshi Tajiri, the creator of



Pokemon; and entrepreneur Elon Musk, one of the wealthiest people in the world. ASD usually develops within the first three years of a child’s life and parents sometimes detect signs in the child’s behaviour from an early age. They may be able to inform educators on the strengths and needs of the child so that both child and parent can receive appropriate support. Educators should become familiar with the student and the nature and extent of the accommodations they require. Since the condition is a spectrum, there should be varying support mechanisms for students, which can be simple to execute in some instances. For example, students may ask for changes to the physical environment and cleaning products that give off a strong odour. Further, they may request a reduction in Teachers should be provided with increased support and training on inclusion. Research has consistently demonstrated that training and experience are factors that strongly influence teachers’ attitudes toward inclusive education.

Research suggests that many students with ASD struggle with abstract thinking but often have visual strengths. Therefore, educators and support teams need to employ effective practices and strategies such as visual aids, multimodal interventions and strategies for challenging behaviour, thereby allowing students to receive the type of education most suited to them. Research has also shown that children with ASD are often the victims of bullying. To combat this unwanted problem, schools, parents and

children should collectively work together in creating a safe and welcoming atmosphere for all children while rewarding positive behaviour.

Notwithstanding these hindrances, students with ASD have conquered many physical and mental challenges, excelled in several diverse professions and continue to make significant contributions to our society. Their successes are made possible through absolute determination and strong support systems.

In Trinidad and Tobago, our Constitution and Education Act speak to the right to an education. This is similarly stipulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, as well as included in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCPRD). The Equal Opportunity Act also covers the status ground of disability and complaints can be lodged at the offices of the Equal Opportunity Commission if a person with a disability or disabilities have experienced discrimination while attempting to access employment, goods and services, accommodation or an education. The act is the only national legislative instrument that addresses disability discrimination in four broad categories. As part of the mandate of the EOC, we strive to eliminate discrimination and promote equality of opportunity for all. By 2030, goal four of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is to ensure access to equal and equitable quality education at all levels and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities (PWDs). As a signatory to the UNCPRD, TT must respect, protect and fulfil the right to education of PWDs, through the implementation of the appropriate legislation for “inclusive education.”

Monday 4th April

# PLWHA can seek relief at EOC

PERSONS living with HIV and Aids (PLWHA) who face discrimination in certain settings because they are infected with HIV or Aids can lodge a complaint and get relief at the Equal Opportunity Commission (EOC).

The commission's mandate is to enforce the Equal Opportunity Act. That act prohibits discrimination in four broad categories – in employment, in the provision of goods and services, in education, and in the provision of accommodation – where someone is treated adversely because of a personal and inherent characteristic that they have, known as a status ground. Currently, the act protects seven status grounds – race, ethnicity, religion, disability, sex, marital status and origin.

PLWHA can lodge a complaint under the header of disability. There has been much discussion in the past on whether HIV/Aids fell within the provisions of the act, and concerns as to why it should be seen as a disability given that, if detected early and properly treated, people can live healthy lives. Disability is defined at section 2, the interpretation section, as follows: "Disability" means—

- (a) total or partial loss of a bodily function;
- (b) total or partial loss of a part of the body;
- (c) malfunction of a part of the body including a mental or psychological disease or disorder; or
- (d) malformation or disfigurement of part of the body.

HIV attacks the CD4 helper cell which is a cell within the immune system. Apart from attacking the cell, it uses that cell to replicate. The person's immune system becomes compromised and they have difficulty fighting off even minor infections such as a cold. When a person's CD4 count drops below 200, they would



have progressed to Aids. As such, HIV comes within (c) above, as if untreated it causes a malfunction of the immune system which is a part of the body. If it progresses to Aids, then it can also fall under (a) as it is loss of the functions of the immune system.

PLWHA have complained of discrimination arising from stigma more than they have complained of discrimination because of their medical condition. Inequality and discrimination are closely related but not identical. Inequality refers to a state of existence; we can all be differentiated along lines such as culture, language, social connections, economic status, educational background, etc.

Discrimination is where a person or group is treated less favourably because of one or more of these differences, rather than because of their merit and ability. Stigma is where a person or group is viewed in a negative way because of a characteristic or attribute. While not itself discriminatory, it can lead to discrimination where that person is treated unfavourably because of this negative perception.

There is a shame, fear and guilt associated with HIV and Aids that is not associated with diabetes or heart disease. For example, it is assumed that PLWHA did something that society disapproves which led to their infection, like sexual promiscuity, drug use, and sex work. This public stigma can lead to self-stigma; that society disapproves which led to their infection, like sexual promiscuity, drug use, and sex work. This public stigma can lead to self-stigma;

**“There has been much discussion in the past on whether HIV/Aids fell within the provisions of the Equal Opportunity Act, and concerns as to why it should be seen as a disability”**

that is where affected people develop internal guilt and shame about their own condition, believing that they are being punished and see themselves as lesser people. It has been reported that because of this some PLWHA would try to avoid attending clinics or pharmacies to get the medications they need or would choose to not take their medications in social or work-related settings for fear of being discovered, which would make their health condition more severe.

The commission is empowered to receive complaints, investigate them and, where possible, bring the parties to the table to try to settle the dispute via conciliation. If the matter cannot be resolved, the matter can be sent to the Equal Opportunity Tribunal.

This tribunal is the second entity created by the act and is an independent and separate body from the commission. It is a superior court of record chaired by a judge; its mandate is to hear matters that the commission could not resolve and give a judgment. For more information people can visit the commission's website [[www.equalopportunity.gov.tt](http://www.equalopportunity.gov.tt)].

Monday 11th April

# Dealing with workplace stress

This week, the Equal Opportunity Commission features a guest column by one of our Commissioners, Dr Krystal-Jane Verasammy, who is also a Counselling Psychologist. The Equal Opportunity Act covers employment as a category under which a person can lodge a complaint, if they have been discriminated based on their sex, race, ethnicity, origin including geographical origin, marital status, disability or religion. We take a moment in commemoration of stress awareness month, to address workplace stress. Discrimination at the workplace is a stressful situation and the EOC offers redress for those persons. To lodge a complaint at the EOC, you can send an email to [complaints@eoc.gov.tt](mailto:complaints@eoc.gov.tt) or visit our website [www.equalopportunity.gov.tt](http://www.equalopportunity.gov.tt). However, there are other factors that can lead to stress and with dynamic workplace situations due to the pandemic, recognising and managing workplace stress is crucial to your well-being.

**By Dr. Krystal-Jane Verasammy**

**“Ahh! I’m so stressed!”, “This is so stressful!”, “Work stressing meh!”.** We may be all too familiar with such phrases. But what is stress really, and how does it affect us?

When we say such comments, what we’re really referring to is a situation, event or person that puts pressure on us, or our reaction to being placed under such pressure.

April is stress awareness month and this year the theme is “Community”. A community is more than just a group of people. It’s about having a sense of belonging and connection to others, and feeling supported and accepted by them. In many instances, this community may be the workplace.

## **Recognizing stress**

A useful analogy to explain stress is



that of a bridge. When a bridge is carrying too much weight, it may eventually collapse. However, before this happens it is possible to see early warning signs such as bowing, buckling or creaking. This same principle can be applied to humans and work stress. It is usually possible to identify early warning signs of excessive pressure that can lead to a mental health breakdown. Some signs of a bowing and buckling bridge at work may be:

- More accidents at work
- Increased absenteeism (sick leave)
- Presenteeism (attending work when sick)
- Irritability or short-temperedness
- Indecisiveness and poor judgement
- Working late and not taking breaks
- Arguments and disputes with colleagues
- Feeling exhausted most of the time
- Showing negative changes in mood or mood fluctuations
- Headaches, nausea, aches and pains, sleep difficulties

## **Stress and mental health**

Note that stress is not a mental health problem, but it is closely linked to your mental health in two different ways. One, stress can lead to mental health problems, or make existing problems worse. For example, if you struggle to manage work stress, you might develop anxiety or depression. Two, mental health problems can lead to stress. For instance, managing medication, keeping therapy appointments or treatment can become stressful, while balancing a work-life balance. To help reduce workplace stress

the following are a few tips:

1. Talk to your line manager about your workload. Ask if things can be delegated or re-prioritized to help you.
2. Make sure you are physically comfortable. Sitting in an uncomfortable chair or working in a hot room can make us feel more stressed.
3. Be clear on expectations. Not knowing what’s expected of us can make us feel anxious or confused. Clarify expectations and deadlines.
4. Take breaks. Get out for a walk at lunchtime, have a cup of tea, and/or remember to stretch to reduce muscle tension.
5. Take your vacation. Book in annual leave and make sure you use your leave allowance, or make the most of your contract break. We all need regular breaks from work to help us feel refreshed.

## **Staying on top of stress**

Indeed, life is stressful, but learning how to manage stress can be helpful for our wellbeing. While we may not be able to eliminate all the stressors in our lives, there are a few things we can do to help reduce the impact of stress.

1. Be kind and compassionate to yourself. Make time for things that you enjoy and reward yourself for your small achievements.
2. Try to find time to relax. This can be hard if you feel you can’t escape a situation that is stressing you, but even a short walk in nature can help.
3. Look after your health. While this may be hard to do when stressed, try to get adequate sleep, eat on time and exercise as this helps us to cope better with stress.
4. Seek a mental health professional. Your therapist can help you identify stressors, warning signs and teach you emotion-focused and problem-solving techniques to cope with stress.