

# Talking Inclusion With...

## Series 1, Podcast 5: Let's talk about mental health

Talking Inclusion With... Steven Copsey

### Steven

A very warm welcome to our next Inclusive Employers podcast 'Talking Inclusion with' - I'm Steven Copsey, and today we're going to be talking about Mental Health.

We're going to share our own stories, talk about what employers should be doing to support their workforce, and also how they can promote good mental health.

Before I introduce our guests, I'll tell you a little bit about us. We're Inclusive Employers, and we support employers to make inclusion in everyday reality.

Our mission is to make every workplace an inclusive employer, where every colleague values difference, and can contribute their skills and experiences fully to their organisation.

These podcasts are for anyone who has an interest in inclusion and diversity, or indeed in mental health. In our podcast, we share life stories and experiences, learn about best practice, and hear practical advice for employers from our guests, as well as Inclusive Employers own inclusion and diversity experts.

Today, I'm joined by two special guests, we have Jake Mills, an award winning stand up comedian, mental health campaigner, and the founder and CEO of Chasing the Stigma. Hi, Jake.

**Jake** Hello.

**Steven** And we also have Inclusive Employers very own senior inclusion and diversity consultant Addison Barnett – Hi Addie.

**Addie** Hiya

**Steven** We're going to start today's podcast with Jake, how he's dealt with mental health in the past and continues to do so in the present. And also when it comes to shattering that stigma, that still sometimes surrounds mental health as a subject.

So, Jake, can you tell us a bit about your story first of all?

**Jake** Yeah, of course. I mean, it's a bit of a funny one, really, because I'm now obviously, talking quite freely about mental health, or I don't know if we would have done this podcast six years ago, a bit longer. I wouldn't have had any clue what to talk about when it comes to mental health, I wouldn't understand what you even meant by talk about mental health.

And so how am I now running a mental health charity? - Quite simply because I became unwell. Quite simply, I, I didn't know that I was unwell. I was trying to make a career as a stand up comedian, I was trying to make money at the same time trying to navigate through different jobs, how I can make money and chase my dream at the same time, trying to navigate through all these different things and relationships and everything else and just started to struggle with my mental health.

But as I said, I didn't know the signs and the symptoms and didn't know the things to look out for. I didn't know that other people were going through the same thing. I didn't know that I could get help and support. I didn't know that it was a thing that I was going through. I think I just thought that it was kind of just being an adult, being a grown up.

You know, I'd left university and I was now trying to make it in the in the main world, and I just thought that everybody was better at doing that than I was. And that's probably the main reason why I didn't really ask for help, because I thought, well, everyone else is just coping better than I. So it's not something I can be helped with. It's just something that I have to just adjust to and adapt to and fix myself.

I tried to bottle all that up, and it didn't really go very well. And in our again, the longer version is how I looked at my own coping mechanisms, which became unhealthy - ones like using alcohol as a way of trying for escapism. But essentially, nothing else were done one day out of the blue, I decided that the only option I had, was to try and take my own life.

I can't put into words how far that felt from the person that I was before I was unwell. And never ever would have thought that I would be somebody who would feel that, I never would have put myself in that category ever. But I felt like I had absolutely no choice. I decided to speak out about what I'd gone through, lots of help anybody else just to, to move on in my own life and reclaim that almost.

And so I just put it out on social media about what I'd gone through. But as a result of that, honestly, hundreds of people started coming to me asking me for help, and before knowing anything about it, my story got picked up in local press and then in national press and then it went viral and it's been shared by people like Emma Watson and James Cordon, and I didn't know what to do.

You know, I was just somebody who's talking about not being well, I wasn't expecting any of that. But what happened is every single time, I did an interview, which I was being asked to do a lot by different charities, can you go and talk on this, Or can you do this, and I just thought it was the right thing to do, because it's been asked to buy a charity.

One - that was leaving me really vulnerable, because I was speaking out about things. But two - people started coming to me asking me for help, and I wasn't an expert, I wasn't an expert on myself, I'm still not an expert on myself, nevermind anybody else. I didn't know how to help people, I didn't know what advice to give them, I didn't know what to do. But what I did realise was that I had a purpose, that I had almost a responsibility that came with sharing my story.

It gave me a fire in my belly to try and do something, because I realised that injustice that was happening was that a lot of people were struggling, all at the same time, but all feeling like they're the only ones. And not only that, I realised just how many people didn't know how to get help and support. And why would they come unto me? Why would they come into just a little 'divi' from Liverpool who's not anything special, I'm not an expert, or nothing like that. But it's because I believe, they saw somebody who would believe them. They saw somebody who came through it, they saw somebody who would trust them. And that was enough for them to come to me rather than go to a loved one or go to a doctor.

So with that responsibility, came me saying, well, let's do something about it. Let's not just talk, let's not just do these stories, let's not just gesture, let's actually do something physical about that, that's going to make a difference to people.

So if I'm going on television, or I'm doing anything, I can do something that will change their situation, just talking about it is only the start of that. So that's where chasing the stigma came from. And then ultimately, the Hub of Hope.

**Steven**

Just thinking about that history there, Is there a time when you can pinpoint when you first started to suffer? But maybe you didn't know it at the time. But looking back in retrospect, what was that moment for you? What do you think that was?

**Jake**

So it's difficult really - I think for me, there was there was a series of different things, there was kind of like physical illnesses and stuff that had gone on.

So I was in hospital for a while with Crohn's disease, that was quite traumatic for me as an 18 year old, that was leaving university, trying to get work, being in a job I didn't like in a call centre, going on the dole for a little bit, trying to make it, relationship problems, a lot of different things... a lot of different things, but you know what - the things that are not uncommon, that I thought mental health, I thought and a lot of people think is a negative thing. And it's not.

And I also thought struggling with your mental health mean, meant being at crisis. And I didn't realise all the little tiny steps, struggling with your mental health, you know, things having a negative effect on your mental health can have, and instead of doing something about it here, I'll allow those to snowball, and snowball, and snowball and become something else. So it wasn't just one thing. It was a combination of a load of different things.

**Steven**

You've mentioned, work at the time being obviously a contributing factor if you didn't enjoy the work, but how was your experience overall going into

work? Was it something that you were dealing with, or was it as you mentioned, one of many factors that was worsening the situation?

**Jake**

Probably at about three jobs. That kind of ran across the span of me, certainly not being happy, if not being unwell. Not enjoying your job, not going into it and feeling like you have no other options is often a really, really difficult thing. But none of those work environments ever, where I would say inclusive or encouraging to talk about my or anybody's mental health. There was never anything about a mental health and, okay, we're talking about eight to 10 years ago. And yes, a lot has changed. But there's still a lot to do and they were never environments where I felt comfortable enough to be able to say actually is work a problem to my mental health and if so, is there anything I can do with it.

**Steven**

What's your mental health like now and how do you manage it? How do you keep on top of your struggles, and how do you keep yourself mentally healthy?

**Jake**

If I was to say 'physical health' to anybody, generally, people will have positive associations to physical health, they'll have something in the mind that we'll think of either getting physically fit, looking after themselves, eating well, drinking well, sleeping well, even if you're not doing it now,, you look at physical health as an aspiration, you think, right, I'm going to start doing that, I'm going to start eating better, I'm going to start going for a walk, I'm going to do this, and I'm going to take control of my physical health, and make it better.

If I say the words mental health, we generally think that that's a negative, we have an image in our heads of somebody struggling, that might be yourself, that might be somebody else. But if I were to play a game of saying, where the association if I said mental health, you'd say depression, anxiety, suicide, schizophrenia. The other biggest difference between the

two is that physically, if we're unwell, we're told from the earliest age, what to do, to talk about it, and to seek help. We know to look out for signs and symptoms ourselves, we know if we're not feeling well, if we notice a lot of people notice the pain if we notice that we're not feeling well. We ask for help. We go with will speak to somebody will go to a doctor, even if you can't explain it. But even if you think about from like talking to children, we'll quite openly ask a child do you feel sick, do you feel unwell?. What type of sick?, Have you got pain?, Do you feel like you're gonna throw up? We talk about it. We've got confidence around that, but with our mental health, even if we notice something's not right, we don't have the vocabulary to say anything, we don't have the knowledge, we don't have the skill, but we don't have the confidence.

I know now that there's things that I can do to look after my mental health on a daily basis. Big thing for me is sleep. I know that if I don't get sleep, like a decent sleep, for say, three nights running, then my mental health is going to be affected. So I try to do that. I don't want to use it for everybody, I want to make this point - physical exercise is very, very good for my mental health. The reason why I don't want to use it, quite openly and say it, is because I think it can be used quite flippantly. It's not for everybody.

**Steven**

We've mentioned 'Chasing the Stigma' a couple of times, and you've mentioned some of the stuff you're involved in, but what would you say is the biggest thing you're asked to get involved in when it comes to starting to shatter that stigma that surrounds mental health.

**Jake**

Around about 6000 people die each year by suicide in this country. And of all the people who died by suicide, almost three quarters of them are not known to mental health services have not been seen in the year previous to the death... three quarters... three quarters of people dying without getting any help.

There's absolutely no excuse for that. So that's what we want to change, and that's what I think we have to change as a country, as the UK, our governments have to do something about that.

But it goes back to the point I made before is that people don't necessarily know where their help and support is. And they're not reaching out for it in time. So we created 'The Hub of Hope' – The Hub of Hope just started because people were coming to me saying 'where do I go to for help', and I had no idea. So I just put out an appeal, and I said if you offer support, tell me who you are, and we'll put it together in a list.

But that then built into a website, now into a free downloadable app. And it's now the biggest the most comprehensive mental health signposting tool of its kind in the UK.

But we want people to know that they've got options. We don't want people to know that, It doesn't have to be a one size fits all approach. Find help find support, do it when you need it. Don't wait, don't put it off. Don't hope that it will get better. Give yourself a chance to get better by reaching out for that help and support.

But for me, It just shows that it's a simple idea, it's a simple approach that what people need. We need to move away from just talking about mental health, we need to move away from being awareness raising only, here's the awareness but now go and get help and support.

## **Steven**

You've talked about how we've obviously seen a shift in society, you know, maybe not as big a shift as we would like when it comes to people talking about mental health. But you know, we see celebrities starting to come forward to Talk about their own struggles, but that stigma definitely is still there. Why do you think some people are still really uncomfortable talking about their own mental health or even admitting that they're struggling?

**Jake**

I think I'm going to really simplify it - I think it comes down to two things.

One education, there's no mental health education rarely in schools. Yes, they're starting to do it now, but it's not compulsory in schools and it should be.

The other thing is within the workplace? What we need in a workplace is an environment of understanding, and an environment of understanding within a workplace comes from yes, the top up, but it has to have an everybody approach to it. Absolutely, everybody in a workplace needs to be engaged in the subject and the topic of mental health. And that doesn't mean having a day a year or a couple of days a year of reckoning, say it's mental health day. So yeah, it's really important to talk about it. And just say, we've got internal support for anybody who needs it. There's the employee assistance line, and it's just pushed out on something on the internet. It needs an everyday approach, we have to have an everyday approach to mental health.

We designed a training programme called 'Ambassadors of Hope', because we were seeing a lot of organisations we're training, say, I don't know, 5,10,15 people, but they've got like 400 members of staff.

So what we're saying is, well, you've still got a lot of staff there, like 380 staff who've got no training, we've got 20 who have that's still shifting, it's putting them on a pedestal as it's changing. That candidates not equal, you're then expecting 380 people to go to those 20 people that might not like them, might not want to talk about them, you know that that people are worried about being judged, the implications of speaking about this?

There's no more of that than in a workplace. Is this going to affect me? Am I going to get sacked two people don't talk about it. I'm not going to talk to Jean from accounts, because I don't like Jean.

So what can we do? My opinion - train everybody. give everybody the skills, give everybody the understanding. Why aren't we doing that – it makes sense. Why aren't people doing it? – Expensive, takes too much time? Well okay, we'll design it in a in a short and condensed way, we'll make it as affordable as we can, we'll use lived experience, real experience.

A lot of our trainers are from, like a comedic background ,perform background. We're just trying to humanise it, to normalise it to say we're not making you experts. You don't have to fix other people's problems. But you should least know the skills to look after your own mental health and what to do If you're struggling with your mental health. We know when you talk about mental health people roll their eyes and this is going to be depressing, doesn't have to be, doesn't have to be depressing. So that's what we're trying to do.

**Steven**

If there's one thing we all need to remember about mental health, it's there, it's good to talk about it. Next, Addison and I are going to share some of our experiences with mental health.

Addie, can you tell us a bit about your experience with mental health? The up's, the downs? What's that been like for you?

**Addie**

I was thinking when I was preparing for this, how I would describe my experience with mental health, because I think a lot of the narrative around mental health that's quite common, tends to see it as a time limited thing.

So people say they had a period of depression or a period of anxiety, and it has a kind of start or an end. And when I was reflecting on this, I was thinking well, so I've had several periods of depression through my life, each lasting kind of 12 to 18 months at a time usually, for pretty much most of my life, and I'm 37. So the idea of sort of my my poor mental health, if you want to call it that, being a time bound thing doesn't that's not how I see it. It is an aspect of my life. It is a part of how I experience the world.

And I think it's for me, those periods of depression, looking back on them, were obviously very difficult. And as I've got older, I've learned ways to manage that. But similar to what Jake was saying, it's almost it's flipping it around and thinking about it differently. For me, my mental health and keeping myself well. I've learned over time through a lot of error and a bit of trial, what the things are that I need to do to manage that, but just the same way as I would if I was diabetic, you know, so as far as I'm concerned, I will have depression and issues with sort of chronic stress and burnout and that kind of thing probably for my whole life. That's just kind of how it is. So for me, it's about how do I make my life work with that, and how do I ensure that I'm as healthy as I can be, but also that I'm not holding myself up to a standard where I feel like, if I can just find a magic formula, then I'll be cured, and this will never be a problem again, because that's not realistic.

You know, the fact of the matter is that there are there are triggers in my life, there are things that will happen, that make it more likely that I will become unwell, and I'm much more aware of those things.

Now, as I've got older, and as I've gone through therapy, and various sort of different kinds of treatment, but they're still there, and they're still going to blindside me probably at various points in my life that I've just sort of had to, I don't want to say I've had to accept that, I've worked to accept

that, and I have worked to try and accept it with an element of grace. Rather than seeing it as 'I'm saddled with this thing, and it's going to be a problem for the rest of my life'.

One of the things that I've learned is that integrating and accepting all of those aspects of yourself, is a really important part of being able to live as comfortably with yourself as possible. Whereas if in your head, you're seeing them as deficits, or things that are wrong with you, all that's going to drive you to do, is try and sort of fix them or, or dig them out or cure them or chop them off, or whatever it is, and try and get rid of it, but that's for me anyway, that's not how my mental health works, it's sort of integrated into all of me.

**Steven**

So when we talk about that integration of that acceptance, almost of you know, it's a part of you, and you've learned to handle it in certain ways. How does that translate into the workplace, into your jobs, your employment history? How have you managed to integrate conversations around mental health, but also your actual feelings towards mental health in the workplace.

**Addie**

So I started my career in teaching, the first eight years of my sort of working life, I was a teacher, and as you can probably imagine, stress is quite high, when you're a teacher, it's definitely a part of the job, and I struggled with that a lot.

I left the profession because I was burnt out basically, which is, can be a byproduct of being in that career. What surprised me was when I left teaching, and I then moved into the homelessness sector, where attitudes towards mental health are very different to that, that they are in the education sector.

As you can probably imagine, in the homelessness sector, talking about mental health, quite openly is pretty normal, because the service users, the clients, people that you're working with, it's a very, very common part of their life as well. It's just become a topic of conversation.

Looking back, I think that the pace of work in teaching was difficult for me to manage, but the bigger thing was that it, it almost wasn't allowed to be a topic of conversation. Like you were allowed to talk about, you know, being stressed or being tired or, you know, having too much marking or, you know, there were sort of acceptable topics of conversation. But as soon as it got anywhere near being, 'and this is making me unwell', then doors would start closing. And it stopped being an acceptable topic of conversation, and the sort of message that I then got, kind of unconsciously I think, is, we don't talk about that. That's not what we talk about. You handle that on your own time. You're here to do X, Y, Zed.

The homelessness sector was different., as I say it was there was a lot more openness about mental health, a lot more awareness. There's also in the homelessness sector, a lot more people who have been service users then work for the services. So you've got sort of a bit of a kind of talent pipeline, almost of people with lived experience getting into the roles. So that all helps as well, because people are much more versed in in talking about mental health and staying healthy.

I think what I find interesting about workplaces when it comes to mental health is, and you can probably imagine this for lots of other subjects as well, there can be an organisational message that then what that it filters down into his people's individual experiences. So just because you have Mental Health First Aiders, it's an example, and you have a policy and you do things for Mental Health Awareness Week and all of that. Unless you've really thought about your entire organisation, and upskilling, everyone in that, like Jake was saying, you're leaving a lot to chance, and what you're

probably ending up having happened is the individual staff will experience that through the filter of their manager, and if their manager is not comfortable talking about this stuff, or doesn't see it as important, or has their own hang ups and stigma and stuff about it, then no matter what you're doing at that bigger picture level, it's not going to filter down.

And I think that's something I've experienced over time, it's been more up to luck than anything else, that I've had line managers who were supportive, line managers, who would say to me, 'your health has to come first. That has to be the priority, not, you know, deadlines, projects, whatever it is'.

I was fortunate to have had a lot of wonderful managers who really got that, but I know from looking around places that I've worked, that's not the case everywhere.

**Steven**

You mentioned different sectors, having different attitudes, having different experiences, but also when we think about different demographics of people as well, there are very different experiences for people within certain demographics. You know, being part of the LGBTQ+ community, I think that there's a real strong conversation to be had there when it comes to diversity and mental health too.

What are your thoughts when it comes to bringing mental health into more diversity conversations?

**Addie**

I think it's very important, and the, you know, the data tells us that people from discriminated against groups are a much higher risk levels of having mental health issues. There's a really clear correlation there.

I think where we're at at the moment is that, you know, as Jake was saying, probably over the last five or so years, there does seem to have

been a bit of a shift in terms of how open people are about talking about mental health, people are bringing it more front and centre, it's entering more people's consciousness, which is wonderful.

I think, from the LGBTQ community's perspective, that's great, because you've got more people going, 'Oh, actually, maybe how I feel right now, I should get some help for it', or that 'you know, this isn't how everybody feels' or you know 'I shouldn't have this response to this'. That's a sign that you know, I might need a bit of help or support or whatever it is.

The problem is that sometimes the services and support that we want to access isn't ready for us. So, as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, this is getting less common, but it is still there. If you're interacting with health services, it can be a bit of a gamble, as to who you're ended up talking to, as a sort of mental health support person or whoever they are, and their attitudes towards you.

So you know, whether you're gay or bi, or trans, or whatever it is, they might make that as part of the problem, rather than actually just looking at you as an individual who needs to, you know, access to support or go down this treatment route or you know, whatever it is to help you navigate it.

And how about you, Steve, has mental health been something that's affected you?

**Steven**

Yeah, so I think when it comes to mental health and its effect on my life, really, I could talk about a heck of a lot of different things. Even just in my immediate family.

We've got diagnoses of bipolar disorder, PTSD, stress reactive psychosis, clinical depression, panic attacks, anxiety disorders, and that's just between four of us.

So, mental health conditions, mental health experience has been floating around me for as long as I can remember.

And yeah, I could talk about being gay and growing up in the Yorkshire Dales, how that affected my mental health. I could talk about anxiety at high school at college or uni that, you know, eventually culminated in a suicide attempt. But I think the thing that had the biggest impact on me was OCD as a child - obsessive compulsive disorder. And I'm sure as soon as I've mentioned that we'll have a load of people thinking about germaphobes or neat freaks, people that might be too nervous to leave the house, and some of those people might have OCD, yes, but it's much more than that.

And there'll be some people out there that might be listening to this thinking, OCD, you know, they know me, I'm incredibly messy. I'm not very organised, that that's nothing like the me that they know. But that's a real misconception there about OCD as well as a disorder. In its two key parts, you've got the obsessions, you know, the thoughts that intrude on your mind and will not go away.

And then you've got the compulsions, and those are the behaviours that you're compelled to do. Even if you know they're totally irrational, sometimes they can be really connected, and they correlate with each other, and other times, totally unrelated. And for me, as a young child, this actually manifested as having to make sure things were in the proper place, everything had to be even numbered, everything had to be symmetrical. All doors had to be closed, not opened, you know, my mum loved it, you know, she didn't have a messy house at all, I was constantly

going around, you know, neatening the rugs, closing the curtains in an exacting fashion. You know, if I walked around a table in a certain way, I had to walk back this the exact same way to have some semblance of order.

Even going to school, you know, I've got a real vivid memory of been about five or six, and getting to school and realising I hadn't brushed my hair that morning, and I ran out of the playground, I ran back home, made my mum brush my hair, then walked calmly back into school as if everything was perfectly normal.

You know, obviously, for me, that was something that was taking a lot of energy, it was taking a lot of time out of my day to do essentially unnecessary things, and the biggest thing for me was washing my hands. And you know, it wasn't because I was, you know, scared of germs or didn't want dirty hands. It had something to do with that compulsion to do things evenly. So I would wash my hands once and then think, well, I have to do it twice to make sure it's even. And then it would be like, well, now I have to do it four times. Oh, let's double that up and do it eight. Okay, now 16, Now 32, and I'd hit my sweet spot of 64 - 64 times to wash my hands was, you know, my minimum and be happy.

And that wasn't because I felt they were clean. It's just because that felt, right, I needed to almost exhaust the obsession, the compulsion, to get it out of my system. For me, you know, puberty was a real wake up call. Suddenly, I became a teenager, and my inner laziness just sort of came out and was like 'I can't be bothered to do that anymore - far too exhausting'.

So the compulsions stopped. Well, they mainly stopped, I still have a few every now and again, but for me, it was the obsessive thoughts that really crept in after that, I had no compulsions to almost order those thoughts.

So then I started having, you know, obsessive thoughts about 'oh what if I die tomorrow', 'where's my funeral going to be held', 'Who's going to turn up', 'Oh, my Mum is going to be really upset'. You know, and that could have been at any point, if I was, you know, doing my homework, if I was, you know, just chatting to friends in school, it was incredibly distracting, and that's something I still deal with to this day, you know, every time I walk across a bridge, I think, 'well what if I just threw my mobile phone over the edge'? You know, I'm not going to do it, but it's that thought that instantly comes into my mind. If I'm waiting for a train, at the tracks and think, 'but what if I fell on the tracks, you know, I die', and then I'll get into that spiral of thinking about my funeral again.

And then in the workplace, every time I see an e-mail come in, I'm constantly thinking about what's the worst possible thing that might be in that e-mail, and that's exacerbated if I see it come in, and I cannot open it because I'm in the middle of something else.

So then it's constantly going on in the back of my mind. So what I've had to do is, like Addie, you mentioned, is just accept that that's a part of me, and I can't really change that, but I can try and deal with it.

And for me, that's been learning to focus on one thing at a time, trying to get those little distractions to trickle away... to put them away in a box that I'll come back to later, because if I divide that focus, it will definitely get divided again, and again, and again, until I get to a point where actually, anything I'm going to do is not going to be to a very good standard.

Learning how to have those conversations with your managers, I think it's really important to say actually, this way of working doesn't work for me. And this is how I'm going to work.

So for me, compartmentalising has been a life changer. Learning to really log off when I've logged off, forget about work entirely, until I'm back in the next day. But yeah, absolutely, that there's been a massive mental health effects on me in my life.

**Addie** Thank you for sharing that, that a lot of what you were saying really resonated with me, particularly about about the inbox and feeling pulled in many directions.

**Steven** Yeah

**Addie** Something that I try and think about is, I think it can be easy with particularly working virtually, but with in boxes and emails, is to see them as it can be easy to fall into the trap of seeing them as an email rather than a person.

So what I try and do and I'm not saying I'm always successful at this, this is a work in progress. Definitely what I try and do is think, would the person on the other end of this want me to actually kind of be present and think about what I'm saying in my response, or do they want me to write it in the 30 seconds, I've got between two calls, I think they probably want a better response from me being present in that moment and trying to be there. Now, I'm not saying I do that all the time, but that's one of the ways that I've learned to try and reframe things a bit, and try and get away from.

So one of the ways that my depression can manifest itself is, I'm very, very hard on myself, and there's a voice in my head that is very, very unpleasant to me a lot of the time, and it's a lot less loud than it used to be.

As a child, it was like a shouting voice kind of all the time basically, in my head. And, you know, it led me to a couple of not suicide attempts, but pretty close planning of it, thinking about it pretty seriously.

Through various ways, antidepressants and therapy, and I think to an extent kind of growing older and developing self awareness and developing techniques in terms of what works for me, which I think just comes with time. I've learned to notice that that voice is there, telling me that I'm not good enough, or I'm a terrible person, or you know, wherever it's on today, whatever message is trying to tell me today, it's got this little broadcast going, and go okay, well, that's happening over there - but actually 'how can I flip this around'?, 'How can I think about this in a different way'?, 'What's the bigger picture here'?, 'How might someone else see this situation'?

Something that I found very helpful is the 'what advice would you give to a friend if they asked you this question', because you wouldn't say to your friend, or we missed that thing, because you're a terrible person, like you would not say that to someone that you care about. So approaching the way with yourself having that kind of tone of voice towards yourself.

**Steven**

We're going to spend some time thinking about the scale of mental health issues in society and the workplace, thinking about what employers should be doing, what could they be doing, but also what what should we all be doing?

Jake – To you first. What more could employers have done to support you, as you were going through depression as you were dealing with those suicidal thoughts?

**Jake**

It's difficult, because if we're if we're talking about it on a personal point of view, as I said, I wouldn't say that any of the places I've ever worked, then

I have been particularly inclusive in talking about mental health. And you know, I didn't know that I was necessarily going through something myself, so I wouldn't have necessarily reached out to any line managers or anybody else to say, I was feeling unwell because of my mental health.

I probably in all fairness would have said it was something else made up something else about my physical health, so it's not a it's not a quick thing. I'm not going to say, well, I should have outlined managers who would be asking about my mental health, because let's be realistic, they probably weren't going to do that because they didn't have training boards. That's why it's got to be a company wide approach, of not making people but allowing people to know that there's a trust there to talk about mental health.

If ideally, everybody has training and then if you have a tiered approach so some then our Mental Health First Aid decision making quite clear that you can go and speak to somebody, having a part in inductions in every workplace, having a part of your regular one to one to keep in touch type of, of meetings, making it just making it standard, just making it part and parcel of working and living in that environment, because otherwise, if you don't do any of that other stuff, and then you have a conversation, say 'How are you feeling about your mental health?' people are gonna go 'What that was, I'm not ready for that conversation, I'll just say whatever I've got to say here'. It's got to be an almost... this is gonna sound like I'm contradicting myself, but a gentle constant message that needs to be the 'so if you do need to appreciate that health is health, and that's personal and private'. So somebody in the same way, if somebody's got a physical illness that they don't necessarily want to talk about, they don't have to, but you hope that they will speak to somebody about that, inside or outside of work.

**Steven**

Addie, thinking about the context of the last year of people being in lockdown, people not being able to see people as much as they've been used to. Why is it more important than ever, for employees to start taking action to support colleagues when it comes to their mental health?

**Addie**

I think something really interesting has happened in the last year, which is that because something so massive, has up-ended everyone's lives, everyone has felt it in one form or another. And what I've been seeing is more of the what you might think over the unusual suspects in organisations have been talking about thinking about well being and depression and stress and loneliness. Whereas, you know, two, two and a half years ago, three years ago, whatever, that would not have been a topic of conversation.

What's coming up next is a bit of a risky time, I think, almost more risky than being under lockdown. Because we're going from what's begun to feel a bit normal, because we've been doing it for a year people have kind of adapted to it, they've kind of got the hang of it to another change. And what's gonna happen is that as people, you know, return to the office in more numbers, there's stop doing kind of blended working, with some people in the office, and some people aren't, some people are going to be desperate for it to just go back to exactly how it was before lockdown. Some people have had a taste of a different way of working in the last year, and desperately do not want it to go back to the same way after locked down. And the hard bit next is going to be, it's one thing to try and look after your staff when everyone is virtual, or the majority of people are virtual. It's a whole different kettle of fish when some are virtual, and some are different days in different places in different ways.

Fundamentally, the reason why this is important is that organisations employ people, and they are your singular, most important. I hesitate to say the word resource because we're more than that we're humans, but

you know what I mean. So looking after that group of people, creating conditions where they are as healthy as possible, and where they can thrive, whatever that means for them should be your number one priority, because that then cascades to every other aspect of your organisation and every other element of success that you've got.

So you've got so I think a couple of things for people to think about, organisations think about as we go into the next who knows, year, two years, whatever the future looks like, I think we're all a bit more cautious about putting time limits on anything now after the last year.

One is to really think about what opportunities are there as people start returning to the office in bigger numbers, and people are thinking about what flexibility looks like for them?. What opportunities are there for you to sort of bake inclusion, and that includes thinking about mental health and well being and work life balance, baking that into this new way of working. So you've got an opportunity to do things differently to how they were before because everyone's already kind of in that space where they're like, all things are new and different. What's this gonna look like? So they're really kind of ready for change to happen as there's less resistance.

But also really think about, okay, you might be doing activities around Mental Health Awareness Week, you might have all these sort of diversity initiatives. But are you really doing it in a way that's meaningful? So as an example, are you doing lots of things about mental health awareness and you've got Employee Assistance programmes and various things that people can access, but that's not really being backed up in the actual culture of the organisation. So are your managers still seeing people who don't go the extra mile, or who worked 12 hour days? Are they seeing them as uncommitted, rather than boundaried? Are you not expecting a pretty decent level of emotional intelligence from your leaders, because that's basically what they need in order to create workplaces that are as

healthy for people as possible?. Are you still assuming that someone may be you know, being off work for mental health every once in a while, or you know, working different hours or whatever it is those accommodations? Are you still seeing that as a difference or as a weakness, rather than as an aspect of that person who you're looking at in the round?

**Steven**

Jake, as well as employers, it's really important for all of us to support each other, do you have any further advice that you can share when it comes to supporting our colleagues, our friends, our families, when it comes to mental health?

**Jake**

Yeah, one thing I would say is that, know that you don't have to be an expert, to know that it's not your job, it's not your role to be that expert and to fix that person's problems, that's not what you're there for. Because I know a lot of people, even when they're genuinely concerned for somebody, still feel like 'what if I say the wrong thing', 'what have pushed me over the edge', whatever, you know, 'I don't want to make things where so I just won't ask'.

I can't blame people for feeling that way, because you feel like it's a really sensitive and difficult conversation to have, but you don't have to be that person, you don't have to be the person who's going to fix that person's problems. All you have to be is a bridge, you'd be a bridge between somebody feeling unwell and somebody speaking to an expert, somebody reaching out with help & support.

What I can't stress enough, and this might sound really simple and obvious. But if you're worried about somebody, ask them - just have the conversation. I know you might feel awkward, I know you might feel like you don't really ask these questions, and or you might feel like you're not qualified, but actually just have the conversation. Do it in a way that you

know, is as normal as can be in the environments that you usually talk in, in a way that usually told you don't have to suddenly change how you talk, you don't have to suddenly, you know, go all formal with somebody because it's or hotels, just just ask in a way that you would normally ask them if you can, maybe have a look in advance on the 'Hub of Hope', for example, have it on your phone, look to help and support that's available. Because once you do have that conversation, if somebody says 'Yes I'm struggling' it's knowing what to do next. That's the important thing, get them to that help and support.

And the other thing is to know that sometimes it can take time, it's like planting seeds. That first time you ask somebody, they might say I'm absolutely fine, don't worry, because what the possibly doing is waiting for your reaction, or it could be that you're asking them as made them think themselves actually why if they asked me that I'm I feel it. Okay. So they almost want you to come back. So ask ask and ask again. It's coming back. It's being persistent, not pushy, persistent, not pushy, and that can take days, weeks, years. But just knowing that you're there, because that's how you gain a person's trust. But it's just really important that if you are worried, don't leave it to chance. Just just ask them, just be there for them.

**Steven** And Addie, how about you any advice when it comes to supporting colleagues, friends, family, when it comes to mental health?

**Addie** I think other than, you know, everything Jake said which is absolutely right. It's about recognising that, you know, there is still a lot of stigma around mental health, and people have internalised that stigma, and that worry. And it's still something that all of us are sort of getting our heads around.

So are there ways that you can sort of role model or make a bit of commission for being more open about how you're feeling? So if you're in a situation where something's making you feel a bit anxious or a bit

worried about something, could you verbalise that? And could you explain it? Because then what you're doing is you're just starting to create a bit of permission for talking about how people feel.

So as an example, in a team meeting, if there's something coming up that you're a bit worried about, or anxious about, what's probably happening is other people in the room are anxious and worried, too, but no one wants to be the first one to say it. So if you say, actually, I'm a bit worried about this, or this has caused me a bit of stress. Can we have a talk about it? What do other people think you'll find that that will start the conversation and people will get talking about it. And it's also you get the benefit of starting to be more open about how you're feeling and making those things topics of conversation. But it's also about opening the door for other people to be able to do that and then it can start to become a bit of a habit, and you know, maybe in in your monthly team meetings, you just have a bit of a check in and see how people are doing. And it just becomes part of that everyday way of just being a bit more open about talking about how you're feeling, about being honest about when you're struggling, about speaking about things more early, rather than waiting until it's kind of snowballed into a bigger issue. And that all starts to help.

**Steven**

And finally, if there's anyone listening who's struggling right now, and needs a bit of support, what would you like to say to them? Jake, let's go to you first.

**Jake**

I would say that, no matter how bad it might seem, and no matter how impossible, the situation might feel, impossible for a number of reasons. No matter how impossible recovery, or feeling better, or feeling like you again, might seem, no matter how dark it is, there's a way through. And there always is, you've got to give yourself that chance, give yourself a chance to get better, in the same way that you would, in any other

scenario. Give yourself a chance. Because the way that you're feeling right now, doesn't have to be forever, and I can absolutely guarantee that.

I didn't think I could feel like me again, I didn't think I could have a life. I didn't think I could have a wife and kids... But I have - I very nearly didn't.

So I promise you. It's not forever. But you've got to give yourself a chance to get better, look for the help, look for the support, reach out, speak to somebody, but give yourself a chance.

**Steven**

And Addie, the same question to you. If we've got someone that's struggling, and he's listening right now, what would you want to say to them?

**Addie**

What I'd say is that, while it may feel like your brain is 100% accurate all the time, and how you feel and see things is exactly how it is, your brain can lie to you.

And if you're feeling really bad right now, your brain is probably lying to you about lots of things. So that's not about just throwing all that out the window, but it's recognising that, this is how I feel right now, and this is maybe clouding the way I'm seeing things or it's making me hard for me to handle even just everyday stuff.

So what I'm going to do is reach out to somebody, have a chat with someone, even if having a chat with someone seems like too much, there's other mechanisms. People like the Samaritans, you can ring up, there's online chat services, where you can type in how you're feeling, but that first barrier is getting it outside of your head, and then once you've done that, you can start thinking, Okay, I'm not very well right now, and again, keep it there is 'right now' it's not going to be forever, so let's see what I can do to get better.

**Steven** A huge thank you to my two guests today. Thank you Jake.

**Jake** Thank you very much for having me.

**Steven** And thank you, Addie.

**Addie** Thanks, Steve.

**Steven** For more information about supporting mental health in the workplace, visit our website [inclusiveemployers.co.uk](https://www.inclusiveemployers.co.uk), that's [inclusiveemployers.co.uk](https://www.inclusiveemployers.co.uk). For Inclusive Employers members, there's also a link to our resources in this area in the podcast description.

On the next podcast, the host will be Stephanie Hirst, and she's here to help us celebrate 10 years of Inclusive Employers. That's right, we're going to be celebrating our 10th birthday!

We're going to be looking back at the last 10 years, and how the inclusion landscape has changed. We'll look at what organisations are doing right now to help create inclusive cultures in 2021, and then look forward to the next 10 years. What's next for inclusion? What can we all do to make all workplaces inclusive for everyone?

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