



香港城市精神健康聯盟

City Mental Health  
Alliance HK

## CMHA HK STORYTELLING SERIES Q&A



BRIAN H, FORMER COO

In January 2020, after a period of long-term work and personal life stress, Brian was diagnosed with depression, anxiety, insomnia, anorexia, gastritis and burnout. His experience inspired a new purpose and business.

### 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 Brian, firstly thank you for sharing your personal experience with the CMHA HK community. Prior to your diagnosis in January 2020, what was life like?**

In late 2018, my wife had a life-threatening asthma attack that landed her in hospital for nine days, and she has been in and out of hospital ever since - latest count over 50 nights. We didn't have a helper at the time so I was running up and down to the hospital twice a day, trying to stay on top of all the housework, and responsible for managing nearly 1,000 people across nine offices in the region through a period of enormous change. Then we had typhoon Mangkhut which destroyed all our watersports equipment, including my canoe. So my main stress reliever became a huge source of stress and it was months before we were able to repair everything, get new boats and resume training. At around the same time, we launched a global restructuring project that was set to last at least three years with job losses, new reporting lines, new services and

service centres, new technology, etc. There was no clarity on how many jobs would go or when, nor on the future organization structure or people's roles. People looked to me as COO for answers I didn't have; that was hugely stressful. In 2019, we decided to buy a flat in Hong Kong which used up a significant chunk of our life savings. That plus the process of refurbishing it was also very stressful. On top of all this, we had the social unrest in Hong Kong and Covid, both of which were potentially life threatening for my wife given her asthma. In October 2019 my boss who I had been working with for over 8 years got promoted to a new role and the new regional boss had a very different management style. By December 2019, I was on my knees with chronic insomnia and upset tummy, which was when I went to my GP and got my diagnosis. I was irritable, unable to focus, feeling overwhelmed by the relentless flood of emails and meetings, unengaged with my work, low energy, withdrawing from social contact, having trouble with some relationships: all very common symptoms of burnout.

## What changed from January 2020 onwards for you?

My psychiatrist prescribed a course of an antidepressant to help me sleep, which worked to an extent. I was also given medication to calm the inflammation in my tummy which took months to settle down. My psychologist led me through a cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) programme over several months to help me correct some unhelpful thought patterns and address some of the emotions I was feeling. While medications and talk therapy offered some reprieve, I ultimately had to reevaluate my life situation and make meaningful changes to help support my long-term recovery. What I learned is that it takes a rounded approach, including professional help as well as some self-directed practices and lifestyle adjustments.

## You seem to be thriving now. How did you achieve that?

Recovery from mental health issues always takes time and hard work, but recovery is achievable in most cases. On top of the medical support, I used yoga, meditation / mindfulness, journaling, gratitude, acts of kindness, outdoors exercise and reconnecting with trusted friends to talk about my experience to get myself back to a more

mentally healthy place. I found meditations focused on acceptance, forgiveness and self-love to be particularly helpful and learned the practice from Neelam Harjani's 'Stress to Success' online program from Inspire-Yoga. My acts of kindness include giving back to the community through mental health support groups that we facilitate and offering resilience building workshops to NGOs we support. I always find these activities very rewarding and positive for my mental health.

I also reconnected to my purpose which has always been about making the workplace experience better, kinder and more human. It did not take me long to figure out that my burnout experience was not at all unique and that most organisations struggle to support their people effectively when it comes to mental health. That's what inspired my business, Whole Business Wellness, to bring education and awareness, normalization of the conversation, skills in how to talk to colleagues you are concerned about, insights into root causes based on data, and creating an environment in which people can thrive and feel included based on psychological safety and a more mindful way of communicating with each other.

## What did you learn from this experience?

My previous employer had good tone from the top, a very good EAP helpline, 'lunch and learns' on depression and anxiety, yoga, meditation and an insurance policy that covered mental health. I attended the lunch and learns and casually noted that I had all the symptoms described, as did the person I was sitting next to. So we just shrugged, assumed that must be normal or couldn't be that serious, and went about our days without thinking any more about it. With hindsight, I have learned the importance of being aware of and acting on signs of burnout before the situation gets out of hand. I should probably have gone to see my GP at that point or called the helpline. Even small adjustments like meditation or breathing techniques, or journaling can be very helpful. The key is to take action to prevent yourself sliding into a much worse condition.

## **Do you have any insight into how being a leader may have impacted your experience?**

Leadership can be very lonely, and I didn't feel I could share my struggles with many people. I tried to hide it from everyone, including my close family, which in itself was exhausting. The very few people I did say something to didn't seem to know how to help so I felt totally unsupported. I was behaving way out of character and probably was not much fun to be around at the time, which no doubt

made it more difficult for them to engage with me. I have subsequently learned that my experience and the way it affected my behaviour is actually very common and well documented; it is just not widely understood or talked about. There is definitely still a lot of stigma, ignorance and prejudice about mental health issues and most people prefer to avoid potentially difficult or awkward conversations. Despite all the talk about psychological safety, very few organizations actually achieve it.

## **How about your team?**

I felt a huge weight of responsibility for my team who were all under immense pressure and living in that world of ambiguity, threat of losing their jobs and massive change on so many dimensions. But business conditions were tough due to the unrest, the trade war and Covid so the demands only ever increased. I did my best to support the team and to manage the workload to make it as sustainable as possible, but projects and initiatives just kept coming through. I did my best to hide my anxiety and frustration from the team but could not manage that consistently. For sure they could see I was struggling and that must have added to their own anxiety. That ripple effect through the organization when a boss is suffering is also well documented and it's been shown to affect productivity at all levels.

## **On reflection, is there anything different your employer and/or team could have done to support you both at the time of diagnosis and in your recovery journey?**

People with mental health issues just want to be listened to and heard. We don't necessarily

expect others to solve all of our problems and our problems may not always be work related. But non-judgmental, compassionate, respectful and genuinely caring listening makes a big difference.

## **Do you see a difference between genders in terms of how mental health is perceived, experienced and expressed, particularly in the workplace?**

Minority groups are at higher risk of experiencing mental health issues. The experience of exclusion or not being valued or not being valued equally is very painful and can contribute to depression and anxiety. On average, the typical man is probably less well equipped to express himself when it comes to emotions and mental health and may not have the sort of supportive relationships that women tend to more naturally develop. Men tend to be at higher risk of experiencing substance use and dying by suicide while more women report feeling depressed or anxious. But the differences in mental health presentations between men and women are complex and multifactorial.

## What do you believe leaders should be doing more of in this space?

What I see is organisations providing various mental health support resources, but they are all aimed at treating the symptoms and put the responsibility on the individual to 'fix' themselves. I don't see many leaders acknowledging that there are root causes based in the way the business operates or its culture and the behaviour of the leaders and managers that is contributing to the stress that lies behind many of the mental health issues we see.

Leaders generally don't have much data on the mental health of their people as it is not usually measured or reported. This means they can't quantify the impact it is having on the business, which is very material, probably 20-30% of annual profits; and they can't manage mental health effectively without measurement. Empathy and vulnerability always come up as essential to creating the psychological safety people need to underpin their mental health and are sorely lacking or inadequate in most leaders and managers - 75% of people say their direct manager is the most stressful aspect of their job. Training managers to understand mental health issues better and to talk to their team members in a supportive non-judgmental way is important, as well as making it part of managers' KPIs to look after the mental health of their team as a key part of ensuring overall performance objectives are achieved. It's a complicated challenge and needs significant amounts of management time and attention.

## What advice can you offer to C-suite leaders who may be going through mental health experiences?

Prioritise your own wellbeing - life is too short and other things are more important in the long term. If in doubt, seek professional advice.

Brian is a panelist at the CMHA HK / AmCham Men's Mental Health Panel to mark Men's Health Week (14-20 June 2021). For more info, click [here](#).

Further information: <https://www.mind.org.hk/mental-health-a-to-z/>

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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