



Weathering the STORM

Since the onset of the financial crisis five years ago, mental health problems have become more common in the City. SUSAN MCKENZIE reports on how companies and employees are handling pressure

A recent survey by Mind, the mental health charity, found that not only is work the most stressful factor in people's lives, but one in five take time off due to the pressure. Emma Mamo, policy and campaigns manager at the charity, says that 90 per cent of workers who take time off for stress give their employers a different reason. Overall, attitudes to mental health issues are improving, but the workplace hasn't moved on enough, says Mamo. "The feeling is that most workplaces have pressure, and if you cannot cope, it is a weakness. The legal and banking sectors are the most discriminatory, where there is a lot of stigma still attached to mental health issues."

Dr Michael Sinclair, a consultant psychologist at City Psychology Group, says that since the beginning of the financial crisis he has seen more and more City workers suffering severe symptoms. The author of the

self-help book, *Fear and Loathing in the City: a guide to keeping sane in the Square Mile*, he says this is a sign that people are delaying seeking critical treatment. Sinclair argues attitudes are changing, but most patients are anxious about other people's reactions and worried that they may be first for the chopping block if they admit a problem. "Many people suffering with a mental health issue will do the opposite of what their body needs – work longer to prove there is not a problem. This eventually leads to complete burn-out. To suffer in silence is the worst reaction."

One former City worker agreed that trying to hide the problem merely exacerbates the issues. "I felt huge shame in what was happening. It started with high levels of anxiety on the way to work and developed into an absolute inability to make any decisions, large or small – and that is completely unacceptable in a bank. My confidence vanished and fear became all-pervading. I was embarrassed by the way I felt, I had a good job, a good salary, I couldn't explain to anyone

what was wrong.” Eventually he was diagnosed with depression and says the company was surprisingly understanding and supportive.

On some levels, organisations are making an effort to deal with the increase in stress-induced sick leave. One HR manager at a major investment bank said that most organisations have an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP), a counselling service available to staff should they need support. Yet there is still a general scepticism. “There is a component of this that is cynical. It could relate more to the individual’s own circumstances and less to do with the amount of work they have to do. There is often, perhaps, a different agenda,” noted the HR manager.

Mind’s Emma Mamo agrees: “There is a view that some people are playing the mental health card. We have worked with some of the banks where they have held wellbeing days for their staff. But the staff say their workload is too great to participate so it becomes just a token gesture.”

So what can organisations do to support their employees? According to Mamo it is about being proactive, not about weeding out the weak but looking to boost employee engagement.

Rob Briner, professor of organisational psychology at Bath University argues that there are better ways of addressing the issues. The problem with stress, he says, is that it groups all possible problems together. “When people talk about stress, they may have

anxiety, depression or feel harassed. HR departments are a bit confused about this and do not seem to be prepared to pin down what the specific problems are.” Briner thinks that the role of the line manager is critical. “What you commonly hear is that line managers are not being supported by their own boss and then fail to provide support to their own staff. It is a trickle-down thing.”

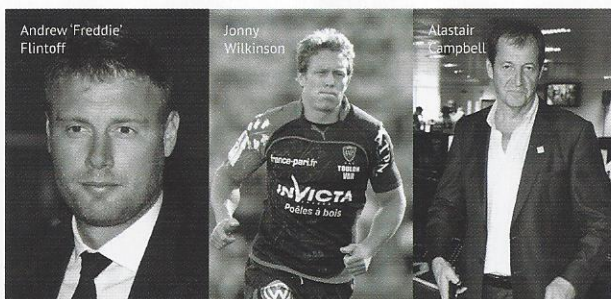
While the stigma attached to mental health issues remains ingrained in society and particularly in the

City, there are some improvements in attitudes as more high-profile people come forward to discuss their own experiences. Alastair Campbell, former spokesman for Tony Blair, published an ebook about his

breakdown 25 years ago and his battle with depression. Sportsmen such as England cricketer Andrew Flintoff and rugby’s Jonny Wilkinson have both discussed their fight with what Flintoff described as a “crippling psychological injury”. The Government is working with Mind on ‘Time to Change’, an anti-stigma campaign

that works with employers to support the mental health of their staff. Such campaigns and publicity will help influence opinions about mental health problems but it has certainly not gone far enough to banish the misunderstandings and prejudices about those enduring anxiety and depression. ☹

✦ mind.org.uk



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