# Vice President's page, April 2020

**Welcomes**

01 April 2020

With a little help from my friends

With coronavirus keeping our physical health at the top of the news agenda, we must not forget about another silent killer: our mental health. This is something I personally feel passionately about, having seen all too closely the devastating impact that mental health struggles can have on friends and their loved ones.

We all have times when life gets on top of us. Whatever the cause, the consequences can be horrible – both for us as individuals and for those we care about.

Initiatives, such as the national ‘Time to Talk Day’ and the CIOT/ATT’s recent wellbeing workshop are helping to encourage everyone to be more open about mental health – to talk, to listen and to change lives.

Sir Winston Churchill, for all his superhuman strengths of courage and resilience, was prone to bouts of depression. He called it his ‘Black Dog’ and there was only one means by which he succeeded in chasing that Black Dog away, using the same therapy that lifts the spirits of millions of us – work.

We all know someone who, at some point, has thrown themselves into their work as a coping mechanism. But what happens if work is the problem?

Work is a massive part of our lives. We work an average of 37 hours per week (for many it is much more) and, when you factor in time spent commuting, it is an even more time consuming part of our lives. No matter how much you love your job, we all have bad days. None of us is immune from experiencing mental health challenges, just as none of us is immune from physical illness.

When we enjoy good mental health, we have a sense of purpose and direction, the energy to do the things we want to do, and the ability to deal with day to day

challenges. Our mental wellbeing is something we all need to pay attention to. If you broke your arm, would you simply ignore it? Of course not. So why treat your mental health or that of your colleagues any differently?

The way we work has changed. The emergence of 24/7 email and mobile access has revolutionised working patterns, but also created new pressures. There are times we all need to switch off and recharge our batteries. How we do this is different for everyone but there have been some great suggestions in recent Tax Adviser articles.

What does this all mean for the accountancy profession? Research by AAT found that 90% of people who work in accountancy have been stressed out by work, with 43% having to take time off as a result of stress. Recent research by CABA, the wellbeing charity for accountants, found that just 2% of accountants are unaffected by stress. Undoubtedly, the accountancy profession is one of the most stressful industries to work in.

Perhaps more worrying is a significant generational divide. CABA found that nearly half of all 18 to 44 year-olds feel stressed every day, compared to just 15% of those over 55. This may be because stressful life events such as getting married, buying a house and having children are more likely for this age cohort. Equally, it could be because older people learn how to cope more effectively and when to ask for help.

One of the most important ways to keep yourself mentally healthy is to recognise when you’re not feeling good and to know when – and who – to ask for help. There should be no shame in asking someone for support if you’re feeling low or stressed. Speaking personally, I can pinpoint key moments in my life which have impacted my mental health. Thankfully, friends and colleagues were always there for me when I asked. To all of them a big thank you for listening and helping me cope. There was never one answer and help can take many forms, whether a cup of coffee and a sympathetic ear or taking a report and tidying it up because I couldn’t see the wood for the trees.

This year, Mental Health Awareness Week will take place from 18-24 May 2020. The theme for 2020 is ‘sleep’. The week will focus on the connections between our sleep – or lack of it – and mental health.

I am convinced about the importance of talking about our mental health at work. But we also know that it is sometimes easier said than done. Based on my own experience and that of friends and colleagues, my advice is to consult (inside and

outside of work), think about what you need, what might help and find the right time and place. Above all, however, try and look after your whole self.