A year like no other

General Features



07 May 2021

Sehjal Gupta considers the impact that lockdown has had on our mental health and her own training as a mental health first aider

Both employers and employees have been greatly affected by the great shifts in working patterns over the last year. Everyone has resiliently continued to meet work demands, with employers having to adapt to keep afloat and employees trying not to suffer from burn out or anxiety surrounding their livelihoods.

Some workplaces, like Menzies, had already implemented steps which aided these overnight changes, including agile working; flexibility around hours; issuing all staff with laptops; training Mental Health First Aiders (MHFA); and implementing video facilities, such as Skype and Teams.

Communication has always been key in the workplace and even more so during lockdown. We quickly realised that staff at all levels had a thirst for knowledge about

how the firm – and our people – were faring in the pandemic and so we enhanced our communications. Our managing partner issued regular updates on the firm and we ran Teams Channels on topical matters. Senior management ‘checked in’ on staff , HR liaised with vulnerable and unwell employees, and we set up buddy systems, especially to support new or recently joined employees. We even hosted a virtual magic show and live music concert.

MHFAs and their relevance

Firms are aware of the challenges that many are facing while working from home (WFH) and are continuously in discussions about what can be done to help and improve resources and support. Now, more than ever, we are understanding the signifi cance of mental health and wellbeing. We must be able to recognise the signs so that help can be sought and provided early to create a supporti ve work environment. We must be able to talk and share experiences with someone who is listening in a safe space and in confidence.

Many employers are investing in trained MHFAs in the workplace. At Menzies, we had already planned a mental health initiative and completed training for office MHFA representatives in November 2019. We are lucky to have a strong team of MHFAs and this definitely gave us a greater understanding of the difficulties when lockdown happened in March 2020.

Blurring of the lines

The last lockdown seems to have been the hardest – whether due to the shorter, darker days or missing interaction in person. Even the simplest tasks seemed to take twice as long to complete, maybe due to not taking regular breaks, no fresh air or exercise, or feeling the effects of burnout.

Although our working hours have been more flexible, our days seem to have merged with no clear differentiation between weekdays or weekends, working and non-working hours. It has been difficult to establish a divide between work and personal time. I have attempted to separate the two by mindful acts such as physically shutting down my laptop or changing my clothes after working hours. As time has passed, though, the lines seem to have blurred. Many of us are liaising with clients and colleagues at all hours and are working longer and more random hours to meet work demands, albeit not as effectively.

Employers recognise that, although it is possible to work remotely, human interaction is required for one's wellbeing and to promote collaboration. A firm's culture is very hard to learn or teach virtually. Being in the office helps in the development of various skillsets and work ethos, and the training necessary for progression. This is especially important with trainees who may have never worked in an office environment before. Employees can also see the benefits of being in the office – even the commute to and from work enables 'time out'. More than anything, we thrive from human interaction and feed off the energy of others around us.

Taboo or not taboo

Many of us wear a daily smile and carry on showing immense strength and resilience but are suffering without admission. As with Covid-19, mental health issues are not gender, race, age specific. They can affect anyone at any time in life. It is alarming to see that in an age where we are all about equality, many of our male counterparts find it so difficult to identify themselves as having mental health issues. Surely, we know the statistics and that 75% of UK deaths by suicide are men mostly under the age of 50. One in four people experience mental health problems each year, yet there continue to be preconceptions and taboos when it comes to mental health. The more we are open about how we feel and share our personal experiences, the sooner these stigmas will be removed – ensuring that those suffering will receive the right help sooner and creating a healthier environment.
MHFAs have some training to identify and guide those individuals who may not seek help. This is not easy in the current environment, without personal proximity. There is no prescriptive way to know who is suffering with their mental wellbeing, but here are a few things to look out for:

- general absence and withdrawal;
- avoiding picking up the phone or keeping the video function off ;
- working long hours and yet not being able to see this in output;
- having numerous other responsibilities, including childcare, home schooling and carer responsibilities; and
- not taking any time out to switch off .

People around us may be suffering with mental health issues. Please remember to 'be kind to yourself'; no one can judge another until they walk in their shoes. It is important to seek help early, before everything becomes too overwhelming. If you are finding things difficult, you are not alone. There are trained people who can and

want to help, in confidence and without judgement. Reach out to them. We are all busy, but ti me is one of the most precious things we can give someone. Something as simple as a friendly chat, and not being fobbed off by a hurried ‘I’m fine’, can unearth problems or at least lift someone’s spirits. Together we can remove the taboos and stigmas attached to mental health issues and create a healthier, happier and more productive work environment. Remember that ‘health is wealth’ – not just physically but mentally also.

CIOT panel discussion

Thursday 13 May

There will be a free lunchti me panel discussion, open to all, on mental well-being and nature, the theme of this year’s mental health awareness week. Details to follow from the Events team!

Participants will be: Sehjal Gupta (Menzies), Amanda Craig (Natural England), Sarah Restall (Inside Out), Garry Tetley (Deloitte LLP) and Valerie Boggs (Tax Charities).

A LIFELONG BATTLE

Gary Hughes

Image



I’ve suffered from depression since my early teens. At the ti me, I just thought I was a sad child as, in the 1980s and 90s, I didn’t even know what depression was.

I remember going to my doctor’s in 1997 on a completely unrelated matter, and by the end of the appointment I’d been diagnosed with clinical depression, prescribed some tablets and sent on my way. There was no follow up appointment; no mental health referral; nothing. I just thought this was the norm, the tablets would cure me and I’d be ok. How wrong I was.

For the next 11 years, I battled with constant bouts of low mood, anxiety and finally a severe bout of OCD. I saw a psychiatrist about my OCD in 2008. The psychiatrist

took my history, but no investigations or follow up referrals were made as to my wider mental health issues. Tablets were prescribed and that was that.

My depression got gradually worse and it took a significant life event in 2012 which drove me to a suicide attempt to finally get the help I needed. I was sectioned for two weeks and upon release from hospital a care plan was put in place which included regular contact with my GP and a proper medication regimen.

Six weeks after coming out of hospital, I sat and successfully passed the CTA OMB Advisory paper. Even in the depths of despair, it's amazing what can be done when you look to your inner strength.

From 2012 to 2018, I was in a very good place with the help of various people, most notably my wife, Natalie, who I met in late 2012, and my former tax partner John McCaffery of Alexander & Co in Manchester. However, a further significant life event in 2018 drove me to a severe bout of self harm. Thankfully, once again with the help of my wife, my GP and employer at the time, Hallidays, I overcame the setback and drove myself forward.

It's now 2021 and despite the mental trauma suff ered over the years, I sit here now as the proud father of a beautiful one year old son and six year old rescue collie, with a loving wife. I have also recently started my dream job as a tax manager at Homes England and we are shortly making the move up north to Newcastle.

Life is good and I look forward to the future with positivity and excitement. My take home message would have to be that no matter how bad things are, there is help out there, please, please seek it if you are struggling. There is no longer a stigma attached to mental health. It is no longer a taboo subject. It really is ok not to be ok.

I have worked in the accountancy profession for over 25 years, specialising in tax since 2010. Since 2015, I have become more heavily involved in corporation tax and VAT, which has led me to my current role as a tax manager for Homes England.