

Cultural Enterprises Podcast

Series 3, Episode 2 – Mental Health in the Workplace

Hello, my name's Vicki Cockman and I am going to talk a little bit about mental health and how both individuals and workplaces can support themselves in the year ahead.

To introduce MHFA England, we are a social enterprise with a vision to improve the mental health of the nation and our mission is to train 1 in 10 of the adult population in mental health knowledge and skills. Through this we believe this will create the culture change that is needed to break the stigma on talking openly about mental health.

By helping people to develop the skills to look after their own and others' wellbeing we aim to normalise attitudes and behaviours around mental health in all areas of society and I am personally passionate about breaking down the stigma around mental health and creating workplaces where people feel able to talk about their wellbeing and bring their whole self to work.

I think it is really important to share, and I say this whenever I am speaking to individuals about the topic of mental health that we all have mental health. Our mental health fluctuates and sometimes we can feel really mentally fit and well and on other days we might not, in exactly the same way that we do our physical health.

There is no denying that the past year has had an impact on our mental health, in fact the Centre of Mental Health is predicting 8.5 million more adults will need mental health support as a result of COVID. We have had to adapt significantly in the last year be that at work with working remotely, sharing our workspace with family, friends, pets or returning to a new way of working with social distancing in place or we have had to significantly adjust to not having the level social connection that most of us are used to. Either way transitions of all different kinds can be a pinch point for our mental health and the last year has brought a tidal wave of change and we are recognising that workplaces, in particular, need to be prepared and set up to support their employees wellbeing and mental health.

Looking forward I think we can take a lot of learnings from the past year and explore ways to best support ourselves and create cultures of care within our workplaces. Firstly we talk about returning to normal and I think this has presented a time to reflect on what parts of normal do we want to go back to, what have I done in the last 12 months that has positively impacted my mental health and what do I know I need to return to doing in order to improve it.

One thing that I will be taking into next year that has really positively impacted my mental health is knowing that I need to reduce the amount of times I am commuting to the office. For me commuting 3 hours a day, for more than 2 days a week has a big impact on my mental health – having the option to work from home gives me time in my day to sleep

more, exercise at times that suit my body, cook great food and spend more time with my partner and dog – all of this is essential to my self-care giving me more energy and allowing me to give more to work – my colleagues and team get the best version of me this way. For others it might be having the opportunity to spend more time with their children and families, or it might be knowing that your workplace is somewhere you love connecting with your colleagues and having that face to face interaction is really important to you.

Most adults will spend just over a third of our life time at work so it is crucial we are understanding what good self-care looks like in and out of work for us as individuals. Organisations, their leaders and employees are working together to create workplaces where people can thrive and support their mental health. I think there are some key themes and focus areas that will set workplaces up for success in supporting mental health over the next year.

Take a whole organisation approach

Building the right culture and ensuring a mental health and wellbeing strategy is properly implemented. Things can't be considered in isolation. Not every workplace wellbeing strategy will look the same but they will need to be reflective of the nature of the business and the workforce. It means designing the stress out of processes and systems, putting healthy job design first, attending to reasonable adjustments, looking at training requirements, flexible working needs, fair and equal pay – and so much more. For anyone looking to get started on looking at culture change, I really encourage you to look at MHFA England's culture change campaign My Whole Self which helps workplaces to recognise the importance of that creating inclusive workplaces has on staff wellbeing and productivity.

Are your leaders/people managers equipped to have confident conversations about mental health.

I think managers are the key to unlocking open conversation about mental health. Starting 1-1's with a conversation about staff wellbeing can be powerful or integrating activities such as the Stress Container into team meetings allows everyone to focus on how they are feeling, how is that impacting work and what help might be needed.

But workplaces need to make sure that managers are equipped with the knowledge and skills and feel empowered by Senior leaders that this can and should be a focus within their role. Senior leaders also play a pivotal part in setting the tone for the organisation and this includes mental health and wellbeing. Leadership teams should be championing this with all teams and employees that work for them. Having Leaders openly talk about it is once again hugely powerful in breaking down the stigma and creating open cultures. Training for staff members can be a really effective way to build up knowledge and skills throughout an organisation which gives people the confidence to have open conversation.

Supporting employees to adjust coming back from furlough or returning back to their physical workspace will need to be a focus for organisations. Naturally after any period of

change and a year of a very different routine, it will be hard for some individuals to adjust back. At times, it will feel like individuals are starting a new job, the first few weeks will likely feel exhausting, there may be heightened anxiety about the need to commute again or be face to face. It will be crucial that workplaces are closely supporting employees and really listening to what people need. It might be more or less flexibility, employee engagement plans and opportunities to reconnect with their peers. Either way workplaces need to take the time to find out what their staff need – ask for their feedback directly, don't wait for them to come to you. Individuals might need upskilling, further training and updates on how the business has changed – my advice would be create some onboarding plans if you have staff working in a different way to the past year to ease the adjustment. That way you will have a skilled, motivated team more quickly. With this it is really important to remind employees, whether they have just returned from furlough or are continuing to work, to take annual leave – downtime to recharge away from work is essential for building mentally healthy workforces and for the next year, knowing that holidays and vacations will be looking different that individuals are still taking time for themselves, away from work, to come back energised and more productive to bring their best selves to work.

Finally I think the one thing we need to focus on this year is putting yourself first and good self-care. You can't pour from an empty cup: before supporting others it's important to check in on your own wellbeing, as this will put you in a better position to provide effective wellbeing support. There is a fantastic resource on our website that is the 'weekly wellbeing check-in' which allows you to ask yourself how are you feeling, reflect on what you are doing to look after yourself - for example am I drinking enough water, how did I sleep last night, and this is a really simple tool to check in and then tweak anything you need to improve your mental health.

Understanding what makes you feel great and what makes you happy as ultimately these things will improve how you're feeling. One of the things I love is Action for Happiness's action calendars which shares small actions to do each day to ultimately improve your happiness.

I also think workplaces need to ensure they are supporting individuals to integrate good self-care into their working day. I hope we will see many more organisations support their colleagues in working flexibly by either empowering employees to get their work and personal life balance right or working at times when they know they are the most productive or scheduling work around school runs and family time or promoting time in the day to exercise, get fresh air or connect with a colleague over a cup of tea. Most importantly ensuring that their employees can put themselves and their mental health first, which in turn really supports productivity and the business long term.

For anyone wanting access to free resources such as the stress container tool, Weekly wellbeing check-in or for anyone wanting to know more about My Whole Self, these can all be found for free on the MHFA England website...mhfaengland.org.



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Thank you for listening.