How we can all be healthier

General Features



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To mark Mental Health Awareness Week on 10 to 16 May, Rob Stephenson considers the huge importance of workplace mental health

Mental health. Say these words in your head. Think about them for a few seconds. What images spring to mind? People suff ering? People struggling with depression, anxiety or PTSD? Black and white photographs of people with their head in their hands? Or maybe you are thinking of a loved one who struggles? A friend? Yourself?

Now think of physical health. What do you see? Healthy, vibrant people? People who are well? Fit people? Aspirati onal images of people that we wish we were more like.

The interesting thing with this simple exercise is that, in both cases, I asked you to think of the word ‘health’. Mental health has a brand problem because we immediately think of illness when faced with the term.

We all have mental health

The most interesting statistic in relation to mental health is 1:1. 100% of us have mental health and, if the pandemic has shown us anything, 100% of us will know what it is like to struggle with mental ill-health to one degree or another.

This could be anxiety about the virus; the stresses of homes schooling; worries about the economy; or loneliness and isolation. If we accept that we have mental health, then we can accept that we are on a continuum from struggling to thriving.

Just like our physical health and fitness, our mental health is not fixed. It is not black or white and it is not binary. It is one of the most beautiful and complex elements of being human. We move up and down this continuum daily and hourly. If we accept that our mental health is not fixed, then we can embrace the idea that we can influence it. This is an extremely empowering concept.

Proactively managing our mental health

Mental health needs a rebrand. I like to talk about our ‘Form’ instead and have identified a number of drivers that can help us proactively manage it.

Our Form is highly individual and personal. Most of us could benefit from getting more sleep, more regular exercise and eating a more balanced and nutritious diet. All of these are core components in maintaining good mental health.

The pandemic has eroded our social connections, parti cularly in the workplace, and we have to work pretty hard to maintain them right now. Stress management is also a very relevant driver, given the way we are working.

Remote working has removed some of the enforced breaks in the day such as the commute; the walk to the meeting room; the trip to see a client. Instead, we are back-to-back on Zoom and Teams without the self-discipline of creating moments of recovery in the day. As we move to hybrid working models, it is essential that we do better at balancing stress with moments of recovery. Helping others, a sense of purpose and financial wellness are all also very important in maintaining positive Form.

The message here is that it is worth embarking on a voyage of self-discovery to learn what is driving your Form, or mental wellbeing. Unlike our physical health, we generally have not developed literacy in this area.

One of the biggest performance advantages available to us is to proacti vely manage our mental wellbeing.

Pre-pandemic, Deloitte estimated the cost of mental ill-health to UK employers as up to £45 billion (see bit.ly/3d0niCy). £29 billion of this is estimated as presenteeism or underperformance due to sub-optimal mental health. Simply put, if we can become a little bit more intentional about our wellbeing, we can move up the continuum and be closer to the thriving end for more of the time. Yes, we will be happier and healthier, but we will also be more productive. We will be better at our jobs and also better parents, better partners and better humans.

Organisational mental health

This £45 billion cost can also be thought of as a £45 billion opportunity as, when employers choose to treat the mental health and wellbeing of employers as a strategic priority, the return on investment is estimated to be anything from 5:1 to 12:1. Anglian Water measured the ROI on its wellbeing interventions and concluded that they were enjoying an 8:1 return. It is one of the rare cases where the moral case aligns with the business case.

So, what does good look like in terms of an integrated workplace mental health and wellbeing strategy? A detailed answer to this question is beyond the scope of this article but can be found in my long form piece on ‘A blueprint for a better workplace wellbeing and mental health strategy’ (see bit.ly/31VW7Tg). However, there are three core elements to a comprehensive strategy:

1. Awareness: raising awareness of mental health in the organisation to help smash the stigma and normalise the conversati on about mental ill-health. This could involve storytelling, external speakers and wonderful initiatives such as the Green Ribbon Campaign;
2. Support: benefits and solutions for people who are struggling with mental ill-health such as employee assistance programmes, in-house counsellors and peer support solutions; and
3. Prevention: a programme of literacy, resources and benefits helping people to become more intentional about their wellbeing and proactively manage it.

Let’s talk about tax

As we look to build back better there is a strong argument that the wellbeing of our employees and citizens is a good measure to assess the success of our businesses and nations, alongside the creation of shareholder value and GDP growth. Forward thinking workplaces are recognising this but it is my belief that the government can do more to help stimulate investment in the wellbeing of employers via tax incentives, particularly in the case of SMEs and low wage employers. In Sweden, employees enjoy a tax free allowance to spend on qualifying wellbeing benefits. At the very least, the government could get out of the way where wellbeing benefits are concerned to remove the administrative burden of benefits in kind reporting.

Ending with a question

One simple question can help you on your journey to better mental health and can help you check in with colleagues. ‘How are you doing today?’ We are asked this question 10 or 20 times per day and we rarely answer it honestly or authentically but if we do so we can then become a little bit more intentional about our mental wellbeing. This can change our lives. So, how are you today?

COPING WITH TRAUMA

Image



Shashi Sharma
Head of Global Tax and Treasury at BRUSH and Trustee at LionHeart RICS
‘It isn’t about what’s wrong with you; it’s about what happened to you.’ – Unknown

Trauma is a fact of life: each of us will go through a deeply distressing or disturbing experience at least once.

You do not need to live in a war zone to encounter trauma; trauma is the emotional and psychological eff ect an event has on a person. It could be a tragic (inter)national event, such as the Manchester arena attack or the death of George Floyd, or something close yet equally devastating, such as physical illness or

relationship breakdown. If one of your colleagues experienced the unexpected death of a parent, sexual assault or cancer, how would you respond? What if there were medical diagnoses of depression, PTSD or anxiety?

Living with trauma and healing from it is exceptionally demanding, let alone the sheer effort of everyday tasks. However, I have witnessed first-hand some good outcomes post-recovery, emerging with a different, in some ways better, life – version 2.0.

Company plaudits for mental health initiatives are worthy of celebration but they are worthless if not embedded throughout the organisation. This is about the personal, not the corporate. The environment you create through your day-to-day interactions with your colleagues is probably the most significant influence on their mental (and physical) wellbeing – both positive and negative.

How to support the people around you

- Show openness and respect in your conversations: Listen actively, share your vulnerabilities as appropriate, consider your choice and tone of language. Mind your 'banter' – no one trusts an inauthentic leader.
- Approach the elephant in the room: If you think someone is acting differently, say what it is you have noticed, ask them how they are and let them know you are available if they want to talk. You do not need to be a mental health expert.
- Communicate: Some may prefer to email or message about how they are feeling and to then talk. Offer options and adapt. It is about them not you. Sustain these channels.
- Ask what they need from you: It may be flexible hours or other adjustments, it may be just for you to understand what they are going through. This will also help you to bridge any generational or cultural differences.
- Contact HR: A good HR function can provide support and advise best practice. You can approach them on a no-names basis.

How to support yourself

- Know yourself: What have you stopped enjoying? What have you started doing? Do you have new physical ailments? If you have not noticed, likely someone close to you has. Express yourself to someone you trust.
- Seek support: You can find support from your GP, a good friend, your EAP or maybe your line manager. Know that you are not alone. Contact the CIOT, ATT

and other professional bodies for information about their support services.
- Build resilience: Know what energises you, what nourishes you, what soothes you. You will need these. It takes time – healing is personal, may be slow and is not linear. Explore the options off ered, including medical, therapy or legal. Show compassion to yourself. You will conquer.

Shashi is an experienced volunteer within substance misuse and gambling support services and is writi ng in a personal capacity.