

It's time to have a different conversation about mental health

By Kerry-Lyn Stanton-Downes

One of the toughest parts of my job as a psychotherapist working in organisations is witnessing first-hand the mental health crisis devastating lives across the globe: the stress, burnout, anxiety, depression and disconnection of individuals, and the badly dysfunctional teams that result.

For organisations in the UK this equates to more than £50 billion lost annually as a result of mental health absences, huge staff turnover increases, and spiralling employee health insurance costs.

The impact of Covid-19 hasn't helped any of this, but it's not the cause. In fact, Covid only exacerbated a more insidious pandemic that has been brewing for decades.

This is a pandemic of the mind and soul, one caused by deep-rooted failures in how we relate as individuals and groups – and it's this pandemic we really need to address if we're going to make individuals and teams happier, healthier and more productive.



Mental health awareness

The amount of effort we're putting into our employees' mental health is phenomenal. Counselling and therapy, reduced workload and sabbaticals, hybrid working, mindfulness courses, gym-membership, training management: the list is endless. You yourself are likely to be devoting significant time and resources to improving the mental health of your team, and the impulse to help is both a humane response and good business sense – as chairman and CEO of Prudential Charles Lowrey says, 'The premium we are all now putting on mental health is so important.'

But I want to suggest there is a deeper and more systemic problem in play, and until we address that problem all our work will be merely treating symptoms while the underlying cancer is left to metastasize unchecked.

“The underlying disease: a catastrophic, culture-wide failure in how we relate to one another”

Relational Poverty in a hyperconnected world

That underlying disease? A catastrophic, culture-wide failure in how we relate to one another. Or to put it another way, we are living through a surge in what I call ‘relational poverty’.

This may seem counterintuitive given that we exist in a world that seems more hyperconnected than ever: a world where we are no longer bound by geography, where we work in multiple teams in multiple locations across multiple time-zones without having to leave our homes, where hierarchies have given way to ‘agile’ organisations that increasingly empower individuals within teams. Aren’t we more connected than ever?

“A closer look reveals a more complex picture, and a more disturbing one”

On the surface perhaps. But a closer look reveals a more complex picture, and a more disturbing one. In his recent book *Lost Connections: Uncovering the Real Causes of Depression – and the Unexpected Solutions*, Johann Hari argues passionately that the real root cause of the western world’s mental health disaster is not the inner workings of isolated brains, but instead those brains being so isolated in the first place.

We are increasingly sequestered: mediated versions of ourselves relating through screens with mediated versions of others, cut off from social and cultural structures that have nourished us for untold millennia, our brains overstimulated by multinational conglomerates hungry for our attention while we neglect our bodies, souls and environments.

The biological need for connection

It’s certainly true that, by enabling remote collaboration, technology brings huge benefits for business. But the new virtual dispensation has at the same time disaggregated the workforce and left individuals increasingly isolated.

As neuroscientist Karl Deisseroth argues, interactions that occur online are profoundly impoverished shadows of those we experience in the physical presence of others. ‘Social interaction is one of the hardest things to do in biology,’ he says. ‘Think of all the information coming in, not just the language and body language but the model you form of the other person’s wants and needs, which you then have to adapt as the conversation progresses – it is a huge information processing task. Zoom makes that much harder.’

Which is to say that, in a very real sense, when we meet online, we’re not truly meeting – and meeting one another is a fundamental human need. So, the very mechanisms that facilitate increased virtual connections are also alienating us from some of the most fundamental biological and social connections on which our wellbeing relies.

“The path to reducing healthcare costs goes through the brain”

Treating the cause not the symptoms

This is why our well-intended efforts to improve our teams’ mental health are proving ultimately to be ineffective.

As a recent article in McKinsey Quarterly puts it: *Simply put, the path to reducing healthcare costs goes through the brain.*’

But what if all our efforts to find that essential path are based on a fundamentally outdated, flawed understanding of what the brain really is – and of who we really are as humans?

I’m not the only one to think this way, with cognitive scientists and psychotherapists increasingly urging us to understand the brain anew: not in isolation from the world around it, but instead as what psychotherapist Thomas Fuchs calls a ‘relational organ’, one that is ‘embedded in the meaningful interactions of a living being with its environment’ and that ‘mediates and enables these interactive processes, but it is in turn also continuously formed and restructured by them.’ The human mind, he says, ‘is an activity of the living being which integrates at any moment the ongoing relations between brain, body and environment.’

He’s absolutely right. Over the course of my career, I’ve come to see that human beings are indeed not individual beings who relate to one another from a place of isolation. Rather, we come into existence in the social and emotional space where we meet each other, and for our entire lives we continue to shape that space and in turn to be shaped by it.

“our brains are in fact physically shaped by our experiences and interactions”

It’s a model supported by science’s developing understanding of neuroplasticity, of how our brains are in fact physically shaped by our experiences and interactions, and when we understand that this is the case we can see that, as Fuchs puts it, ‘empathy and social understanding are the precondition for any science of mind and brain.’

The point: it is essential – and urgent – that we pay more and better attention to the way that we relate to each other.

“I want to invite you to consider the truly transformational potential of prioritising the development of our relational capacity”

A New Approach

It might seem I'm making a huge ask here, demanding that you jettison everything you thought you knew about mental health. I'd understand if, confronted with the kind of paradigm-shift I'm talking about, you felt defeated, overwhelmed, or even a bit lost.

But I'm reassured and invigorated! The neuroplasticity of our brains may make them vulnerable, but also represents a huge advantage and opportunity. Because with careful thought and deliberation we can change our minds – literally – and with them our teams and organisations.

To do that we need to see that the real underlying sickness afflicting us isn't stress, anxiety, depression, declining productivity, or even soaring suicide-rates. Because all of those things are outputs, even good mental health itself, and so to focus on them is to direct our efforts at results when we need to address the profound relational poverty that is the cause. The real input that's needed is an entirely fresh paradigm where relational capacity is front and centre at all times: a radically new model of how we conceive of ourselves and exist and work with one another.

I want to reassure you this is not about losing sight of profits or sacrificing competitiveness - far from it! In fact, a later article in this series will explain in depth how increased relational capacity will be an engine of business agility, success and growth.

By embracing a new, holistic relational paradigm, one that prioritises the quality and frequency of our relating, we can fundamentally re-calibrate the way we relate. We will be empowered to:

- dramatically improve individual, team, and organisational resilience and agility
- improve our ability to navigate uncertainty and unpredictability
- have more honest and robust conversations
- make decisions more efficiently while embracing diverse perspectives
- collaborate more effectively and help establish stronger team ownership
- increase our awareness of needs and vulnerabilities at an individual, team, organisational and product level

In this series of articles, I want to invite you to consider the truly transformational potential of prioritising the development of our relational capacity, and to assess the possibility for yourself.

My hope is you will find, as I do, that it represents a powerful alternative to our failing current approaches to mental health and wellbeing: the architecture of a new way of working and thriving together, one that for businesses represents the only road out of the catastrophically wasteful cycle in which we are currently trapped.

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