



香港城市精神健康聯盟

**City Mental Health
Alliance** HK



CMHA HK STORYTELLING SERIES Q&A

JUSTIN C, MANAGEMENT CONSULTANT AT OLIVER WYMAN

Justin shares his personal story of experiencing an episode of burnout during his career and his transition back to the workplace. The below story is a personal account of experiencing burnout. You will see from the definition of burnout (below) that there is a range of different symptoms connected to this occupational phenomenon.

CMHA HK Storytelling Series

Creating Mentally Healthy Workplaces through the sharing of personal stories

The aim of the CMHA HK Storytelling Series is to educate, inspire and break down the stigma around mental health in the workplace.

Welcome, Justin. Thank you for sharing your personal experience with the CMHA HK community. Can you tell us a bit about your career to date?

I have been working with the same company, Oliver Wyman as a management consultant since I graduated. Over the past ten years, I've taken a few sabbaticals as a way to find work life sustainability.

What were the signs of burnout and how did you manage this experience?

I didn't make the connection back then that my sabbaticals were a way to manage my mental health. Looking back, I knew I was getting restless at work and found it increasingly hard to focus. I also had trouble sleeping for a sustained period. I brushed this off at the time, but eventually it became clear that I found it more and more challenging to manage my frustrations at work in a constructive way. I sustained this kind of high-functioning depression for quite some time. I felt as if I had not much to look forward to beyond getting things done.

At the beginning of 2020, I was due to head back to Hong Kong after a long vacation just as the Covid-19 outbreak began. Back then, I struggled to get out of bed for a long stretch of time. I eventually went to see a psychiatrist who prescribed me with some medication for a major episode of anxiety and depression and I also started talk therapy.

How did your employer support you during this burnout period?

My manager, Peter, noticed that something was off with me. We had a review session where he brought up the topic so he was already aware that I was experiencing some challenges. When I finally needed to take a leave of absence, the company was fully supportive and gave me the space and time off to recover. I was off work for about three months when I was presented with the chance to set-up CMHA Singapore [Oliver Wyman has a non-profit fellowship programme, where they support consultants to pursue non-profit work for meaningful initiatives]. The mission of the organisation really resonated with me and my company facilitated the whole process. This

was a great way for me to ease back into work.

How did you communicate with your team during this period?

Over time, I was able to reconnect with team members to share my personal experience. I hope that this is a learning point for myself and also for my colleagues. If you perceive these symptoms in other colleagues, then it might be worth having a conversation with them to see what support can be offered.

How did your colleagues, friends and family react and what impact did this have on your recovery?

They were all very understanding and I am really grateful for their support. If my employer or family had reacted differently, I would have likely attempted to hide my issues and kept going until it was unmanageable. Essentially, it would have taken me longer to confront the problem and require more effort on my side to ease back into intensive work. I was very lucky to have had such a great support network.

Is there anything that could have been done differently in the process?

If I had the level of knowledge as I do today, I would probably not have taken so long to speak up and seek help.

What advice would you give to people reading your story and going through a similar experience?

For employers, have an open mind and be present to listen. For the individual going through the process - try to maintain optimism and know that people can recover, and that this experience is an opportunity to make meaningful adjustments and lead a more mentally healthy life going forward. I went through a dark period, which I thought I was never going to come out of, but I recovered earlier and better than I could ever have expected.

How are you looking after your mental health these days?

I've developed some new habits, such as

having a regular gym routine. I also came up with a playbook of triggers for bad reactions and how to cope with these - such as stepping away for some time, calling a friend or working out. Another tool that I use is to keep an emotional diary with a mood tracker app. It really helps me to spot trends, identify triggers and find ways to manage them.

What resources did you find particularly helpful when you were experiencing burnout?

Books, resources and websites are all great pre-emptive measures but while I was recovering, I often found other sources of support more helpful. For example, getting myself to interact with others (especially people with lived experiences) and hearing their stories was something that really helped.

Why are you sharing story now and what does it mean for you to share it?

It helps me to appreciate what I have in my life to have been through this. I was very fortunate in that every step of the way I had a supportive boss, colleagues, friends and family. I also had a great opportunity to work with CMHA, which brought me so much uplifting energy. The process has made me realise that there are many corners of the world where more education is needed around mental health, especially in professional services companies. Whatever I can do to help with that cause is great. I also want to let people who are going through this to know that they are not alone.

PETER R, JUSTIN'S MANAGER AND PARTNER AT OLIVER WYMAN, SHARES HIS LESSONS LEARNT AND PERSPECTIVES IN SUPPORTING JUSTIN THROUGH THE PROCESS.

From a manager's point of view, what were the first signs that you noticed in Justin who was going through mental health challenges?

Justin has always been a very enthusiastic and positive contributor to the office. I first noticed that something was off when he was more checked-out and distant from the overall work environment. They were subtle changes in how he was behaving. We had a few conversations where we discussed mental health and also how he was feeling about his work.

We supported him in taking a leave of absence to recover and encouraged him to get all the support that he needed to get back to a state where he can make more substantive decisions about his career.

What support resources did Oliver Wyman provide during this time?

Our medical insurance has varying degrees of mental health coverage and we also have an EAP (Employee Assistance Programme). We made sure to have regular check-ins

with Justin and involved him in general office updates so that he was well informed and felt part of the community.

We also have a non-profit fellowship programme at Oliver Wyman, where we support consultants to pursue non-profit work for meaningful initiatives. The opportunity to help set up CMHA Singapore came up and I thought Justin would be a natural candidate to lead it. This was also a great way to transition Justin back to being an employee after a leave of absence.

What tips would you offer to employees who would want to share with managers their mental health concerns?

From experience, it is more challenging when discussions are left too late and where the employee is only comfortable with sharing with some managers but not others. I would suggest to catch on to the issue sooner and have an open discussion early on in the process so that the appropriate support can be provided as early as possible.

According to the World Health Organization **Burn-out** is a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.

It is characterized by three dimensions:

- feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion;
- increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and
- reduced professional efficacy.

Mind HK also has a useful link about [stress](#).

We would like to thank our storytelling participants for sharing their personal stories with the CMHA HK community. We hope that sharing from a workplace mental health angle will help to break down the stigma that exists around mental health and wellbeing in the workplace.



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**City Mental Health
Alliance** HK

The City Mental Health Alliance Hong Kong is a collaborative venture founded by city businesses. Championed by senior leaders, the Alliance is business led and expert guided and aims to create a culture of good mental health for workers in the city of Hong Kong, share best practice and increase mental health understanding.

CONTACT

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