

The Work Couch

NAVIGATING TODAY'S TRICKY PEOPLE CHALLENGES TO CREATE TOMORROW'S SUSTAINABLE WORKPLACES

Episode 10 – Mental health at work (Part 2): Implementing effective mental wellbeing measures, with Neil Laybourn

Ellie: Before we jump into today's episode, we wanted to give our listeners a quick content warning. We will be discussing themes around mental health, including suicide, severe mental health conditions, and mental health in the work context, which some listeners might find triggering. With that in mind, we would advise listener discretion as to whether you feel comfortable listening to this episode.

Hi and welcome to the Work Couch podcast, your fortnightly deep dive into all things employment. Brought to you by the award-winning employment team at law firm RPC, we discuss the whole spectrum of employment law with the emphasis firmly on people. My name is Ellie Gelder. I'm a senior editor in the employment equality and engagement team here at RPC and I will be your host as we explore the constantly evolving and consistently challenging world of employment law and all the curveballs it brings to businesses today. We hope by the end of the podcast, you'll feel better prepared to respond to these people challenges in a practical, commercial and inclusive way.

Last time in the first part of our mental health mini-series, I was joined by the inspirational Jonny Benjamin MBE, who spoke so powerfully about his own experience of mental illness and the work he is doing now to campaign for better mental health support. And today in the second part of our mini-series on mental health and work, I'm absolutely thrilled to welcome the other key person from the incredible "Stranger on the bridge" story, Neil Laybourn, who on that fateful day in January 2008, stopped to talk to Jonny, who was about to take his own life on Waterloo Bridge. So, 15 years on, Jonny and Neil are now best friends and colleagues. Like Jonny, Neil is also a passionate mental health advocate and now runs his own consultancy, helping employers implement end-to-end employee mental health programmes. So, Neil, thank you so much for joining me today on the Work Couch.

Neil: Thanks, Ellie. Hello, everybody listening in today.

Ellie: So, Neil, we heard last time about one half of your and Jonny's remarkable story. So, Jonny spoke about the events that had led him to feel so desperate that he planned to take his own life on the bridge that day. And we also heard about the life changing impact that you had on Jonny that day. So, if you can just take us back to that day, a typically normal day for you, you were on your way to work. What went through your mind when you first realised that this stranger was about to take his own life?

Neil: So yeah, fascinating to think that I'm going to go back to a day 15 years ago that actually kicked off my professional career now and all the stuff you talked about, which obviously was not the intention at the time. On the 14th of January 2008, I was walking to work. At the time, I was a newly qualified personal trainer.

So, I was walking over Waterloo Bridge early one January morning to go and put somebody through a whole lot of pain, I should imagine. Physical, pain that they were paying for. They were happy about that. So, yeah, on that commute to work that morning, I saw for the first time in my life, somebody that was attempting to take their life. I didn't actually realise that's what it was at first, but...soon after kind of cutting through the crowd to, you know, just make a, I don't know, a haphazard approach, stand next to that guy on the edge of the bridge and just ask him why he was there. So just for context around the day in question, you know, in 2008, you know, there wasn't much education was there around mental health awareness at all.

So, it wasn't something that I spoke about growing up. It wasn't anything that somebody talked to me about growing up. So, the fact that I did actually have to ask, this guy, why are you sitting on a bridge? Seems a bit ridiculous now, right? It's kind of obvious, but if the education wasn't there, why would we know what a suicidal situation looks like? And obviously it was January, it was cold.

I think there's a lot of knowledge now around like this time of year, there's even a campaign day called Brew Monday, which is linked to Blue Monday, which is like the third Monday in January, we realised that, I mean, British weather is horrible on its own, let alone all the other stuff that comes after Christmas, you know, the highs of seeing family you go to them to, you know, being isolated afterwards, the financial stresses of some families around Christmas time, that coupled with the weather, it is, it is a typical time when people face a lot of emotional challenges, and we should

maybe, you know, just check in on people. Anyway, no awareness of any of that at the time. So yeah, I mean, January, cold day, seeing somebody on a bridge, you know what, I'm not the only person. We'll find out through this story that actually it happens to a lot of people in London actually walking past that kind of scene.

Ellie: Yeah, it's so shocking to think that, but as you say, we'll explore that as we hear a bit more about the story. So, as you say, you didn't really grow up with mental health being something spoken of. And as you say, 2008 was a very different time. It wasn't a topic that was openly discussed particularly. So how did you know what to say to Jonny in that sort of hugely precarious moment?

Neil: Well, Ellie, thank you for the compliment that I knew what to say because I had absolutely no idea what to say. It was literally just one question at a time, I think, just I was trying to build my own picture of what the situation was, because of that lack of education. So just, one dull question after another. But what's interesting when I reflect is that I remember not trying to give any sort of opinion really early on.

It was just like, "Why do you feel like this? have you spoken to family? Does anybody else know you're here?" I remember that quite distinctly. And obviously, me and Jonny are friends now and we've sat down and talked about that time, and he's told me that...it's not really about what you say, it's how you make somebody feel, it's just being there, it's being by their side. There are things that I'd know now that I might try and say, but I think that's the beauty of the moment when people are just themselves actually. It just allows a really open, authentic space to be with somebody. I was just being myself.

Ellie: And I know that Jonny has said, because you both, kindly came to RPC's offices recently to give a talk, to us all, to mark World Suicide Prevention Day, which by the way, left such a lasting impression on all of us. And Jonny said, and this will stay with me, despite having been an inpatient in a psychiatric ward, no one had ever told him, "Don't be embarrassed" and "You'll be okay". And he said how those just really simple words, but I guess such humane words, gave him hope in that darkest moment.

Neil: Well, I think you really have to believe when somebody says they've never been given permission to not be embarrassed. Jonny was 21. I was only 24.

And I think especially as males, there's so much stuff that we just keep in the locker, whether it is really severe, like suicidal ideations, which is obviously part of Jonny's story, or it could be something completely different. But it's really important, I think that we are giving permission without this embarrassment for people to talk and open up. I think you need it, as your life progresses and you take on more stuff. We were talking just before this call weren't we about like the stuff going on at home, right? For me, it's three children. It's a 27-year payment term left on my mortgage, right? It's, you know, it's like whatever challenges I didn't have at 24. I do need the tools now more to talk and open up without embarrassment, and embarrassment about you know, things that they seem small, but actually, like, they're really big, if you can just talk about the stuff that's going on in your head that day. So, if we have to practice to do it when we're younger, it's huge. And I think what Jonny was saying was, when he was a teenager, before he got to the bridge, he was never shown permission or role-modelled to do that. So unfortunately, it is indicative of our society today, but we're trying to change that through this story of these two guys talking on a bridge and this survival story, what we're showing is that it's completely possible to create an open safe situation, just through being yourself. And that hopefully can translate for something that anybody on this podcast can take away today and think about.

Ellie: Yeah, and I think it's not being afraid to have that conversation, as you say, not giving opinions, but just enabling people to talk and be heard and get that stress out of their head and out to somebody else. You don't have to have mental health expertise necessarily for somebody to talk and feel that sort of comfort, I guess.

Neil: I've always felt like, just don't impart too much. And what that does is that really allows time, you know, time in a conversation, for somebody to just have their own space and answer properly. Because we always want to like, jump in with an opinion about how you feel. So sometimes not being very good at having an opinion. Because I think the misconception is that when you're having a conversation with somebody, that you're going to impart some sort of huge wisdom that's going to solve the problem for that person, which is usually through an opinion, but what non-judgment is usually is just the absence of opinion.

Ellie: So going back to that moment you talked about sort of going to get coffee and talking some more, but that didn't end up happening, did it?

Neil: No, so the conversation lasted about half an hour. That was a natural point where a rapport was built. I think trust was exchanged. And there was, yeah, comfort for Jonny to step down from the bridge. And that's when, yeah, this suggestion of coffee came into it. So, my thought was by sitting down, by having a coffee, I would be able to get him to... call somebody. But no, we didn't get that chance because the police came. And he was abruptly arrested, which is, which is really, yeah, just doesn't seem right. Again, you know, didn't question it at the time. I thought, well, that's how the police handle that situation. So, Jonny's arrested for essentially being in mental distress while exhibiting no danger really to anybody else apart from himself, you know. I mean, he won't mind me saying it's not like he's an

imposing six-foot, bodybuilder, right? Okay. So, you know, we were just standing there on the street talking, but because I guess the police had a report that, you know, this chap had been on a bridge stigma associated is, you know, like you're a danger, you're a danger to yourself. You're a danger to other people. So, him being handcuffed on the scene and taken away. I just honestly, I thought, well, that's, I guess that's what happens, right? Why would I question it? I don't know any different. That's how our conversation ended.

Ellie: So, you carried on with your day. And I know you often thought of Jonny after that, and sort of wondered what had happened. And you never really heard anything about it until that amazing moment when you were both reunited six years later. So long, long time. And that was following the viral and globally reaching social media campaign, #FindMike. And obviously you're not Mike. But just tell us briefly how that happened. How were you reunited and how did it feel when you finally met Jonny?

Yeah, it was an amazing moment. So, it was six years after the conversation in 2008. And Jonny, I didn't know had Neil: gone through his own journey towards recovery. Every day I walked to work within those six years, there were times when I thought about it a lot. I didn't know that when Jonny had gone through this part of his recovery journey, he was out there looking for me to say thank you through the help of the charity. And they thought my name wasn't Neil, that he thought my name was Mike. So, they somehow had managed to convene a global audience to search for me through Twitter, through newspaper articles, through terrestrial TV campaigns, but they're looking for Mike. So, I guess that threw a spanner. But when I saw it, it was actually through Facebook and my fiancé seen this post being shared looking for Mike. So, I saw it through her mobile phone one evening. And that was a surreal moment because like I said, I just notched it up to a random 30-minute conversation where I got to feel good, you know, doing a good deed that one day and then that was it. So, to then know that he's out there, he's looking for me, but also to know that it made a difference, you know, that it had sparked something that allowed him to begin a journey of recovery, you know, not putting it down to that conversation. Like there's a whole load of other things like, his relationship with his family, his psychiatrist, medication, his own journey with himself, all of those things, but to know that our 30minute chat had actually been like a piece of that puzzle. It was really surreal; it was really lovely. And then, yeah, we met and then we started this flourishing friendship, which led us both in all sorts of directions together.

Ellie: And just going back to the campaign, it's very tragically, it's much more common than people realise, people standing on a bridge. Just tell us about that and how in Jonny's search, there were a lot of people that thought that they were Mike.

Neil: So, this is where the kind of trigger warning comes in, I guess, because I do want to be open, I do want to be candid about this topic, because I know a lot about it now, and I've been actually quite passionate about men's mental health and suicide awareness. So yeah, just to let people know that this is an opportunity to pause. So about 5,000, 6,000 people die a year by suicide. Most suicides in the UK are male. So, 75% of people who do end their life, are men. So, there's something there, around the stuff I talked about, about the masculinity and not permission for talking. Unfortunately, this is hard to hear, but the place where I found Jonny is quite typical approach for somebody to attempt suicide. And because it affects so many people in the UK, and it is the biggest killer of men under the age of 50, a lot of people find themselves in that position and a lot of people have walked past somebody in that position. And that brings us to the fact that when he did the campaign, a lot of people thought they were Mike, they were me, because around that time in central London, around that sort of setting on a bridge, they had actually stopped to talk to somebody.

Apparently there were 38 people that came forward. It just goes to show then what we're sort of dealing with, but also goes to show that there is a lot of hope that people will stop and intervene, talk.

There's a whole bunch of reasons why people might not make an approach. But... 38 people that did, in this case, around that time, it just goes to show you what there is to build on and kind of break down those stigmas and barriers. And there's a lot of empathy in the world.

Ellie: Yeah, absolutely. And what's so wonderful about your story is how you and Jonny are putting all those unique insights, experiences into bringing about positive change for mental health. So, as I mentioned, through your consultancy work, you're giving employers practical tools to help them support their employees' mental wellbeing. So, before we look at those practical measures, in your view, what are the main challenges or barriers that employers face today when trying to support their employees' mental wellbeing.

Neil: I've always really fascinated to like dive into like what else is going on through the whole organisation, who's involved in that and my first attempt at doing that was I co created with Jonny a mental health conference in 2018. And we invited all of these companies and representatives to come together and share best practice, which at the time, Ellie, actually was quite novel, believe it or not, only five years ago, it was, it still felt quite novel, because nobody really had the answers, they were just doing kind of what felt right. And the marketplace around mental health was quite in its infancy. There wasn't a lot of providers out there. So, they were just doing what they felt was right. And so, then everything just accelerated. Now it's something that every organisation knows that they need to have a strategy for.

And I think the main reason is because when we were first talking about this in companies, bringing people together through those events. The narrative, the lens was about the ill mental health, the diagnosed population, which is about one in six of the workplace. But then after the pandemic, after the fact that we've realised that it only takes one big life event to derail actually the most hardened of resilient people, I think employers realise that provision needs to exist for six in six, not just people who could potentially have a diagnosis that needs a medical intervention like medication, talking therapy, etc. Actually, our businesses are going to thrive much, much better if we look after 100% of the population and look after their mental health and wellbeing. And I guess a couple of things that are kind of like evergreen that are always going to be there is some of the challenges are still organisations find it difficult to talk about the taboo side of mental health. So, our story touches on suicide, or the clinical side, I feel like a lot of employers don't have the confidence or the knowledge to themselves have the conversation. So that brings up a challenge of inauthenticity.

So that's one barrier. I think another is that, you know, when people who are really great in organisations and have been, doing great work and moving the culture along, those people leave. I feel like a lot of migration has happened over the past just a couple of years, especially post pandemic. So those ideas and passion leave the company when those people leave.

Ellie: Yeah, but there's no succession planning for that hugely.

Neil: But exactly. So yeah, that's a good point. Succession planning wasn't in place.

Ellie: Whereas for something else that there would have been wouldn't there? You know, that's the difference, I guess.

Neil: Oh, yeah, absolutely. Like succession planning for your executive leadership team or you know, your sales strategy or your market. I do feel like the chasm of understanding and empathy is very wide right now. So, there's a lot of work to do to bridge that disconnect. And then I guess I'll finish on this one, A real lack of operational budget. I wonder how much operational budget do they actually spend per head per capita looking after employees, it's probably nowhere near as much as they spend on other business initiatives. So those are just a few examples of stuff where we have to navigate implementing our wellbeing programmes.

Ellie: And just, obviously you've touched on the COVID-19 pandemic and that impact it's had on people's mental health. There's huge difficulties in accessing treatment. And then in the context of work, there's obviously been a move to working from home. That may have increased people feeling isolated or just general poor mental wellbeing across the working population. But we know from previous episodes of The Work Couch that the ability to work flexibly and differently can improve mental wellbeing. So, I guess for employers, when we're talking about hybrid working or that requirement to return to the office, there's a tricky balance to be struck, isn't there, between what the business needs, but also people's mental wellbeing.

Neil: Well, I've got an interesting take on this I think remote working previously, before the pandemic, was a bit of an art form. And it was probably reserved for freelancers or entrepreneurs or, you know, kind of at will through choice. And it's a learned skill. It really is.

I think what I don't see enough is workplaces could very simply, very cheaply assess how apt an individual is to working remotely and then working in the office environment and getting that mix. I think when you just take it back to a very, like there's a person, there's a human in front of you, there's some emotional questions we need to uncover about what's going on in their life. What is their tolerance to isolation? What is the ecosystem around their family, their support environment, their relationships? You know, very rarely do I hear that conversation come up. But as, you know, somebody who runs my own company and has employed people in different industries over the years, the first thing I want to do as a leader is get to know the person in front of me and understand, you know, how I'm asking them to operate and where I'm going to support that person on an individual level, and a business operational level. I don't see that happening enough. It's really simple to put in place.

Ellie: And just wanted to go back to the importance of having a culture of psychological safety where people feel able to discuss their mental wellbeing. And you mentioned one of the challenges is leaders', managers not feeling that they have the tools to lead those conversations. So how can we get better at that? In your experience with businesses, what works to help improve that sort of culture?

Neil: Well, I think it can come down to just, I like to use the word "close the gaps of understanding". I don't think that we're gonna eradicate 100% stigma to some degree, because I think as humans, we all have a little bit of protectionism. I think we don't necessarily wanna show, you know, the whole vulnerable side of ourselves and be honest about everything. I think there's always going to be people who maybe say they've got a headache when actually it's a bad mental health day. I honestly think that's always going to exist. So, it's just about, mitigating the worst behaviours of it and, perpetrators in the workplace that are adding to a toxic culture and kind of slowly fading out. And I think, the consistency of your messaging of your mental wellbeing programmes, definitely needs more than three touch points a year needs more than just mental health awareness week, World mental health day and say like blue Monday, right. So, something specific to the legal sector, because what we're talking about is understanding good work design. And like the Mindful Business Charter I was exposed to quite a few years ago. And I think that's really great. And I think it would be good to see leaders how they demonstrate their own initiatives that they are signatory to.

Ellie: So, Neil, if you can just remind us what the Mindful Business Charter actually requires of signatories.

Neil: Yeah, so I'll do it to the best of my understanding because I don't work inside a law firm every day. The origin of it was fascinating. I believe an exchange of contracts happening between, I don't know, a couple of fee earning executives in a law firm, sometime around Christmas time, right? And there was a deadline that came in to say, like, we need to get this merger contract over the line. And it was Christmas Eve, right? And the other person did get back to that email, but somebody was copied in like a partner and was like, this can't happen. This is not healthy, psychologically safe, business as usual approach. I understand we work in a competitive environment, right? So, from that origin story, the mindfulness business charter was adopted inside the legal sector. And it's basically a framework to say, look, here is an ethical way of doing business that you don't psychologically harm somebody else in another firm in your industry, because they might not have a rigorous mental health and wellbeing programme. Right?

And I love that because do you know what, something like that can exist in every industry, and it can be nuanced for every industry.

Ellie: Yeah, that is really interesting. And just like you say, in any industry, you can work to just avoid those working practices that can have a negative mental health effect on other people. So, Neil, your consultancy focuses on prevention as opposed to sort of intervention at crisis point. We've just spoken about actually working practices, avoiding those, that's a preventative measure. What else would those preventative measures look like in practice?

Neil: So, we as a consultancy, will look at the whole spectrum. So, we will look at preventative. I call that, green to amber, okay, where people just are given tools to look after and mitigate, but then amber to red, the crisis intervention side as well. I genuinely think a strong charity partnership is one of the best tools for that amber to red, for that crisis intervention. But not enough is done around prevention. And that is where I feel like we can make a lot of ground and is an unresourced area. And for me, prevention is simply education and permission because when you're educated and given tools to speak and understand not only your own mental health, but your colleagues around you, that's half the journey to the preventative And there should be equity across the board, I believe, not only for executive leadership team, but it should be for like, you know, frontline operational staff should have the same benefits access. And awareness also takes place through narrative focus sessions. So myself and Jonny going in, we do understand the power that's unlocked by having somebody like Jonny, be raw, be emotional, be vulnerable and give permission. And then, I come in and I'm like, "Well, let me just say, okay, I don't understand what it's like to be suicidal, but I empathise, and I'll have the conversation with you, if you want to have it with me". And we'll try and work out then what the next step is. That's permission. I feel like companies usually jam pack their mental health programmes with like crisis intervention, either tools or partnerships. Really because we don't know how to do the first bit, which is talk empathetically, and give permission to people just to have the conversations. So hopefully that's going to change in the future.

Ellie: I think that happened when you and Jonny came to talk to RPC and a lot of, quite powerful questions were asked by attendees, and I thought that was really brilliant to see in a work setting.

And going back to the individual business and their needs, so there's various factors that they've got to sort of take into account when they're devising their own policies and measures: the diversity of the workforce, their age. Is there sort of a checklist that you go through when you're looking at how to make those measures bespoke to that business?

Neil: Yeah, you're correct Ellie. There's no point trying to prescribe a solution if you don't understand the landscape first. Because you can't design a psychologically healthy work programme for, let's say, like a fee earning lawyer, and expect that programme to work for a construction worker, right?

You've got to really look at the operational role of the people in your team to create that psychologically safe work design The three things I really like to uncover. So, what is the resource and the attitudes and the fears to managing, and where are we going to plug some gaps? Who's involved, top to bottom? What is it people do, so we can design those psychologically safe practices around their work design?

Then once I've got that, we'll be talking about data and diversity and programmes I really like to understand the basics first. And I think if a company does that themselves, I think they're going to understand how to fix a lot of their own issues, but it's really just holding their hand, giving them confidence and making them understand the business needs in front of them, really from a wellbeing lens.

Ellie: So, I came across some <u>research</u> recently from Deloitte that found the average return for employers on mental wellbeing measures is £5.30 per £1 spent. And we know, don't we, that employers are under pressure to measure the success of any workplace initiative that they implement. So, what do those returns on investment and key performance indicators, what do they look like in the context of mental wellbeing measures?

Neil: Great question. And that is on everyone's lips, isn't it? One, why do we measure the performance of our wellbeing programmes? How do we measure it? You know, and what do we do to keep moving the dial?

For me, what we track is usually internal event engagement because we need to know, what you're putting on, is it being attended. That's really key as like a performance driver. And also like the gender split, we try and look at the gender attendance, just to know that we're getting that parity of the workforce attend. Retention and absence is quite obvious, it's hard to make a tangible link back to the fact that our wellbeing programme definitively increased our retention or reduced our absence. But I think if there's correlation there, I think that's good enough indicator if there was nothing else existed before which you were able to correlate against it.

So, all of that stuff is quite objective driven, you know, its numbers, but I like to look very much at subjective feedback as well. So, get quite anecdotal with it, got to get the voices and the opinions coming out. So, what we really manage the objective data with the subjective data, just how people feel, because we can turn that into voices and stories and bring other people on board to enhance that resource that I talked about for a company to manage their wellbeing programmes. So, writing a business case for wellbeing is very difficult, but I guess if you look at it like this, what's the business case now for like, the situation we find ourselves in, where most days off work, we know are attributed to mental health. There isn't a business case for the status quo, right? So, you don't need to write one to say let's look after our people better, because we know that people do leave companies and do lie about time off work due to mental health. So, just changing things is the business case.

Ellie: And finally, Neil, research has obviously found that poor mental health, actually, disproportionately affects underrepresented groups. So how can employers ensure those sorts of intersectional nuances of mental health to make sure they're sufficiently reflected in their wellbeing measures?

Neil: Well, simply put, I think that there is a distinct job description, for want of a better word, that can be written for the employee resource groups that represent those minorities or intersections in the workplace. I think there's sometimes a lack of goal and structure around the resource group, like they exist simply to exist, which is fine, because it gives people a communal ground, but I think it does need to be tied to more objective based outcomes of like, well, what are we doing this year? And who is driving each outcome initiative, you know, whether that's tracking what engagement they've had with the senior leadership team or like their input into the events calendar through the year. And then I guess all of those problems about younger people or marginalised people being predisposed to mental health issues. That's not because of the company they work in. That's because of a deeper, socio economic, or societal reasons which your company can't fix, to be honest. But what you can do is say if we think that there's lack of opportunity in society for young people to, achieve X, you can say, well, what we'll do is we'll build that programme in our own company to give equity to mental health provision for each and every group. Expand that knowledge out to your supply chain, to your peer group, to your competitors, to your clients.

Ellie: Well, Neil, thank you so much for joining us today and providing us with that amazing insight to how employers can actually begin to embed mental wellbeing measures effectively. And as you say, it's just, it's just the right thing to do: the business case is the status quo needs to change. So, thank you so much for your time today.

Neil: Thank you for having me on. I wish you a great week ahead and I hope everybody's found something informative on today's conversation.

Ellie: Absolutely. If you'd like more information on how to implement mental wellbeing measures in your workplace, do take a look at NL Consulting.

And for those of you who are listening who are struggling with your mental health, please don't suffer alone. Call your GP, the <u>Samaritans</u>, <u>Mind</u>, <u>Rethink</u>. There is always someone to listen. Or if you prefer to text, you can use the text service from <u>Shout</u> on 85258.

Well, that brings us to the end of part two in our mental health mini-series. Join us next time for part three when we'll hear about how employers can take proactive steps to ensure people's digital wellbeing and protect them from viewing harmful content.

If you would like to revisit anything we discussed today, you can access transcripts of every episode of the Work Couch podcast by going to our website, http://www.rpc.co.uk/theworkcouch. Or if you have questions for me or any of our speakers or perhaps you have suggestions of topics you'd like us to cover in a future episode please do get in touch, you can email us at theworkcouch@rpc.co.uk. And finally, to make sure you don't miss any of our episodes please hit the like and follow button.

Thank you all for listening and we hope you will join us again next week.



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