**Time to Talk Day: Do I have to? – Mental Health First Aider blog by Maria Stopyra**

I first received a mental health diagnosis aged 19 while at University, though looking back I had been experiencing symptoms of depression for a long time before that. Either way, I’ve spent most of my adult life experiencing symptoms of depression or anxiety in one form or another. Throughout that time, I’ve always struggled with campaigns encouraging people to talk about their mental health and to be open about it. I don’t disagree with these campaigns, it’s not just important to open up about how we feel, it’s absolutely vital. But they always come with a nagging sense of guilt for me, because I don’t really want to.

For time to talk day, I thought I’d reflect on a few of the reasons why. I’ve also included some thoughts on what has helped me, but like anything else in the area of mental health, what works for me might not work for you, and I’ve far from figured everything out!

**Self-Stigma**

Somehow, in my head, it’s completely fine if other people talk about mental health but not really ok for me to do.

When it’s other people, I know that everyone carries different things, everyone reacts to them in different ways, and nobody can judge someone else for struggling with what they struggle with. But for me? No that would be attention seeking. For me, it’s showing I’m weak and that I can’t cope with normal everyday things that other people have no problem with. My thoughts are crazy, and my feelings are ridiculous.

Self-stigma is far more destructive than any stigma I’ve encountered from other people, because there’s no escape from the nagging thought in the back of my own mind that I should just ‘get it together’ or ‘stop being so sensitive’.

What helps: Gently challenging myself helps when I’m experiencing this. I can remind myself of how inconsistent this way of thinking is, and of the supportive people in my life who don’t think this about me.

**Protecting people**

A lot of the time, I just don’t want my colleagues, friends or family to have to deal with this. I hate worrying people. I don’t want anyone to be upset. I don’t want to create problems or inconvenience people. I often feel an obligation to explain and help people understand, so I’ll avoid talking about things until I can do so logically (because waiting for your feelings to be logical makes lots of sense). When I do talk about it, I tend to minimise and pretend it’s ‘not that bad’.

This also comes with an extra layer of guilt because I know people who care would want to know. Plus, this tendency can actually make things harder for other people, because they don’t know how to help.

What helps: It’s important to be considerate and respect people’s boundaries, but you don’t have a responsibility to manage other people’s feelings, and I find it helpful to remind myself of that. The point of talking about mental health is for you to get the support you need, and keeping this in mind can really help you plan who to talk to, and what you tell them. That might just be someone to listen to you while you talk, but it’s really helpful to let the person you confide in know that. In a work setting a [Wellness Action Plan](https://www.mind.org.uk/workplace/mental-health-at-work/taking-care-of-your-staff/employer-resources/wellness-action-plan-download/) can be a useful template for starting a conversation about the support you need.

**I’m fine though**

Long term stress has a way of becoming part of the background until you don’t even notice it’s there anymore. I suspect a lot of people can relate to this right now. Constant anxiety is normal to me, so it’s not something I often consider mentioning.

I’m fine.

I’m fine because I’m still functioning.

I’m fine because I have the energy to hide how not fine I am.

It’s also pretty difficult to go through every day feeling anxious and on edge all the time, and sometimes my brain just decides not to feel things for a while. Stress and anxiety can still be taking a toll physically and mentally, but I feel ‘fine’. This is how I’ve been able to get by day to day with anxiety for so long, but it also means I don’t always even know how I feel. I’m getting better at identifying the physical and behavioural indicators that I’m more stressed than I think I am by asking myself questions:

* Did I eat today?
* How did I sleep?
* Is my heart rate up?
* Does my jaw hurt? (I often tense my jaw unconsciously when I’m anxious so this is a helpful check in for me!)
* Am I more impatient than usual? Or the opposite; being indecisive or procrastinating?

What helps: You can’t talk about how you’re feeling if you don’t know how you’re feeling. It’s worth taking time to notice the physical and behavioural indicators you have, because if you’re anything like me you might notice those long before the actual emotions leak through.

Also, I should mention Mindfulness, because it really is great for this kind of checking in. Mindfulness isn’t for me personally; I find techniques that combine movement with meditation (such as yoga) work much better for me. But anything with deep breathing and focusing in on how you feel physically is going to be useful here, so I encourage you to find a method of doing this that you like. Even [singing](https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200518-why-singing-can-make-you-feel-better-in-lockdown), with its focus on breath control, can help reconnect you with your body and how you feel.

**Final thoughts**

I could say so much more here, this barely scratches the surface of the things that block me from talking about mental health. But in summary my ‘top tips’ are:

* Challenge self-stigma, and remind yourself how you would treat someone else who feels this way.
* Keep the support you need front and centre in a conversation about mental health.
* Remember to check in, and ask yourself ‘am I ok?’.

**Useful resources**

Combatting self-stigma:

* [Self-Stigma Resource Card](https://www.wgtn.ac.nz/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/1337432/SG4-Self-Stigma.pdf)
* [Time to Change](https://www.time-to-change.org.uk/)

Talking about Mental Health:

* [Talking Mental Health Guide](https://www.headstogether.org.uk/talking-mental-health-guide/) (Heads Together)
* [Talking to friends and family](https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/guides-to-support-and-services/seeking-help-for-a-mental-health-problem/talking-to-friends-family/) (Mind Charity)
* [Wellness Action Plan](https://www.mind.org.uk/workplace/mental-health-at-work/taking-care-of-your-staff/employer-resources/wellness-action-plan-download/)
* [St Mary’s Mental Health First Aiders](https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/hr/health-and-wellbeing/mental-health-first-aiders.aspx)
* [Employee Assistance Programme](https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/hr/employee-assistance-programme/eap.aspx)

Checking in:

* [Self-Check in tools](https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/hr/health-and-wellbeing/wellbeing-resources.aspx)
* [Mood Meter](https://moodmeterapp.com/)
* [Headspace](https://www.headspace.com/) (mindfulness meditation app)
* [Yoga for Mental Health](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLui6Eyny-UzwDdFPVSeYN3aTG_B1qtHtz) (Yoga with Adriene playlist of yoga tailored for managing depression, anxiety and stress)