Helen Cross

**Amy:** I'm Amy MacDonald. I'm Angus Robinson. And Liz Clarkson is here too. We are from Headtorch.

So for those of you that don't know HeadTorch, we work with organizations to enable them to develop a mentally healthy workplace, a mentally healthy culture within the workplace. So we work with senior teams doing strategy consultation, getting them to really think about what is the vision for their organization. We work with people leaders to upskill, raise awareness, and we work with frontline people, again, raising awareness on this super important topic to each and every one of us, which is our mental health, our wellbeing, Without it what do we have? Yeah, so it's about supporting that culture within your workplace. So just to give you an idea of the schedule for this session, I'm shortly going to introduce Helen, and then she will introduce herself using a mystery objet, and then we will move into conversation for some time.

Then Helen is going to pose you a question, although interestingly, today, it's more of a reflective statement. So get ready for that reflective statement. We're then going to open the floor to hear your thoughts on that statement, and to enable you to ask Helen some questions, if you have any for her at that point. She and I will then move back into conversation, she's going to share some of her top tips before I ask her a few rapid fire questions. And then I'll hand over to Angus who will thank her formally and tell you what's coming up on the Headtorch calendar. So, without any further ado, let me introduce

our guest, Helen Cross. Who is a, who is gardening, food, and farming writer. She's a broadcaster and a podcaster. She is a horticultural educator, which is very hard to say. And Angus, would you like to share with everybody how we know Helen?

**Angus:** We know Helen because, I'm just giving Helen a wave now, we're literally 50 metres away from each other, just across the street.

 We're neighbours. You're neighbours. Neighbours and friends, yeah. Fabulous. so yes, it's fantastic to, to make connections and have people along, who we know really well and, um, and also those we don't know so well. So let me tell you more about Helen then. She has a wealth of experience spanning over 16 years working in the world of media and PR in high profile government campaigns, as well as large consumer and corporate organisations.

More recently, Helen was a finalist for the Royal Horticultural Society's School Gardening Champions. Not a trained horticulturist, but a history graduate, she's published her first book, Grow, Cook, Inspire, which is all about gardening and cooking for a healthier mind and planet. The book encourages everyone to grow their own and eat seasonally.

exploring the benefits for our mental and physical well being and our environment. Helen has experienced firsthand the consequences of mental illness and gardening has proved vital in her own toolkit for managing this. So Helen, over to you. Tell us. Share your mystery object.

**Helen:** Amy and Angus and Liz, thank you first of all for inviting me on.

It's a real privilege. It's lovely to see so many people. I will just duck down and show you my mystery object, which is a pumpkin. Look, it's still got the soil on it. There you go. Not from this year, but from last year, they actually,they store for about a year. So it's still edible. So why a pumpkin?

Well, pumpkins are bright, bold, and brash, and perhaps on the surface I am a bit of, I'm a bit bright, I'm a bit bold and brash, in a good way. But also what I discovered about myself probably during lockdown was that a bit like pumpkins, they need companions to be able to grow, which is a bit of a pithy one, but a bit of a cliche so they need sunflowers and things like nasturtiums and calendulas, and I realized that actually, during that period of time, I really needed people around me. And I think people, whether that's in a community, in a workplace, it's vital that we have that sense of community for our own sort of mental well being.

I grew up on a farm on the southwest coast and I could not wait to escape that freedom and isolation. And that's the one thing I am glad about living on where we do actually was having that community around us during lockdown, but nonetheless, being locked in my house with three small children under the age of five during lockdown was pretty miserable.

and yeah, so that is my mystery object. A pumpkin.

**Amy:** I love that. Thank you. Pumpkins need friends. Yes. As do we all. How fantastic. Well, we'll come back to, the pandemic and, what you went through then. I wanted to start our conversation, Helen, with the Chelsea Flower show. How did you end up there?

**Helen:** Chelsea Flower Show so that was back in May. So I guess as you've said at the beginning, I worked in media and PR for over 16 years which is incredible, and it was brilliant fun and great at that time of my life before I was married, and before I had small children and I love talking, and I've, I have my own podcast as well, and I've got a real passion for horticulture, but I also studied women's history at university and I was invited by the RHS in May to come to the Chelsea Flower Show for a week and they were doing a special exhibition for the show celebrating women in horticulture.

Now women have always gardened, but actually there's some really significant women who brought a lot of change within horticulture that are the unsung heroes. So over the course of the week I interviewed 20 women on the main stage at Chelsea, something they'd never done before. So it was a huge privilege for me to be given a microphone and let loose, this Scottish bird down in Chelsea, it was great fun. So I got to chat and interview with 20 women who are, I don't know, the champions and horticultural heroines of our time at the moment who are doing really inspiring things and what was interesting thing was all the women I interviewed their first career was not in horticulture, they had come into horticulture for another reason.

And many of those reasons was to get a better life balance and for their own mental health as well, and realizing that working in sort of high pace corporate worlds was having an impact on their families, on their mental health, their physical health. And I'm not saying that career in horticulture is easy cos it's not,

but for them, they'd found this real connection to something and they felt they were making a difference whether that was the food they're producing or they were having a positive impact on the surrounding environment around them. So yeah, so that's how I ended up, there. And I was also working with one of the designers on a show garden helping them with their, with their press and media.

So that was quite fun.

**Amy:** It sounds a lot of fun, but I think was it not called the heroines of horticulture your podcast.

**Helen:** Yeah, that's right. So I've actually I've gone back and I've interviewed all the women again for the podcast. So we've done a special series this summer,celebrating those heroines for people who weren't at Chelsea, and they can listen to those conversations.

over the course of the summer holidays while they're sitting on their beach lounger yeah.

**Amy:** And what I'm hearing also is you said that there was a pattern of those heroines having a sort of a previous life, if you like a previous occupation or career before they went into gardening, which from what I understand, that's what's happened with you, right?

**Helen:** Yeah, if you'd asked my 17 year old self, would I be gardening? I was like, no, and it's a bit of a cliche actually, because I think you do find later on in life when you do come and find your first house and then, oh, you've got this garden. oh, it might take an interest in gardening. But yeah, certainly I did grow up on a farm and I think the seed was sown perhaps early on so subconsciously I was out all the time.

But it was a bit like the cliche again, lockdown came and many people started gardening who had never picked up a trowel before. I'm sure you've heard that story a thousand times over. And it was because they wanted to be outside, and also, it was a distraction and that is what it is for me it's a bit of escapism and this idea of mindfulness gardening because it is a bit mind like you're reading, or you're sowing seeds and you're focused on this one small thing this task and everything else around you can just take a backseat for that moment.

**Amy:** So it was during the pandemic that you started this, adventure?

**Helen:** It really was. I'd always had an interest in gardens. We lived beside Kew Gardens down in London. My first two kids were born down there while we lived down there. And, I really did love Kew. And that was a great place to escape when you live in a city,

but yeah, it wasn't really until the pandemic when, like I said, I was at home. My husband's a doctor. I had three children under the age of five at the very beginning of the pandemic. We don't have any family in Glasgow and it was really tough and like you said again, I have a history of mental health.

I was anorexic and I had postnatal depression after my first child and then subsequently, during the pregnancies with my next two. And there are obviously some triggers that I think, and I think that isolation is one of them, for me,so the garden provided something that we could all come together around and focus our attention on.

I know it sounds really simple, but for so many people that I speak to, that has had a huge difference. It's not the only thing, there has been therapy, there has been medication, wild swimming.

**Amy:** It's a combination, right? It's a combination of things that, and it'd be different for everybody.

What was it, one day you weren't gardening, the next you were gardening, what happened? What was the decision that made you go, do you know what, I'm going to plant a marigold or whatever it was?

**Helen:** Yeah, no, totally. Do you know what? Ironically, the two months before the lockdown my dad came up to visit and we planted two fruit trees for the boys in the back garden and then while he was there I asked him very kindly to make, I am not a DIY person and I don't like, totally not,

and he very kindly made me four raised beds, and it was as if he had some sort of crystal ball that he'd see that we were going to be trapped in this sort of garden for the next two years. and it was a bit of boredom, to be honest, and I was like okay, let's, I like to be busy, and I think that's the thing if I am not busy

then my mind goes into overdrive and I will start to catastrophize. So that was it. It was a bit of boredom and we'd just moved into the house and I was like, kids, we need to do something because we cannot, there's only so much Netflix or CBBs we can all watch. Absolutely.

**Amy:** Fantastic. So how does, how does, so when I was wee, myself and a family friend, we love nothing better than to make mud pies.

So like, where are they? They're out there making mud pies. So what is it about soil, getting your hands dirty? What is it about that helps our mental health?

**Helen:** When I was researching for the book, this was something that kept coming up and actually there, there are proper scientific people who can back this up,

so do believe me when I say this. Getting your hands dirty and that's why I garden without gloves because the soil releases this hormone, it's a bit like serotonin so it's basically like eating chocolate. I'm not advising you go and start eating mud in your garden, but it does release that happy hormone as if

you were having some chocolate, so it's better for the waistline.

**Amy:** Wow. So what did, how was your health when you first started gardening?

**Helen:** Really poor. I was in a bit of a very dark place. and there have been weeks where I wasn't able to leave the house in the sort of middle of all this.

We couldn't really leave the house in lockdown, but I really couldn't do very much and it's, I'm sure you've had the conversations, mental health, and you'll see that in the workplace, the people will look fine. And something's obviously triggered something and then they'll go into a bit of a black hole.

And I think from the outside, I was very much this swan gliding, but beneath the surface of the water, I was really struggling and I was trying to keep face because we just moved to the area as well, we were still trying to find our feet and then boom, we've got this pandemic. But I was really fortunate

we live in a lovely community and I have got some really great friends who really helped me. so there were days where you didn't want to go into the garden or you didn't want to cook or anything like that. And that's absolutely, as I said, it's not going to be a quick fix. I think mental health is something that you manage,

and that's why I think in the workplace, it's really important to identify that because everybody struggles, whether it's financial worries, grief, anything like that. Everybody has got some sort of weight on their shoulder. and it's not one size fits all either. And I think I remember that from myself working,

in a really fast paced corporate consumer environment where it was at the time when like newspapers were still like you got getting front page headlines and it was like all about the glamour and making money for the company and actually they were just churning people actually and people must have had issues going on,

but you would never really been aware of that actually. With looking back in hindsight, it's really interesting because I've never worked in a, I've been out of, I've work for myself now and I freelance and I've not actually worked in an office environment, but looking back, it probably wasn't a healthy environment for our mental health.

**Amy:** Certainly the whole talking about, understanding, being aware of our mental health, our wellbeing. I've been in this, I've been working in this area for probably about 15 years now and it's really changed. There's still a long way to go, but it's definitely beginning, fortunately to open up.

So let's go back to the pandemic then you were at the beginning you were you said, as you were starting to garden you you were in a pretty dark place so talk us through the sort of how the gardening helped your mental health during that period.

**Helen:** So I think it provided structure and escapism and you were looking after something other than yourself that relied on you that a bit like a plant is a bit like a small child, to be honest, you need to feed it and make sure it gets light and it's not stuck inside.

And so there's that I also decided to gardening was one of the only things we could really do outside in small groups. and because like I said at the start, I think it's really, we missed human contact during that period. I think that's one of the keys. As great as it is to work from home like I'm sure many of you do, missing sort of colleagues, I imagine, um would be similar,

and so I started with the school. Our school's got lots of green space around it, nothing was really being managed and obviously, everything had gone to seed and was all a bit wild. So I took it upon myself to start up a gardening group of local people and children and it still runs at the moment.

I go and well Thursday's my day off, so I volunteer at the school on a Thursday and it's not just the kids, it's actually the teachers as well, because with a little bit of guidance and I like, I'm not a horticulturist. I studied history at Glasgow Uni, but just with a little bit of confidence and encouragement,

it's amazing what you can pick up really quickly. So Nick, you said that your wife was pleased you were coming to listen to this because it was about gardening. So I'm just with a bit of gentle encouragement, you could be the next Monty Don. But, yeah, so I love working with the kids and the teachers, and it's amazing the transformation in them, and you do get some kids who are quite quiet and anxious, and perhaps don't thrive necessarily in a big classroom with lots of children, but you take them outdoors,

and it's like a different child. And over the course of the week, you see them grow, and I get a huge amount of satisfaction from that. And if I had a magic wand every school and workplace, whether it was a roof garden in your office block, every school would have a garden. I know that sounds all very sort of wishy-washy, woo-hoo,

but do you know what? I'm not suggesting everyone learns maths outside every single day, but just having that place to go and to chat, And people open up to you in these spaces as well. It's really interesting. I've had kids and they just feel comfortable and they tell you all sorts. You get lots of gossip.

**Amy:** Yeah, it's tapping into those, well, we talk about the five ways of wellbeing, so about connecting with others, learning, staying active, notice, which is about being in the moment and giving. And it sounds like what happens is it's not just about growing pumpkins. It's actually so much more than so much more than that, isn't it?

**Helen:** Yeah, the actual growing of it, it doesn't really matter if things don't work out because you're out there, you're giving it a go, you're in the fresh air, you're doing something physical, which is great for our physical health as well as our mental health. And yeah, and you planted that seed to, because we do all need to take more care of our environment, and we're all very much aware of that and in my book, I talk about how cooking and gardening seasonally is not only good for our mental health, but also the health of our planet as well.

So just by taking that little bit of responsibility for a small area, it's a good thing and it makes you feel good and it boosts your confidence and your resilience.

**Amy:** You were talking in your lovely book, in your lovely book, you were talking about, how gardening helps you to almost celebrate imperfection.

Yeah. Tell us a bit more about that.

**Helen:** Oh, I always use that and I like the carrots. So if you grow your own carrots, and kids pull them out and they're like, oh, it's all mucky, and it's wonky. And I'm like, it's just like you and I, because none of us are, we're all very, very different.

Nobody's the same. And we need to celebrate that, like we're not all carbon copies of one another. And I think in today's day and age when I see I've got lots of nieces and nephews who are in their teens and going off to university. And I see the pressures that they're under all to fit in. And all to get the best grades and to work, and that's great to some extent we all want to do well and achieve but just to celebrate that individuality as well I think we've lost that and I see the kids going up to high school where we live, and they literally all look like carbon copies of one another.

So I am all very much about celebrating our imperfections because life is not perfect. Life is, far from perfect.

**Amy:** And in the workplace, how can that kind of ethos of celebrating imperfection, how can that help, do you think?

**Helen:** I think it's about looking at strengths and playing to the strengths rather than the imperfections, because I think yeah, everybody, like my husband, for example, has recently, he won't mind me saying this, has recently been diagnosed as dyslexic at the age of on his 40th birthday and he's gone back to medicine later on in life and you could argue, oh God, but actually you need to look at what strengths that brings out because before that his mental health was very low because there was, I must be a crap doctor, but no, actually it's because you have other superpowers.

I know that gets floated about all the time, but it's about working with people as individuals and we're not all the same. And I think companies and organizations need to look at, what employees can bring to the table for them, and for the business, and they will flourish as well as the business.

You don't want people to get burnout. I got burnout working in a consultancy. It was complete and I lost the love of what I love telling stories and I, there was a shift on making lots and lots of money for the company and that was not what I went into media for. It was to tell stories.

I love telling a story. Can you tell? so yeah, you don't, you need to value, your employees are like, they are your bread and butter, they are going to make.

**Amy:** Yeah, often in, in our sessions, we ask people to focus on what are the skills and qualities of somebody with lived experience of mental ill health.

What are the, what might they be bringing to the workplace? Because so often the shift is on the negative rather than actually saying wow look at all these amazing skills and talents people have and who doesn't want that diversity within their workforce? Yeah. That's a really,

**Helen:** yeah, that's a really good question because I think

that knowledge that everybody has vulnerabilities is really important and makes you seem a bit more human and not robotic and corporate and I think that's, there's something quite nice about that, to be honest, and also to be able to share those experiences with one another, and discuss what has helped them, what hasn't helped them? What changes could be implemented into the workplace that could prevent this from happening as well?

**Amy:** So just talking about,in the workplace, you say, you're doing the volunteering work within the local school. What, from your perspective, have you got any stories or thoughts around what the teachers have picked up for their work from what, you know, participation.

**Helen:** I'll be completely honest. It's a huge school. There's 700 kids. There's a lot of teachers in there. You're not going to get every single teacher in there completely on board because I think I'm not a teacher. I've got family members who are teachers and I know that their cup is full and overflowing and that they have got boxes to tick and gardening is pretty far down that

 list of priorities. There is a genuine like when they go away at the weekend and they do happen to go to a garden and they bring back ideas to the school. I think that's really lovely and they do come and oh look we saw this we wondered whether or not this could work in the school, that sort of thing, and more there are a few teachers who are making use of the green spaces, during their class time as well to do classes outdoors, just to actually be outdoors and sit outdoors. And I think that's something that I remember being at work and not even having that space outdoors because it was a very much a culture of you go in to work at half seven, eight o'clock and you're at your desk.

You're having your lunch at your desk, and you feel a bit guilty for going outside or leaving the desk early to go home. I don't know if that's still the case in work. I hear mixed stories from people and I'm sure in some places that culture still exists. So yeah, I'm not sure if that's answered your question or if I've waffled off on a different tangent.

**Amy:** No, not at all. I think what's key is, and we talk about this a lot, it's about finding what's right for you, isn't it? And so for some people within the workplace, gardening will be a fantastic tool and it gives you all of those, wellbeing, boosts that that you've talked about, and for others,it's other things and that's okay.

It's not about everybody being wild about gardening, right? No, but it's about finding the joy within that, maybe just if you're thinking about it, have it having a go, Nick.

**Helen:** I had the conversation with someone earlier last week, even if I don't know in terms of like corporate social responsibility and as an organization if you have that box that you need to tick, what about looking at ways in which you can team up with a school or a community group, or actually just if there's a bit of like wasteland near where you work like a kerb and engage in a bit of guerrilla gardening. It's not illegal, you can blame me if you get into trouble. and just having that as a little sort of like fun project that, yeah, it's not expensive, just need some compost, some seeds, and just take a bit of ownership and it's a fun talking point as well, but it would be lovely if businesses could, it could, it would be great if every office block had some sort of, whether it's a living wall or a garden, just not just to grow stuff, but like I said, just as a space to escape to, And maybe there's people on our chat today who do already have that in existence and do work with organizations and charities, but it's just about keeping that continuity and it just can't stop.

It is something that you need to continue and dip in and out of. Because it's like anything.

**Amy:** Yeah, the same as looking after our mental health and our well being. It's not something you do one day and not the next. It's something we need to do on a continual basis.So what guerrilla gardening can you, tell us about?

**Helen:** Yeah, I'd go as far as saying my project at the school garden is a bit of guerrilla gardening because I've taken ownership of a big bit of ground that no one's using. And we've got all sorts we've got loads of raised beds and bug hotels and we're this morning we've started a sensory garden as well for the kids to be able to explore a bit There's a kerb near to where we are, which we have ripped out some brambles and we've got loads of compost and we're starting to do things like but that is something that actually, and in the world of gardening at the moment, it's a big thing. And there's an organization called Grow to Know,

and it's a guy called Tayshan who was a, he was an ex footballer down in London and he he lived in Grenfell. And as a consequence and a fallout of that, he created the Grenfell Peaceful Memorial Garden and he is now actively encouraging people to get out there and look at your urban spaces and see what can be greened up and bringing communities together, who have obviously gone through so so much.

Not only in that area, but in other areas as well. the PR around it has been phenomenal and he's doing really good things. so I'll share that with you. You can pop it in the show notes afterwards.

**Amy:** Yeah, absolutely. that sounds absolutely, just so inspiring. Yeah.

And in terms of the more, family orientated, how has the gardening impacted you and your family?

**Helen:** Yeah, so that the book itself is it's not just aimed at people with children, and I say at the beginning, it's for anyone age five or 85 or beyond or younger. But I think I wanted, I, as I said, I grew up on a farm and I very lucky looking back as to how privileged I was to have all that space and knowing where my food comes from kind of take that for granted or took that for granted.

And it wasn't until I had my own children, and realized we weren't moving back to the countryside anytime soon and I've only lived in cities since the age of 17 since I left home. And I wanted to make sure my kids had an appreciation early on exposure and education as to where their food comes from, even if it is from a container at our back door.

And yeah, the kids, children have short attention spans. some adults have short attention spans, myself included. But the fact that they've had that knowledge, they know what's edible, they know what's poisonous. They know when to pick things and they know when not to pick things. That's not to say that they don't go around with scissors and clip things.

But that's fine because a garden shouldn't be this sort of pristine sort of suburban crown that's just to be looked at. A garden should be something that you can feel and touch and explore. So yeah, so I'm hoping I've planted a seed that when they're older as well, they'll continue that interest and that interest will grow.

**Amy:** Yeah, absolutely. And it's that sense of, going back to your pumpkin. It's that sense of being together, isn't it? And that sense of belonging and that gives us so much power, inner power, doesn't it? Inner strength and sense of well being. Fantastic. Helen, let us go to your... Reflective statement.

and, do you want to tell everybody a little bit about your thinking here.

**Helen:** Yeah, sure. So I think I alluded to this at the beginning of our conversation and there's not one thing is going to help everybody. and I think that's why it's important to have a toolkit that you have, and that you can access easily, so that when you do recognize things are getting too much that you're able to dip .

into that toolkit and pull out something that's going to help you. And for me, gardening obviously is one of those. I'm a big walker. I love outdoor swimming when I get the chance. so it's just about seeing what works for you and being able to go into that toolkit.

**Amy:** Fantastic. So consider what tools you could use in your kit when things are feeling particularly heavy and consider how often you use these.

 Liz will have put that question into the chat so that you can reflect back on it. We'd like to open up the floor now. if somebody would like to share, their thoughts to this question, stroke statement, and, and also open the floor to any questions that you might have for Helen.

**Liz:** I'm happy to share Amy. I think sort of building on what you said, Helen around escaping getting out in the garden I walk as well. And so not to repeat that. I know that I've got a sort of trusted circle of people who I would go to, and I think it's finding that kind of, the people that you know, get it very quickly, because sometimes these things are momentary blockers aren't they that they, you need to address and adjust quickly and navigate around.

So I think one of the tools I would say is loads of friends within my network but I know that there are certain people within that network I would go to for that sort of immediate kind of counsel that really helps, so I think finding those people, and you want that to be reciprocal as well you know because you want to be able to share the learnings from those kind of experiences with other people.

that would be my contribution.

Yeah. Thanks Liz. What's your thoughts on that Helen?

**Helen:** I think that's really key and it's about recognizing that it's okay to open up as well and that you're not being a burden because for a long time I didn't want to be a burden but my best friend said, you know what, I will probably need your support.

It might not be now, it might not be next week, but it might be in five years. it is respect, sort of, it goes both ways. and it is about having some key people, whether that is in the workplace or outside, of the home or the workplace. But yeah, I think that is really important.

**Amy:** Wonderful. Anybody else got any thoughts or comments they'd like to share?

**Nick:** I could take up the whole call. So I was just listening to that. It was it was funny because.

**Amy:** Sorry, who's that speaking?

It's Nick.

Great. Nick, do you want to tell us just where is your work?

**Nick:** Where I work?

**Amy:** Where do you work? Yeah. I

**Nick:** I own the tech recruiters, Bright Purple. and I'm CEO of Bright Purple.

so yeah and a long term friend of Headtorch. yeah,I was fascinated to listen, listen, sorry, because,two days ago, I just got diagnosed with mild depression burnout. and it's the second time in five years that I've had this,pre COVID and then, two days ago, I've been diagnosed,

and I'm taking to get over this is a road trip with my dog, because my dog is my best friend. I better not tell my wife that, but actually my dog is, the one that I'm going with. me and my dog going on a road trip, but it's interesting because I don't swim, but I tried wild water swimming for the first time last week in North Berwick.

That was interesting. and I did say I'm not a gardener. I absolutely, I don't have green fingers, but when I was a little boy, the, my mother and father had, heirloom lilies, in our garden in Wales, and, they, they were everywhere in the garden, and people used to come and take cuttings, and they became quite famous.

And then I moved to Scotland, when I was 16, and I've been here ever since. I'm now in my early 60s. and last year, I started thinking about the arum lilies and I actually tracked down a lady, my parents have been dead for a long time, 20 years, but I actually tracked down a lady who had the cuttings of my mother's plant, in her garden in Glasgow.

So I drove to Glasgow, chopped a big piece of it off and put it in my garden last year. And, I've now got two giant bushes of arum lilies and,so I managed to, that was the only green thing, good thing I've ever done. But actually what's lovely about the arum 20 arum big stalks just now with lilies on them.

But when I'm feeling, particularly, like I am just now, burnt out, I can go into my garden, touch the lilies and think about what I was when I was a child. And, it's amazing how touching the,just even touching the leaves. And the plant is 100 years old. So the plant has been around for 100 years, from when my mother and father were little people, young people as well.

So my only garden and expertise has been my two edamame plants.

**Amy:** Gosh, Nick, what a, thank you very much, first of all, for sharing your personal circumstances, but what a wonderful story. Helen.

**Helen:** That was lovely. Really lovely. Do you know what? Oh, that's just really, and that you don't have to have green thumbs or green fingers.

And it's just that just recognizing you can go out and touch things, and there's that sentimental connection as well. And everyone can engage with gardens and green spaces in different ways. I do encourage you to try the wild swimming one more time, if you're a bit hesitant.

**Nick:** I think it was fine.

It's just, I'm not a very confident swimmer, so it was a friend of mine that,took me out into the sea and, yeah, I have to admit, I felt energized when I came back in. I should also say that, and Headtorch know this, I'm a board member for Lifelink, the mental health charity in Glasgow,

so it's quite ironic that I'm now feeling ill and, and I'm a board member. But,the rise in, mental health since challenges since COVID has been, astronomical.

Absolutely.

**Amy:** Thank you, Nick. Thank you so much. Thank you. Amanda, would you like to, you've put a note there in the chat, I find I know what will make me feel better, i. e. getting outside, but I find it really hard to motivate myself to do that. I think we can all relate to that, Amanda. Do

you want to say a little bit more? Tell us where you're at.

**Amanda:** Yeah, I'm from, West Dumbartonshire Council. I'm an HR advisor.

Yeah. But I've just had a bit of a low weekend myself. It comes and goes and I knew I would feel better getting outside and the weather was nice and my sister's got a dog who I absolutely adore. I could have done that. And I just found that I just Just lack the, it's one thing knowing what you need to do, but it's almost like a completely different part of your mind that needs to actually go right, go and do it then, because you know the logic.

I know if I eat two donuts for my breakfast, I know that's not great for me, but you still do it, because. Why would you eat Weetabix when there's donuts? It's like your brain's so complicated, it seems to sabotage me. What ended up happening is I spent the whole weekend in bed, watching Netflix, eating junk.

And then on the Sunday, my sister said, I'm going for a walk. Do you want to come? And I just went, yeah, but do you know what? I'm not getting showered. I'm not brushing my hair. I'm coming for a walk. And see when I came back from that walk and just being outside and looking at trees and just been feeling the air on me.

I came back, I got showered. I was more productive. I did bits and bobs of work and it's just, I need to find a way to, I know what I need to do. It's just making myself do it.

**Amy:** Yeah, I think we can all relate to that. Helen, what's your thoughts?

**Helen:** Yeah, I think it's about remembering to, to, to walk before you run and just do small steps.

I always think that if things are particularly bad, like actually just making a cup of tea is a good thing. So even if you just do a loop around the block, it doesn't really matter, or just go and sit and drink your tea or eat your doughnuts outside. so yeah, it's just about taking small steps, but totally getting outside, it does take a bit of motivation and I can totally relate to that of having no motivation to go outside.

**Amy:** And I think also, if I can just chip in there, I think also another important thing is to really celebrate that small stuff. Because often we spend a lot of time going, maybe it's just me, but spend a lot of time going, I should be doing all of that stuff over there, instead of actually just going, do you know what?

I've done this, that's great. And it's about celebrating that, that little thing and focusing on that rather than all the other things that you could have, should have, might have done.

**Helen:** And the other stuff will still be there and it doesn't really matter, you're not a bad person for not being done.

**Amy:** Thank you for sharing, Amanda. Thank you so much for your thoughts. Helen, let's hear your top tips.

Top tip number one, Notice the five senses. What can you feel, touch, taste, hear, and see? Do you want to share your thoughts on that, Helen?

**Helen:** I'm sure many of you have heard this and it was my CBT therapist who Made me realize this. When you're out for a walk, just take notice of the things around you.

What can you feel, touch, taste, hear, and see? And I think you can do it as a sort of 5,4,3,2, 1, so that what five things can you see? And what four things, I think it was, what four things can you feel? that sort of idea, and again, it just gets you to be in the moment and consider where you are, as opposed to focusing on the worries and the anxieties and that to do list that will still be there.

It doesn't matter. but just actually try and be in the moment, so to speak.

**Amy:** Lovely, yes. Where is your mind? It really helps you to... center into that, doesn't it? It's a lovely exercise. Thank you. Write down what is triggering you and how it makes you feel.

**Helen:** This is probably one of the most simplest things, but it has probably been one of the most powerful things in my toolkit that I do.

I keep a notebook by my bed and if I'm traveling or I'm away, I take it with me. And again, it doesn't necessarily work for everybody, but I write down what is worrying me, what my anxieties are, what I fear, and then I write down what the more likely outcome is going to be, and it just helps you get a little bit of perspective.

I then close it and put it down and I don't necessarily look at them. I've got quite a few of these books. And they might be quite terrifying to read. They're not going to be a number one bestseller. But, just by getting it out and putting it down on a piece of paper, I find a really helpful way of dealing with anxiety, when things are particularly bad.

**Amy:** Yeah, absolutely. Writing it down, it actually makes it more tangible, doesn't it, when we've written it down? And I suppose what you're also talking about is avoiding that catastrophizing, or helping yourself not to catastrophize, if you like, by considering how it, how else might it turn out.

**Helen:** Yeah, totally.

**Amy:** Lovely. Consider creating your own green space within your workplace.

**Helen:** So this goes back to my magic wand, idea of having a space. If you are all, maybe some of you're all now working remotely from home and maybe you don't have an office space, or consider doing something within your community where there is a green space and it's something out with of your work and something that you can, you might even meet new people as a consequence as well.

**Amy:** Absolutely. I've just,we're fairly recently got an allotment, so I'm meeting new people. It's good fun. Brilliant. Prioritize time for you and recognize when it's getting too much.

**Helen:** Yeah, this is often, we talk a lot about self care in 2023 or whenever. and actually, do you know what? Self care should just be like your five a day anyway.

It's like food and drink. It should just be a priority. So do recognize that it is important that you have to take time out for you. And even when things aren't getting too much, because often it's actually better if you take those steps, then it might actually prevent you from spiraling out of control.

So whether that is going and playing five a side football on a Monday night or going out for a walk, these things are okay and not to feel the guilt because we can't work all the time. And we can't spend all our time with our families because... to be honest, we'd all go a bit crazy. So it is about recognizing that and not feeling guilty.

**Amy:** I think it's almost like flipping that, isn't it? especially if you're a people leader within an organization, it's actually promoting the fact that when we take a break, if we're not feeling that great, it's, it's crucial that we take a break regularly, anyway, to give ourselves that time so that we can engage, we can be more productive, we can be happier, healthier people altogether, right?

**Helen:** Yeah, it's about leading from the front and leading by example.

**Amy:** Definitely. Write down your goals and what makes you happy. Don't lose sight of these things.

**Helen:** I like to write and I find that writing things down just like you say makes things more tangible and more real.

Have goals, have dreams, and just write them down and they obviously they have to make you happy. And, again, they might not all be achievable, but don't lose sight of the fact that actually you can gradually sort of tick these things off. And I like a plan. I like to have an aim and something to reach for,

it gives you purpose as well.

**Amy:** Absolutely. And finally, everyone needs an interest out of work and away from family for themselves. Find something that works for you.

**Helen:** So yeah, this recaps on what we've already talked about. I think, I remember an aunt saying that we've got to be like triangles.

You've got your work, you've got your family, but the bottom half has got to be something that, that works for you and makes you happy and that you have an interest. Because ultimately you'll work better and your home life will be happier as well. Doesn't always work out that way, but that's the principle anyway.

**Amy:** That's lovely. What was that? So life should be a triangle.

**Helen:** She's a very wise woman. I call her the white witch. She used to live in a thatched cottage in Devon.

**Amy:** Fantastic. Fantastic. Let's move on now to some quick fire questions. Helen Cross, are you ready?

**Helen:** I think so.

**Amy:** What does vulnerability mean to you?

**Helen:** Not being afraid to fail.

**Amy:** Nice. And, what's going to revolutionize workplace mental health?

**Helen:** You're going to have me come and create a garden for you all.

**Amy:** Brilliant. You alluded to this earlier actually, but what message would you give your younger self?

**Helen:** To not, how can I put this concisely? Forget about what other people think.

 I am a people pleaser, but actually be your own person and you'll be a lot, you'll be a lot happier.

**Amy:** Nice. Be your own person. Yeah, there's too much comparison going on, isn't there? Wonderful. So your book is fantastic, full of lots of top tips, ideas, loved, for example, using bamboo, cutlery to mark out where your broccoli is and your spuds, and so on and so forth.

Also have to say, I'm a bit of a occasional baker. Used to be more of a baker, but anyway,I gave this one a go.

**Helen:** Did it work?

**Amy:** Blackberry brownies. Obviously it's not blackberry time right now, so, um, I had some amarena cherries, so cheers. Thanks.

Excellent. Don't eat when you're presenting. That's top tip. Anyway, thank you so much, Helen. Over to you, Angus. Thank you.

**Angus:** Thank you, Amy. Helen, thank you very much for that. That was wonderful. I love your vibrancy, your enthusiasm and your honesty as well. It was very straightforward and honest. I've always thought about the fellowship of mud. I am a mountain biker, I also do boot camp, these are an integral part of my life and I've always talked,

for years now about the fellowship of mud. What I never realized was there's a biochemical reaction going on in your body that makes you feel better. I never realized that, and it was researching in the lead up to this that I discovered that. And then you mentioned that as well. And I also love the fact though you're talking about transforming people.

Yeah, the transformation of people through gardening, seeing people grow. There's, they're lovely pictures that you're painting there, and, celebrating the imperfections, celebrating individuality, also the fact, a garden is there to feel, to touch and to explore. It shouldn't be pristine.

It should be an adventure, it should be a playground. And,those words, all these words that you're saying build up a picture of,a really comfortable, really happy place. Yeah, I delivered a box to Helen this morning. which is for her kids to build a cardboard fort. Yeah. huh.

**Helen:** Well, it was for the garden to make a raised bed or to make a no dig bed. So basically, without digging the ground, you put the cardboard over the ground and then you put the compost directly on. But my children have turned it into a cardboard fort.

**Angus:** Into a fort. Excellent, excellent. when I was taking the box over,it always strikes me your garden is full of things.

There's lots of flowers, there's lots of growth. It is not pristine at all. And that is in a very positive way, which is, which is great. I also love the thought of guerrilla gardening. Yeah. Our office in the, is in the east end of Glasgow, which is maybe not the most salubrious, but I think there's a wee challenge there that we could maybe do something in terms of guerrilla gardening in the east end of Glasgow.

The magic wand is wonderful. Every workplace, every school to have a garden. There is a podcast from Miles Keane, who works for Coutts Bank, on our website from an earlier Wellbeing Hour, and, they have a garden on their roof. They have bees in central London, right next to Trafalgar Square,

so,a nice little step in the right direction there. So thank you again for all of your vibrancy, for your honesty, for your enthusiasm and the insights you've given today. it's really great having you on the Wellbeing Hour, Helen, and,good luck with all the amazing things that you're doing as well.

**Helen:** Oh, thank you so much, Angus. It's been an absolute pleasure. Thank you.

**Angus:** Good. Good. Nick, I look forward to hearing about your gardening adventures and also your swimming adventures. Keep at that, man. it's really worthwhile. Definitely. Good. So on the next well being hour, we have Julie Nerney and Julie is a transformational leader, non executive director of the UK Supreme Court.

So she's working at quite a high level there and a serial entrepreneur. She started her first business, I think when she was 14. So I think this is going to be another fascinating Wellbeing Hour that is on 21st September, at the same time. We're taking August off, no Wellbeing Hour in August.

So coming up in our calendar, after Julie, we have Professor Rory O'Connor from Glasgow University. He is, president of the International Association of Suicide Prevention. Then we have Kate Goodger, who is Head of Human Innovation and Performance at Laing O'Rourke. Kate was also a sports psychologist who worked with the British Olympic team,

especially with the cycling part of that. So I think Kate's one is going to, be really interesting. We have Chas Howe, former finance director at SuperDry, and that is in December. So stay in touch with us, follow us on LinkedIn, do all those good things. and if you like what we do and want to know more, please get in touch.

We'd love to hear what you're doing in terms of workplace mental health. We do have solutions for every layer of an organization. And so it'd be great to hear from you. If there's no more questions, then I think that is about done.

**Amy:** There is a comment in the, sorry, there is a comment. Yeah, which, Heather Collins has left, which says, I think the best thing to do when we are struggling with anxiety is to remove ourselves from social media.

**Helen:** Excellent point. Absolutely. Yeah, I think for younger people as well that's where there's challenges, definitely, and actually pulling them away from screens and getting them outdoors. It's something I was down in Manchester yesterday at Tatton Park flower show and that was one of the things that came up.

at a lecture that I was listening to. There is a challenge. Yeah, I don't have the I don't have the answers to that because we also do rely on social media for certain things and technology and our phones are always in our back pockets. And there's a question here, and I'm from Amanda,

talking about gardening and it being good for ADHD and for people who are on the autistic spectrum. And one of the things I did at Chelsea this year was work on a garden that was designed for a charity that specializes in supporting people with autism and learning disabilities.

**Amy:** And there is loads of research being done about how gardening is, fundamentally a positive thing for supporting people who, are on the autistic spectrum. So that's something else that, and obviously in our organizations, you come across people from all different walks of lives. and again, it's about recognizing what their needs are,

**Helen:** and gardening is great for everybody, but specifically for people who have sensory issues or are on some sort of spectrum as well.

**Amy:** Wonderful. Thank you Helen.

**Angus:** Great. Good. Anything else before we go then?

Nick, you ran the Tatton Park 10k.

**Helen:** It's a beautiful park.

**Nick:** I've never heard anybody mention Tatton Park ever in my life. and yeah, I ran the Tatton Park 10k, cause I happened to be in Manchester working and I stumbled across Tatton Park. So you're the first person I've ever heard mention Tatton Park.

**Helen:** it was my first time there. It's gorgeous. It's got deers.

**Nick (2):** It was my only time there, but I've got a medal with a deer on it. and I guess I,it's not my gardening you should be looking forward to hearing. It's my road trip with my dog. That's what you should be looking forward to listening to.

Not my gardening exploits.

**Angus:** Where are you going in your road trip?

**Nick:** I'm going to our summer house in Sweden. Oh, wow. I'm driving,Newcastle, Amsterdam, Holland, Germany, Denmark, Sweden. Staying there for a month and then driving home. Me and my dog.

**Amy:** Fantastic. Wonderful. Thank you very much, everyone. Okay, thank you.

**Helen:** Great to see everybody. Enjoy the rest of your day. Thank you.