

A blog by Derbyshire Police Federation's wellbeing lead – Sergeant Bryan

As 2020 ends, 2020+1 shall begin. What a year it has been. When I look back at the way it has panned out on a personal and professional level, the changes I have gone through have been drastic and it's time to share them.

Some of you may remember the previous article that I penned for the Derbyshire Police Federation magazine. I talked openly about bad management which resulted in me losing all hope and realising I was very ill. I made some conclusions in there that, in hindsight, were wrong. That said, at the time I believed that they were right which reinforces to me that we should never stop learning, changing and growing as individuals.

The biggest things I got wrong in that article was that I thought I was doing well. In fact, I was doing terribly. I confused doing well with being drunk and feeling good. By the end of 2019 I was full of remorse for once again drinking myself stupid and feeling incredibly ill. This had become normal to me. This was the latest form of mental health issue I faced. I was wrong.

I didn't have the greatest start to the year. Owing to a build-up of my own mental ill-health, I ended up with nowhere to turn but my saviour Dr Gomez. I sent my line manager, Toby, a really lengthy email explaining why I had reached rock bottom.

The most saddening line of that email is the way I described myself: *'I'm not well. I've lost weight, not sleeping, not eating, not training, not thinking.... I'm not anything. I'm miserable and broken and its obvious.'*

This was very much true but had been true for some significant time. What I had been doing is often referred to as self-medicating. It could also be referred to as drinking yourself stupid to feel alive, or alcohol abuse. It had become normal for me to 'self-medicate' most evenings from 2017 onwards. It became apparent this was almost every night and, over the years, I had gone from someone who didn't really like drinking to someone who really, really liked it.

If, like I was, you are abusing alcohol to cope with the stresses and sadness associated with policing please seek help before it gets too much.

I have an analogy to explain my views on mental health, which came together after the day the Whaley Bridge dam collapsed. I started to think that little Adam joined the police at 21, had never really been involved in violence, had never seen a dead person, couldn't remember seeing a car crash... you get the idea.

Over the years, little Adam was wrapped in experience and a became brave, but what he found fun and exhilarating was unknowingly having an effect. He began to crack inside. The little cracks inside Little Adam were OK but did start to creep through the layers of experience wrapped around him until Little Adam's layers of protection were damaged, much like the spillway; all it took was one more thing and kaboom. A dose of bad management and all the layers exploded and Little Adam, now very much broken, was exposed and vulnerable.

I would never be the same again. I still believe it could have been avoided with much earlier intervention, organisational support and some honesty from both sides. Now the damage is done and I am told it can't be undone. So, to wrap up on me, Dr Gomez was my saviour. I thought I was OK. I wasn't so I changed things for the better. I'm a year further on now and feeling stable. I urge you to spend a few minutes really intrusively reflecting on your own health and asking yourself if you are looking after you.

People talk about light bulb moments in life. Being mentally ill is one of those. It's horrendous and we all suffer to varying degrees. Until it hits you hard, you have no idea just how bad it is. I look back on the younger version of me in disgust at my attitude to certain things, again... learning.

Life will throw things at us. Women will experience the menopause, the effects of which I will never truly understand. Individuals, primarily in ethnic minority groups, will experience racism and unconscious bias, again I will never truly understand the feelings experienced when subjected to that.

So, why am I saying this? This year I have learnt that communication and kindness are key to effective wellbeing. I believe that many anxieties can be addressed earlier by effective, honest communication between staff and their managers. This will prevent fairly minor situations snowballing out of control, it will improve relationships and it will prevent individuals suffering. When absence statistics for the organisation indicate that over 50 per cent of absence is mental health related then that tells me things need to change.

As the wellbeing lead for Derbyshire Police Federation, I involve myself on plenty of boards around the Force and EMSOU. It's clear to me that the executive level message is hitting the nail on the head. Our people are very important to them so, with that in mind, why is our absence rate so disproportionately high for mental health related absence? What is going wrong? The only thing I can think is that where the executive message meets the need to get the incredibly challenging day job done, the wellbeing of those individuals will always come second.

Some areas of policing are disproportionately busy, for example LPU officers' workloads in some areas have hit 30/40 or even 50 open cases which are not only very complicated but also higher risk than ever before. There is no wonder those individuals are falling. Organisational reflection is required with those people involved, a bottom up approach rather than top down.

Let's find out exactly why people felt like they did, listen to their individual feedback and learn the lessons that each individual has to pass on. It will be painful, but in time it will save us money, improve our service and look after our people; look after you.

We now have a new Chief in Rachel Swann. She is forming a new executive team with the new Deputy Chief Constable coming from Notts. My challenge to them is to put 'our people' as our Number 1 Force priority. Let's invest in our most important asset and put proactive measures in place to look after our people.

We are still very reactive and throw stuff at people who, like me, are already broken but not until they are off sick. Let's address stress management and make it routine

for officers to receive regular resilience training, from the moment they join the organisation. Let's provide intrusive and routine assessments and counselling for staff and let's consider employing our own team rather than outsourcing care. Let's prevent PTSD. Ultimately, let's prevent the risk of suicide of one of our friends.

If this year has taught me anything it is that we are all in this together, we stayed apart but came together. Covid has been incredibly challenging for us all; an overnight change from freedoms to feeling like prisoners in our own homes. Local amenities shut and loved ones lost by many.

I suppose the privilege of policing is that we will not lose our income like so many others have as well. Unbeknownst to me, I have helped many people cope over the lockdown. I run a totally unrelated guitar forum and I was really humbled to start receiving emails from members saying how my positivity had helped them from the brink. In turn, I could explain to them how it went both ways. This enabled me to learn that kindness is the forgotten virtue in life. It costs nothing yet is so easily overlooked.

Kindness is a positive feeling which encourages both individuals to achieve better wellbeing. Kindness simply needs to be tied into police management. Organisational change happens, but there is no excuse for treating others negatively during it. Engage people in that change, be kind to those who may feel negatively affected and the outcome is much more likely to be favourable to all. Treat people badly, ignore them and be dishonest then the likelihood is they will feel devalued, become unwell and end up as one of those 50 per cent statistics I spoke of earlier.

I said it last time, and I still say it now – more needs to be done.