

Transcript Talking Therapies Episode 4: Wellness in the Workplace

Wellness in the workplace

Suzy: Hello, and welcome to Talking Therapies – a podcast made together with Psychologies magazine, and the UK Council for Psychotherapy, or UKCP for short. I’m Suzy Walker, and I’m the Editor-In-Chief at Psychologies. Each month on Talking Therapies we will be talking to a UKCP therapist about a range of topics. In this episode we will be discussing wellness in the workplace, if you’re a workaholic or you are finding that work is getting you down, then this is the podcast for you.

Music

Preview clip: You might want to think about having some sort of ritual so when you get home is it about having a bath changing your clothes is it having a cup of tea maybe meditating could be different for anybody but there is a real power about having some sort of ritual that marks the transition between work and home and helps to create emotional space.

Suzy: That was psychotherapist Jared Green. Jared works across a range of issues and often supports clients who have experienced workplace issues. Previously, Jared worked internationally for e-commerce and retail companies. He now offers ‘Toxic workplace’ training to help other therapists support clients through workplace toxicity.

Shortly, Jared will be talking to Martin Pollecoff, the Chair of UKCP about how we can all improve our own work-life balance. But first here’s some comments about workplace wellness from people we spoke to on the street:

Street comments

Comment 1: Yes I have been a workaholic before and it didn’t take much to get out of it just a little bit of effort and someone actually, probably needs to tell you to your face that your work can go on without you.

Comment 2: I feel like I am a complete opposite to a workaholic, I will take on the least work as possible just to ensure that I am not tired.

Comment 3: The culture is expected that you work long hours and there's no real consideration for how you manage those hours and yourself.

Comment 4: I don't feel like I have enough time to relax and wind down, but when I do I normally travel if I can, but more day to day is just you know switching the brain off, catching up on TV, listening to a podcast and just hanging out with friends and family. Mental health and wellness needs to be apart of the company from day one and just as much as you want to make sure your employees are proactive, you want to make sure that they are happy and that they feel right in themselves.

Music

Suzy: According to the Centre for Mental Health, mental health problems at work cost the UK economy £34.9 billion in 2016, whilst the Mental Health Foundation says, improving workplace wellness increases productivity to as much as 12%. So, let's find out more about workplace wellness...

Music

Martin: How can we aspire to achieve without feeling that we are not quite up to it / faking it.

Jared: first ask a question to the individual. Who is not quite up to it? Whose version of not quite up to it? We need to take a step back when looking at how we make decisions. Humans are very good at being efficient with energy. Decisions we make on a daily basis are based on previous decisions, on habits, maybe on assumptions we have made. Often the idea of not being quite up to it is a reckoning that happens automatically without as much objectivity as we think.

Martin: So we are given a task and think oh my god I can't do that.

Jared: That may be an automatic thought potentially. But the feeling will be there. And that is key. That's often what drives those thoughts. I think this is especially true at work. If you look at the big picture of work it is about career. A career path of where you have come from and where you are going to. In therapy, we may find that under the surface the decisions that are being made about career are somewhat automatic or maybe less rational than we might think. They may have been influenced by mum and dad, they may have

been driven by peers and wanting to keep up with peers. They might have been driven by wanting to avoid risk and aspire towards wealth for example. As you can see these are decisions that may have been made not in the truest interest of who I really am. But in some sort of conforming with culture, society and with others.

Martin: In your work you look at the underlying issues here

Jared: Exactly, trying to unpack it. What is it about my background that impact my ability to tolerate the workplace or perhaps impact the way I got here and whether I am in the right place in my life. On a more day to day level, the 'I'm not good enough' feeling because you have a general sense of being not good enough. Rather than anything to do with a particular path.

In therapy, we might ask the question 'is this real?' or 'is this something you are creating?'

Martin: You write about toxic what do you mean by that?

Jared: Background, I have done some writing and my clinical practice involves lots of encounters with toxicity in the workplace. Before becoming a therapist I've worked in e-commerce, retail, corporate organisations and agencies. I have had lots of exposure to different places and have seen a bit of toxicity first hand along the way.

There is also a formal definition of toxicity which comes from the workplace.

A psychological contract is the interpersonal understanding that is created between the employer and the employee as they come into the workplace. Some of that is based on the physical contract but it is mostly and more powerfully based on the conversations you have in your first interview or with your first line manager. They all set up an unwritten contract which is totally subjective. It is based on interpersonal communication and so we can think of a toxic workplace as a workplace which in some way disrupts that psychological contract.

Martin: What are the signs that your workplace might be toxic?

Jared: In my experience, this falls into two categories. There are workplaces which have structural toxicity. Maybe the culture is driven by people who are about commercial success and little regard for interpersonal issues or employee well-being. This can be quite common in commercial organisations. There can be toxic practices where there are deliberate attempts that create pockets of toxicity in these organisations.

A local level toxicity is when the overall organisation might be balanced and there may be a focus on well-being. But there are individual managers and employees through their different personalities or actions somehow create smaller pockets of toxicity.

There are the levels you may see. The organisational structure - toxicity is quite often in our culture people sign up to work at them and are happy to do so because they get a work package including bonuses. They are willing to sacrifice this. I am not criticising that I do not have an opinion on this, it is a personal decision, But where I am interested is where a workplace develops the structural toxicity but it was never explained to the employee and the employee never knew it was going to be that way. Or it was actually hidden.

You should know the toxicity when you are going in and you can make the decision to work in that environment.

Often in a workplace context people don't think they can move easily they do not think their lifestyle can be maintained if they leave the workplace they are in. this creates a trapped feeling.

Martin: this sense of 'trappedness', do you think that is realistic?

Jared: I think it is very real to the individual at that point. I think there is a lot of powerful early life connections here. It is about nurture and being safe, and the workplace provides. We have an attachment to the workplace.

That said we can also unattach and work through what our dependency is and move forward.

Martin: What do you know about a workplace which has the possibility of being toxic?

Jared: There can be telltale signs to look out for. There are also some signs that you can pick up on by doing a bit of homework. Some of them relate to business strategy. For example, if a business has a new strategy or new management structure, operating in an environment which is very much changing, then the organisation will have to change. A part of that will be the management looking at other people and the practices around other people and they may need to make some changes.

You may also find that there are cues you can pick up on in the interview process. You may get an intuition that this isn't quite right. I encourage people to listen to their intuition and feelings about a workplace especially from the people you are meeting with who are selling you the role.

That's really important information, on its own intuition and feeling, on its own you might not want to make the decision entirely based on intuition and feeling but some of those feelings might tell you I might need to do some more homework. And I think this is important.

We, at the end of the day are the only people who will care about ourselves enough in the workplace. The organisation is never going to take as much responsibility for our personal wellbeing as we are. So take personal responsibility and do some homework, do some background research on the company can be very helpful, looking at the press and website. You might have heard of Glassdoor the website of employee reviews. Like any review website take it with a grain of salt as there can be some bitterness in there as well.

It is a useful way to get another perspective and you know if you're getting any of these warning signs do a bit more homework track someone down who works there. Go onto LinkedIn and see who you know who knows someone. Talk to a mentor or previous manager who can give you a bit of insight. So, I guess, in summary you can tell, sometimes though it changes so you can have no idea that the workplace might be like that, do your homework.

Martin: One of the things that people always say is that I was so and so until I was about 40 and then I just thought what am I doing here. And I decided to become a teacher or a therapist. After 9/11 people in the states just jacked things in and did other stuff and found jobs that really suited them. There is a mid-life crisis and that is normally finding yourself at the top of the ladder and realising you're against the wrong wall.

And that's because why you think would I feel, I've got all these things I've got the title, why do I feel like that. And I think that's where the therapist comes in really helpful when you have those ideas.

Jared: It's really interesting to hear you say that, in fact, in many ways you're talking about my life story. When I got to my mid-30s I was like I'm against the wrong wall here, this isn't quite working. And I think that's the real upside to having a workplace crisis, often it's a call to go deeply within and figure out what do I really want and has the last 20-30 years of my career been delivering against a sense of meaning. And I find once you've got a lot of the anxiety out of the way and you've worked, you've helped the client separate from their workplace situation it is then that the deeper question the existential questions start to emerge.

What do I want out of my life, do I want to make money or do I want to help people am I about creativity the question that maybe didn't get asked can start to come to the forefront.

Martin: and can I be both, can I make money and help people which is quite possible

Jared: or can I be creative alongside my next job can I make sure there is enough balance to have guitar lessons, I don't know. It's often a wakeup call about what we really want in life.

Martin: Terry Winter who wrote The Sopranos, was a script editor for The Sopranos and wrote Boardwalk Empire. Big writings. He was a lawyer until about he was about 29. He always wanted to do those and he said if I don't do this now I'll never do it. And it did work for him.

Jared: I think it happens a lot for creative people

Martin: But you did that, you changed, I've done that

Martin: Jared if I suspect I'm suffering from work-related stress what should I do?

Jared: it can be really tough and we touched on this before when we were having chat when we're in this kind of situation there can be a lot of very powerful feelings going around. It can feel anxious it can feel hopefulness. They can be fear. So, the first thing I'd say is that can be really difficult for people and because of the sense of dependence we often develop with our workplace it can be really, really powerful stuff.

People can feel quite debilitated by this feeling.

And there is something that I think is a little bit abstract but I think is really important here. And it's one of the first things that I try and work with when a client has come to me in this sort of situation and it's about separateness and the statement I use around this is to say something to the person like you are not your job. So it's an important kinda statement if you think about going to a party or a social context in our culture often the first question that gets asked is what do you do. And I think about like I'm Jared and I'm a therapist at the moment, I'm earning money from it at the moment it's my profession. And that's quite different from saying I'm Jared I'm a therapist if you see what I mean. Jobs are transitional we chop we change, but in our culture, we get so caught up in the fact we have this job so the attack on the job so it were the sense that the job might be under threat becomes an attack on us. So, the question is how can we separate from that. And that is something that therapy is really good at helping with.

It's very hard to work through a struggle like that on your own but go to the right therapist and you're gonna find that there is an ability to work through that with them.

Martin: would you say go and see HR, would you recommend that?

Jared: I think there is a misconception that HR is full of people who support people and that's not true, I think HR is about managing the resources of a company. So there is a huge risk about talking to people at the workplace if you do need support from people who you really, really trust be careful how do you know. It might make more sense to speak to a therapist or a friend who's outside of the origination. But a therapist in particular, isn't going to find you're overwhelming, a therapist isn't going to find you too much, a therapist is going to be objective and he's going to have the skill to be able to help you, very different to talking to a friend.

Martin: Do you have any advice on how to leave work at work because we all seemed to be linked to it 24/7

Jared: yes that's a really good point too, technology just sort of keeps us connected doesn't it and I think yeah that's one of the key points. It's a very therapeutic word and I tend to say it quite a lot it's about boundaries and about how do you define your boundaries when I am at work and when I'm at home. So on the technology point that you mentioned do you need to have a technologies detox every day, every week. Do you need to turn off your work emails after nine o'clock or after you leave the office? What is right for

you and when I say what is right for you, what is right for your work situation and your personal needs. So if your work-life balance is taking up all the time you need to exercise to relax, to socialise then maybe your work-life balance is out of whack. And the boundary needs to be brought in. so, the boundaries that I'm talking about are the obvious ones - how many hours a day do you spend in the office? When do you go home? How much time do you spend at lunch break? Do you leave the office at your lunch break? These might seem like inconsequential things but over the course of the week they really add up to give you a lot of emotional space or not. And then, similarly and I think for us therapists we get trained very much to take care of ourselves and leave work at work. And you might want to think about having some sort of ritual so when you get home is it about having a bath changing your clothes is it having a cup of tea maybe meditating could be different for anybody but there is a real power about having some sort of ritual that marks the transition between work and home and helps to create emotional space.

Suzy: That was psychotherapist Jared Green speaking with Martin Pollecoff, the Chair of the UK Council for Psychotherapy.

If, after listening to that, you feel you could benefit from some talking time with a psychotherapist, then go to the Find a Therapist section of the UKCP website and have a look through. The website address is www.psychotherapy.org.uk and look for the Find A Therapist tab.

We are also featuring the subject of workplace wellness in the Psychologies magazine this month.

Or you can find us online at: www.psychologies.co.uk.

We'll be doing a podcast each month for the next year with some of the UKCP's psychotherapists, and remember like and subscribe to our channel to hear it first and it helps others find us. So, join us again next month

Till then, thank you for listening, and take good care of yourselves.