Headtorch Wellbeing Hour Chas Howes

**Amy:** Welcome everyone to the Headtorch wellbeing hour. We are recording this so it will be available as a podcast on our site and on most podcast channels now so do follow us if you aren't already doing so, and thanks also, if you have taken the time to respond to the survey that hopefully you came across as you came into the waiting room, it'll be good to read how we can continue to make the Wellbeing Hour better for you.

If you haven't had time now, or at a previous session, you can find that form on the Wellbeing Hour page of our site. At Headtorch, we're experts in workplace mental health. We engage with every level of an organisation with the key aim being to help that organisation to develop and maintain a mentally healthy culture where everyone can flourish.

I'm Amy MacDonald. I'm Angus Robinson. And I'm Liz Clarkson. and our colleague Nick is working away in the background. And today, of course, we are delighted to have Chas Howes with us. And today's event, we, yeah, I'll be introducing you more fully shortly, Chas. Today's event is called Boardroom Behaviours, Just Not Good Enough.

And I'm going to be asking Chas questions such as, what's the impact of poor behaviours in the boardroom? What happened to him on the 16th of December 2016 and what was the upshot of going rambling with Claire Balding? Chas also has a question for us. He's going to be asking us,

How can we create a psychologically safe workplace for everyone to feel it is acceptable to say they are struggling? Particularly those at board and senior management level. So we're just going to pop that question into the chat. Do take the time as Chas and I are having a chat to respond to that question and indeed ask him any other questions or put any more comments into the chat and we'll come to that a little later on.

So let me introduce. Chas to you more fully. In fact, first of all, let me just share how we first met. I was introduced to Chas by my big sister, who's a tour guide and who discovers very interesting people for her American tourists to meet here in the UK. In his capacity as trustee of Cleeve Common, a conservation area in the Cotsvolds, Chas entertains and informs my sister's tourists, from time to time.

And since he and I both met. I have also had the pleasure of being interviewed by him on Fubar Radio in London. Chas Howes then is a Fubar Radio presenter and the former CFO at Superdry. After a finance career at a number of different companies, including Cadbury Schweppes, Debenhams, the Burton Group, Diagio, United Distillers and Guinness, Allied Domecq Wines and Spirits and Fosters Chaz's last major role was as CFO at Super Dry PLC, where he saw the business grow from 25 million in 2007 to 314 million in 2012. He chaired the project team to list the business on the London Stock Exchange in March 2010, winning IPO of the year in the process, and achieving, FTSE 250 status within one year.

After leaving Superdry, he was unwell and was eventually diagnosed with clinical depression. Some seven years ago, he began the long road to recovery. Now he says he lives with depression rather than suffering from it. As part of the recovery, Chas has found a passion and purpose in changing attitudes to mental ill health.

He's written a book, he's on the speaker circuit, and he's hosting a show on FUBAR radio which discusses mental well being and attitudes to mental health in business. Chas, welcome, welcome, do introduce yourself with your mystery object.

**Chas:** Right. well, the mystery object goes back quite a way, actually, in my life, because it's, it was sort of the foundations of how all of this happened,

and how I am where I am today. So if I, if I just go back to the, the moment I left Superdry, and I'm guessing we're going to come on to that, but essentially I was fired for various reasons, and I will probably come on to that as well. I then went into a long period of depression, which as you said, Amy, I'm just coming out of.

During that period, I was very resistant to therapy or anything else. I was a typical finance guy. I can do this all myself, I don't need any help. And eventually I got persuaded to go to therapy, and frankly it was the best thing I've ever done, in terms of getting better, feeling better, and I'm actually in quite a good place at the moment.

And what the therapist does is take you all the way back to your childhood, as to why you feel like you do and why you think like you do and behave like you do. And I suddenly began to realize that actually it was when I went away to boarding school when I was 13, which is an unbelievably early age for anybody to get to go away from their parents.

You know, you're seriously young and I wasn't cool, I was a bad sportsman, I was overweight, so I got bullied in my second year for about a year. And of course at boarding school, you can't get away from it. So I then thought, well, what, it's probably not the right thing to do to bring this out,

here, but the thing that was typified by the bullying was they used to run up and down the dorm, these two boys, with a pillow or a cushion under their shirt, pretending they were fat, and then hitting me and slapping me and goodness knows what else. So my, my object, interestingly, is a cushion, because what it does is reminds me of those periods, allows me to move on from those periods, and recognize that actually, what, how I feel is a part of me,

I can't change it. I can't feel any regrets about it, but it's a part of me and hence the living with depression, not suffering from it. So, I don't think about this all the time, but it is the founding moment of when my depression started, although I didn't realize it took me another 50 odd years or so to actually realize that, that that was the case.

So. It's, it's a very, very personal, deep seated and rooted memory of me that had a massive impact on my life. and I've now got over it 50 years later. So that's it.

**Amy:** Thank you. Thank you Chas. Thanks so much for sharing that story. So boardroom behaviours then, it's just not good enough. Do take the time folks, as I said, to jot down your thoughts in response to Chas's question and any other thoughts that come to mind as we have a conversation now.

Put that into the chat and we will come back to that a little later on. So an enormous, growth period then when you were at Superdry, what, what was good about that?

**Chas:** Oh, well, when I joined by mistake, actually, uh, because, I got an email from the previous company that I'd worked for saying, I've just found out about a finance director's job for a company based in Cheltenham, you know, thought you might be interested,

and I'm thinking, oh, for God's sake, I don't want to do that. You know, I'm going to London, I mean, that's where all the big jobs are and blah, blah, blah. Anyway, my wife gently reminded me that, actually, you haven't got much else on, darling, and so I went, I went for the interview, and it turned out to be Superdry, and I met Julian Dunkerton, and I've never been in such a passionate, family oriented, entrepreneurial business in my life.

It was completely different from the list of companies that you mentioned in the introduction. And I just loved the fact that you could be a part of it and make an impact. Everything you did had an impact almost instantly in the business. You know, you didn't have to go through approval processes or anything like that

you just went to ask Julian, Julian Duncan who owned it, do you fancy doing this Jules? And he'll say, yeah, yeah, okay, yeah, that's all right. So off you go, you go and do it. And it's just so liberating and refreshing that it, it just, was absolutely fantastic. And to work for one of the coolest brands on the planet at that particular time was just, you know, as an accountant,

wow, you don't get opportunities like that, do you?

**Amy:** So a lot of, a lot of freedom then it sounds like to do what you wanted to do.

**Chas:** Yeah. and passion and creativity as well. And I suddenly realized that the role of a finance director had to be very different, because as we grew, you had to put in certain structures because otherwise the company would have would have failed, which actually became part of my legacy anyway.

So you have to be very, very careful how you do it. And my role as a finance director suddenly becomes putting, implementing in structure without compromising creativity. So I likened myself to being a road sweeper, which a lot of finance directors really wouldn't want to be likened to. So Julian forges ahead and creates a load of mess in all his creativity and I

sort out the mess afterwards by sweeping it up and making it work. You know, because I mean, he used to send stock out to stores without putting it through the books, so we got no idea where everything was, you know, nonsense. So yeah, yeah, I mean, it was, it was just an opportunity to be completely different in a finance role.

**Amy:** And how do you think that difference. was part of the enabling of that just incredible growth that the business went through?

**Chas:** I think, I think it all came down to the brand, actually, and Julian and the head designer, James, who were just so unbelievably good at that time. You know, Julian, probably one of the best retailers in the country.

James, the designer, probably one of the best, brand designers, fashion designers in the world in that category. And you don't quite, you don't often get those. You either get one or the other in an organization, and then when you do that, you just get this unbelievable result. And so we grew and we grew and we grew,

and then Julian, said to me, one morning, uh, 15th of October, actually 2009. He said, Chas, I want to list on the London Stock Exchange. I says, Oh, okay. And he said, I want to do it by February. Now, as a retailer, you've got Christmas in the middle of that. So we had four and a half months with Christmas in the middle to launch the next year at the end of February.

As it turned out, we listed at the end of March 2010. And almost overnight during that period, apart from having to work unbelievably hard, and there's just so much to do, as you can imagine, because most companies take 18 months to do these things. the culture changed, the atmosphere changed, and the board

of non exec directors suddenly appeared. And now what we've got, we don't have a nice, friendly family, but it wasn't that friendly all the time, obviously, but a family oriented business where everybody was local. You suddenly got eight or nine non execs coming into the organization, some of which are accountants,

and I say some, because it was about half of them. And their behavior was appalling in some instances, not everyone, but some of them, and, you know, and it took me way back to when I was at school, actually, apart from the physical part of that. You know, the intimidation, the bullying, the, the belittling, the questioning, the, arrogance, you know, I mean, honestly, it was just so, so different, and I started, I think, now looking back, I started then to go into a depressive period, which I'd had periodically over the course of my whole career.

**Amy:** What, what, what allowed, you know, when you, when you've got a culture that's really supportive, what was it that allowed it to, the boardroom to shift to such unhelpful behaviours?

**Chas:** Because it was very different people. So, so when you're not listed, you have a board of directors, yes, and the senior management team and all that sort of stuff. And, but you all know each other, you'll get on with each other, you have to work with each other and the executive meetings become updates on the organization and agreeing what you're going to do about it.

When you're in a board meeting that you get behind closed doors. Yeah, it's private, it's minuted. It never ever, comes out about what's said or how it's, how people behave and it gives people permission and a freedom to behave badly. And I just, I just think it's terrible that that actually goes on.

And the other thing is the only executives there were me and Julian, so finance director and the CEO, and a chairman and the non execs. So, and their job, their job is to look after the interests of the shareholders, right? And that's basically, that's what they do. So, they think that gives them permission to beat you up every time you're in a meeting.

And so it's not, it's not like a meeting of an executive team, which there can be difficult some of those as well. It's, this is about being grilled in front of a, of a committee of people who are incredibly bright, very experienced, have been through the, the trade, probably in retail or in fashion or whatever, or something that, that is relevant to the business,

so they know an awful lot about it. And it's just Julian and I trying to not fend them off, but respond to them. And Julian would only do Retail and Brand, because that was his skill set and that's how we worked together and I would have to pick up everything else. So, finance, IT, HR. Can you believe that,

finance director with HR responsibility? I mean, that's a nonsense. You know, law, tax, treasury, you name it. I had the supply chain. I had the lot and it was too much, frankly.

**Amy:** Yeah, it sounds like it. Everybody recognizes poor behaviours, right, so what do you think stopped somebody calling it out for what it was in the boardroom at that time?

**Chas:** It was a few years ago, now, and I just don't think there was the attitude that you could, you could do that. And I think a lot of the people around the boardroom table were relatively old, and I'm not being ageist in that sense, but they were, and they came from a different generation.

And it's, it is probably different now, but interestingly, I did call it out. This, there's one particular person who was giving me such a hard time, and I called it out to the chairman. I actually went and spoke to the chairman. I said, look, you know, this is not acceptable, blah, blah, blah. and he had a word with him, bless him.

So he had a word with him and he checked the next day, the next meeting, he changed his behaviour. The meeting after that, he reverted back to type and continued on as he was. And I thought, well, what's the point? so it, it needs, it needs people to be able and feel free to be able to call out bad behaviour without fear of recrimination and making it actually happen.

**Amy:** It sounds like there was a lack of consistency in terms of, you know, what the, what the chairman did or didn't do. So what, what's the impact? What was the impact of you on those, you know, from those poor behaviours?

**Chas:** Well, when you, you look shot to pieces, you know, you can see almost like you've got shell shock.

I didn't obviously in anything like that, but your eyes go blank, your eyes go distant, you can't focus. You can't really talk to anybody or engage with anybody, your eye contact disappears. I was like that after the board meetings. It then took me two or three days to recover. I mean, everybody in the department could see it, right?

So it wasn't like it was, I was hiding it. They could see that that would happen after the meeting and they knew that would happen every time. And because the board meetings come around monthly and the cycle is quite vicious and demanding, you know, once you've finished one meeting, you're almost preparing for the next.

And

**Amy:** sort of other people are seeing this, they're seeing how it's impacting you. Who, who reached out to you?

**Chas:** Nobody. Nobody. They, they, well, actually one guy did. A guy who worked for me said, oh yeah, look, you know, you've obviously had a bit of a beating, you know, I'll give you a couple of days before I raise this with you or something, but nobody, nobody.

because it just, it wasn't really known about or acceptable to, to sympathize even with somebody to say, you know, bloody hell Chas, why don't you go home? You know, so you come, you come out of the meetings at four o'clock, it's lasted six hours or whatever it is, and you keep working, you keep going. And,

that just got worse and worse and worse. And then the business performance started to disappear as well. not profitability, but in terms of the infrastructure, the bit that I was responsible for, because I was basically overwhelmed with too many things to do. So, warehouse failed, we missed Christmas, we missed the change of season, and I ended up leaving in March, sorry, April, end of April, 2012, very quickly.

Like within five minutes, Julian sacked me, for various things that had gone wrong and various profit warnings that we'd had. So, I, at that point, then I just disappeared into, well, I had 10 minutes. No, maybe not 10 minutes, probably had a couple of weeks of thinking, great. This summer is coming up.

I'm going to have a fantastic summer and sit around and do nothing, and then I'll get a job in September. Well, I sat around and did nothing, but didn't feel very good about it. Then started to get a job in September and nothing happened. Couldn't get one because I was of an age.

**Amy:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. So huge impact, obviously, in terms of, I mean, I can only imagine how it would make me feel to have to go through,

it sounds like a fairly dramatic experience within those boardrooms, right, every, every month and then the, the, the change that was actually happening to the business. So let's fast forward, what, what happened to you on the 16th of December, 2016?

**Chas:** Well, I, I. I got to that point by just getting worse and worse and not really realizing what was going on, you know, and I used to stand in front of the mirror and look at myself and think, for Christ's sake, what's going on inside this head here?

And on December the 16th, we're at a family lunch just before Christmas and we normally do a crossword during those occasions and the telegraph pub quiz and all that sort of stuff. And I read out the questions and I couldn't do it. I just couldn't get myself to speak. And I just said, I can't do this anymore,

and I stood up and I went through into the lounge and I burst into tears. And cried, for quite some time, actually. Soon my wife came out and tried to console me and, you know, that did work eventually, at which point I thought, Jesus, I've got to do something about this. So I called the doctor, the doctor, spoke to me instantly and said, well, I said, can I book an appointment for after Christmas?

He says, no, come in now, come in immediately. So I did, I was prescribed medication, I started to take the medication and thought, well, that's that then. That's that done, right? It's, solved the problem. Like you have when you've got a headache, you take a painkiller or you've got a virus or something. you take tablets, you know, I thought, well, that's it.

And so three or four weeks, maybe three, no, probably two months later, I realized that actually it wasn't quite, it, it had helped. So it had numbed the top end of my depression and numbed the bottom end of my depression, so I was stuck in this sort of middle bit, which was okay, but I realized I had to do a hell of a lot more, in terms of getting myself back to where I could actually function at all.

**Amy:** But when you, when you saw the doctor, if I may. so did the doctor diagnose you then with depression?

**Chas:** Yeah.

**Amy:** Right, and you, had you had that diagnosis before or not?

**Chas:** No, no, this was all new to me, right? So, and I had no idea that I'd been experiencing it all my life.

No idea, you know, because it just, you know, you're an accountant, you're a macho finance guy, you don't give up on these things, you just keep going, you plough through it and blah, blah, blah, you know, so I had absolutely no idea. And I mean, interestingly, that summer, I, I, will I call it a suicide attempt? I don't know,

but we were very, very lucky to go to the Rio Olympics. And on one of the beaches there, there's a place on the beach where the waves come together in a, in a sort of an angle and create this vortex, where basically you can't get out of it. And the waves were coming in and it was crashing over my head and, and I just thought, oh, God, what's the point of all of this?

And it was, I was that close to saying, that's it, I've had enough, and then my two sons came and rescued me. and, you know, I didn't even twig that that was massively worrying for everybody. You know, because I don't think I spoke about it to anybody, about the fact that I'd nearly given up. I basically waited to be rescued and they, sure enough, they did.

But that, that then comes back to you when you talk to the doctor, says, well, look, you know, I've been, and I, I, interesting, I wrote down the list of things that were wrong with me and I, and I'd put self harm. No, I didn't put anything about self harm on this list to talk to the doctors, because I didn't want my kids to see it, if they ever found that piece of paper. So even then I was denying talking about it. And, then I just, as I say, got to the point where I had to do a lot more than just, take some tablets.

**Amy:** Thanks for, thanks for sharing that. So what, what did you do then subsequently to, to help yourself feel, feel better?

**Chas:** I did quite a lot, actually, but I didn't, what I didn't do was read up about it. I sort of said, right, well, I read up about it to the point where I knew the list of there's so many lists of things that you can do, which end up being tick boxes. And we'll come on to this is one of my tips in a bit I didn't do New Year's resolutions because New Year's resolutions and it was New Year, obviously,

End by the 15th of January if you're lucky right, because you go into them and you go in far too fast, you try to do too much, and of course you can't keep it up. So, I thought, I need to change my lifestyle, I need to do things that suit my lifestyle, that I can keep as part of my lifestyle without even thinking about it.

So I gave up alcohol, which actually, that's something that I didn't get used to. So I gave up alcohol for about five years, because I thought this is, alcohol's not good for you. I started to do a bit more exercise, but not overdoing it. I started to eat better. I started, because I was not drinking so much, I started to sleep better.

And it was all these sorts of things, and then over the years, I've added things to that list, and I've taken things off that list. Because, like, I listened to, Just One Thing by Michael Moseley on BBC, and it's just absolutely brilliant for just one thing that you can do every day, and it takes you no time at all.

Like breathing, you know, big deal. Drink water. Yeah, you know, it's easy, right? Take a breath, stand up, stand on one leg. So I now every morning I stand on up on one leg and clean my teeth in the shower, right? So I clean my teeth and I do, and I'm doing something that's actually helping my posture and helping my well being, you know, so, so easy to do it.

**Amy:** And how good, how good are you at standing on one leg now?

**Chas:** Oh, appalling. The hardest bit is, well, my right leg's okay, but my left isn't, but the hardest bit is to do it with your eyes closed. Oh, yes, don't, no, don't do that. Don't do that. Unless you've got people hanging around you with their arms like that, ready to catch you, because you will fall over.

**Amy:** We particularly like BJ Fogg's, Tiny Habits. He's a Stanford University guy who's, you know, it's all about creating habits with very, very small changes, so that ties into that whole, just one thing. And I know there's another, there's another habit making guy. His name I've forgotten. Somebody I'm bound to put it in the chat, in the chat.

Atomic something. Atomic habit.

**Chas:** There's a, there's a, Ian, no, he was a guy on, Love Island, Dr Alex McKenzie, I think his name is. He's got the habit stack. So, yeah, which is basically you, you build up your stack of habits, but you can take them out, you know, and a cold shower. I just got rid of that because I don't like it.

**Amy:** Excellent. Hear that Angus? He'll have something to say about that when, when he comes on later. So tell us about your ramblings with Claire Balding. What, what was the upshot? How did that happen in the first place? And what was the upshot of going online with her?

**Chas:** Yeah, I mean, I approached

the Ramblings producer, there's a lady called Karen Gregor, who I now don't know, I've never met her, but we know each other well on email.

It's on the Radio 4 website under Ramblings, funnily enough. It's called The Highest Hill in the Cotswolds.

And I kept persevering because I wanted to do it. I then went, spent an hour and a half with her and Sue, my wife, on Cleeve Hill, walking along Cleeve Hill, talking about mental health, and it was, I mean, apart from the fact that Cleeve Hill is the most lovely environment, you know, in the country almost, the views are just sensational, the environment is just sensational, and we got to talk about mental health, and I exposed quite a lot on, Radio 4,

which was broadcast some later that year, I can't remember what year it was, I think it was 2018 or something. We had a great chat and it, she was quite persistent about why aren't you doing therapy? And I thought, I don't want to do therapy, I don't need therapy, I can do this on my own, I have been doing this on my own,

it's great. But then that and looking back at that now, that was the bit that probably convinced me that I do need to do.

**Amy:** What was it she said that convinced you?

**Chas:** Do you know what? I can't remember, if I'm honest. Everybody will have to listen to it to find out. I don't know.

**Amy:** Sometimes it's a feeling, isn't it?

Yeah, yeah. Don't they, don't they, when somebody different says it?

**Chas:** But I think it also, it also started what I'm doing now by doing things like this, by doing my radio show, by doing event speaking and, and stuff like that. and I'm now in doing a production in, sorry, producing a website and blah, blah, blah, all that sort of stuff that you normally do.

But it was that bit because I really enjoyed talking about it far enough. And I love the fact that it was hopefully doing other people some good. And the more people I think that can get themselves out there and talk about it, the better, but the bit that is the most important for me is about boardrooms and senior management teams,

because I don't know of any PLC directors, of which there must be a few thousand, who've come out publicly whilst still in office and said they've got a mental health vulnerability. And that's not right. You've got thousands of sportsmen and actors and actresses and celebrities and goodness knows what else, you know, even politicians, actually, and charity workers, all of which have come out and said, yeah, look, I'm really struggling, actually.

But not many, if any there's one guy from Lloyds Bank and I think the head of Virgin Media at one point, but they both left their positions, I think. Javier Escobay, who's the finance director of Heathrow, came on my show, actually, still in post, and he has done that, and all credit to him. But, you know, you just take the average number of directors for the FTSE 100 of 12, say, that's 1, 200 people.

How many of those have come out with a mental health problem when one in four, human beings in this country will have a mental health issue at some point this year? Or in 2024, let's say. You know, there's something, something stopping them.

**Amy:** Yeah, especially if the behaviours that you saw, you know, back in 2010, 2012, especially if those behaviours continue within the boardroom.

I mean, we've certainly met a lot of senior leaders who have had experience of mental ill health, but not necessarily explored, you know, mainstay board, if you like.

**Chas:** Yeah. It's a very different environment than you'd get in a company because you are in the public arena. And the primary objective, whatever anybody says, the primary objective is about making money for shareholders.

Full stop, right? Subsequent, subservient to that is all the other stuff, one of which is mental health. And I'm, I'm interviewing an investor analyst on my show in a couple, early in the new year, actually, and he's already said to me, he says, yeah, investor analysts don't care about mental health. They just want to make sure that they're doing it, that they're doing their initiatives, you know, down the organization to get the mental health of the business

better, right? And so you've got the boardroom in the middle of this, so you've got lots of pressures from outside and shareholders who pay lip service to, to world mental health and well being because they're really only interested in, in profits. I might be being slightly controversial here, but I'm making the point.

And you've got them doing lots of good stuff, fantastic stuff in their organization to help the mental health, the well being of them. But who looks, who looks after the boardroom? When it's all behind closed doors and the behaviour, you can get away with bad behaviour because it never gets called out. And if I'm honest, I suspect some of the people around that table are thinking, thank God he's saying these sorts of things because I don't have to.

So they're actually cowardly by not calling it out, and they're also cowardly because they wouldn't dare behave like that themselves. And they've got away with it, basically.

**Amy:** Or they're not calling it out because they themselves are scared. You know, that's your question. You know, they don't feel psychologically safe to, to call somebody, to call somebody out.

**Chas:** Yeah, but they should in a board meeting. Christ. Yeah. Anyway,

**Amy:** You would hope but obviously, it's not, you know, it didn't happen when, for you, did it? Maybe it's not happening elsewhere.

**Chas:** Yeah, I'm slightly out of touch, of course, but because it's been a while, but from what I hear and understand, I don't see that much difference, if I'm honest.

**Amy:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. You said just before we, go into seeing what some people have, you know, shared questions, thoughts in the, in the chat, you said that you, you now live with depression rather than suffering from it. Can you tell us how, how has actually taking up, going back to the therapy, how has taking up therapy helped you to achieve that?

**Chas:** I, I live with it because it's a part of me. It's not, uh, something that I'm a, well, I suppose I'm afflicted with it, but it's, it's not something that I've caught, I'm not guilty for it, i, I'm not responsible for it. It's me and I just have to live with it. So what I do is I manage it as carefully as I possibly can, and that's all the things that I do,

to keep it in check and to manage it. And I know when it's going to happen now, and so does my wife, Sue, actually. And we spot it and we call it out and I deal with it in that particular moment. And what the therapy did was help me to understand myself, and give me a clear conscience, because the number of times, I mean, my show is called Just Not Good Enough for very good reason, as indeed is this for a very good reason, because that's how you feel.

You just think you're an imposter, you're not good enough to be in the position that you're in, you know, but it's, it's like a footballer, who, is really good at one club and then changes club and turns into not such a good player because the people around him, the players around him aren't giving him the same support that he got at the first club.

He hasn't suddenly become a bad player or a bad footballer. It's because the environment that he's in doesn't suit his style, and that's exactly the same with mental health. You know, you can feel fantastically safe in one environment and go to another and the job is maybe the same. same seniority or maybe a bit more,

and because the culture is different and the way people behave is different and the support levels and the recognition of mental health is different, you will behave differently. And I know that because that's happened to me, you know, and I've had periods of jobs of, four years where I felt awful,

and it happened on day one. So the therapy has helped me understand myself and say, yeah, look, this is me, you know, I'm wearing a sweater and a shirt today, and I've got, you know, grey hair, haha. I also live with depression.

**Amy:** And it's about context is what I'm hearing as well. Thank you so much, Chas.

Pleasure. Great. Yes. So let's just refer back to this question that you're asking us to respond to then. How can we create a psychologically safe workplace for everyone to feel it is acceptable to say they are struggling, particularly those at board and senior management levels? If you haven't put your thoughts or any other questions into the chat, please do so now.

**Chas:** Can I say something about the question? Would that be all right? Because I've asked this question to a lot of people, right, particularly on my radio show, as you know, I think I asked you it. and apart from you, clearly, nobody has come up with an answer, because it is so unbelievably difficult, right?

**Amy:** There's a challenge, folks.

**Chas:** Can I just, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, just one last thing. I know we're running out of time, but, I, I compare people's answers or my answer, which I'm, I don't know if I'm allowed to give yet or not, but my answer is, is just thinking about what is the one simple thing that you can do instantly,

to make a difference. And the comparison I'd make is with plastic bags in supermarkets. The government introduced a 10p charge, really simple, right, and it 90 percent disappeared overnight. So what is the one tiny, tiny, it could be tiny, intervention that you could make that might just make it a psychologically safe environment?

**Amy:** Lovely. Can I invite Angus in now just to, uh, share your thoughts, Angus, and, any questions that people have been putting into the chat?

**Angus:** Yep, thank you. I think it's always really fascinating. We were working with a company recently where their CEO, we almost had to drag him to the event. Yeah, he, even the night before it, he was, you know, reducing the amount of time,

he was saying, we don't have time to do this, et cetera, et cetera. During the event, there was a light bulb moment for him when he said, I get it. I get this. Mental health is all about an optimally performing organization, and mental health is the canary in the coal mine. That will tell you when things are going bad, when they're not working.

So I think it, I think it's really interesting you saying that the analysts are only interested in profit. If they were aware that the way to improve profits is through people feeling good about what they're doing and being psychologically safe and having, being mentally fit, if you want to call it that.

Yeah, it would be a whole different discussion.

**Chas:** I agree.

**Angus:** What are the things that you would do then, Chas, to, to facilitate those discussions?

**Chas:** You see, even I'm struggling, right, to do this, but I think it comes down to the individuals in the boardroom and around the table and in the business that need to change their own behaviour to recognize the impact that they might be having on somebody else. Learning how to perhaps recognize that somebody is struggling and providing the right support to all of those people, probably confidentially, to allow them to speak and to, to get that light bulb moment and I mean, it is so, so hard to come up with the right answer, but the more we talk about it, the better it is,

yeah, because people don't feel quite so ashamed about it. But you are dealing with shame and guilt and all of those quite powerful emotions that, that stop you doing all sorts of things. Like the guy you just spoke about, about you have to drag him to the event. Quite often I've woken up and I've not been able to get out of bed,

literally, and I've still been there at 5 or 6 o'clock in the afternoon. because you just cannot do it. But a lot of people don't understand what that means, don't understand how that feels, because they don't feel the same. That's fine, you know, they don't feel the same. So for me, the change in behaviour and attitude has to start at the very top, because the cultural shifts come from that.

If you've got a person who behaves badly in a board meeting, they will behave badly in the organization, you know, because that's how they do things. And they think they need to do it because they're a tough nosed businessman. No, actually, what you have to try and do is get your behaviour right in the boardroom, because that will filter down to the people in the organization.

Because they will see that actually the reason for success is because that's the behaviour that got you there. If the behaviour that gets you there is, nasty, competitive, belittling, bullying, you know, treading all over people, because that's how the operator at the top works and how he behaves, then everybody else will do the same thing,

and your culture is doomed to being in that position where, uh, the business case for making it better, it just doesn't warrant anything. But you're right about the business case, because I think, is it what, £1? There's a £5 for every £1, £5 return for every £1 invested or something?

**Angus:** There's various estimates on that.

it's anything from 1 to 2 and a half to 1 to 10.

**Chas:** Yeah, so analysts, shareholders should be interested in it, but they just at the moment, and it is getting better, i, I must admit it is getting better, but at the moment it's about return on capital and share price because they're looking to make money for their customers who might be an investor who's living in Asia Pacific, you know, and isn't really that interested in the mental health and wellbeing of a British company, are they?

**Angus:** Well, maybe if they saw it as, as a tool for better performance, yeah, but it's getting that understanding across and it's also interesting, we've been working with, a company that's owned by private equity company and, you know, they were, they were having a hard time about, it's all about profit, it's all about numbers, et cetera, et cetera.

When you research into some of the private equity companies that are doing well, they are valuing people and they are, it's a different model that they're starting to adopt. Yeah and maybe those are some of the first steps in terms of making mental health, a priority in this world, you know?

**Chas:** Yeah, it is, but bear in mind, that's a private environment, isn't it? It's not a public environment,

**Angus:** it is. It is.

**Chas:** and, private equity, in my experience, I've worked for a private equity company a while back, were the worst of the lot, actually. Their behaviour was absolutely dreadful, you know, and their sole objective with the business was to get the assets out of it,

sorry, get the debt and window dress it for to sell it on a four times term, three years later, you know, and that makes you make ridiculous decisions in terms of the wellbeing of people.

**Amy:** We're very much used to working with, with the senior teams within organisations, but we haven't yet worked with the full boardrooms,

so we're just putting out there as a challenge to any, any board that would like to have us in. Here we are.

**Chas:** I tell you, that would be absolutely fascinating to do that.

**Amy:** Yeah, it really would. so AJ Way, thank you for your comments. You've said here, I also think the reason why it's more a stigma at the top, levels is due to their level of responsibility.

They essentially have the success or failure of the organization on their shoulders. I think that makes people feel uneasy, as if people who suffer from mental health issues can be trusted to make important decisions. They can, we can, I even notice it in my place. We have an incredible wellbeing strategy in place, but it seems to be a, to be staff under a certain grade who avail these supports.

**Chas:** I guess that's sort of saying the same thing, isn't it?

**Amy:** Sarah McCann has said it's interesting, Chas said businessman. Have you ever encountered this bad behaviour from a woman?

**Chas:** Yes, I have actually. Unfortunately, yes, I, I, I apologise for that, I should have said business person or something,

I don't know, but, It was an unconscious slip, I apologise.

**Amy:** No, not at all, not at all.

**Chas:** But yes, woman, I mean, one woman I worked for, it lasted six months actually, and I walked out because she was so awful. I literally walked out on a Monday morning, I said, you don't want me here, I don't want to be here, and I went.

**Amy:** I also have a male friend who left his work very high, very senior level, and he left because a woman also at a senior level was bullying him.

**Chas:** Yeah, yeah, it's not, it's not limited to any gender, type, race, whatever, you know, it's the behaviour that's the most important thing, you know, all of those other things are frankly irrelevant.

It's about how you behave in the moment. Yes.

**Amy:** AJ Way, thank you again. You're saying there needs to be a group of people, I think, to stand up, and challenge the status quo. Absolutely. It's also about having that safety.

**Chas:** Yeah, you know, I mean, yeah, God, wouldn't it be nice if that happened? God.

**Angus:** Can I just ask, Chas?

What advice would you give to somebody who is in the same set of circumstances as you were in?

**Chas:** I, I think you do need, if you can, if you've got the courage, and it does take a lot of courage, you should almost say, you know, just say things like, look, I know, I hear what you're saying, but there's no, you don't really need to say it like that.

You know, or, or you do what I did and go and speak to the chairman, who's the guy at the end of the day who's responsible for the behaviour in the boardroom, and he then has to do something about it, because if he doesn't, that's a, a, a, a derogation of duty. If he does do something about it, make sure that he does it and it sticks.

I didn't, so I, I was at fault there for not persevering, but make sure it sticks, you know, and so you don't actually have to call it out in public, you call it out round the sides, and that's why networks and conversations and coffee, water cooler conversations, can I use that term? water cooler conversations are, really important for, for dealing with these sorts of things where you don't feel you've got the courage or the confidence to call it out publicly.

**Amy:** and I think some of the, you know, some of the de escalation techniques of, for example, you know, not using the word you. So, when, when such and such is said, it makes me feel like this, right? So you're not saying, when you said that, it made me feel like this. You're saying when such and such is said, or when this kind of tone of voice is used, it impacts me in this way.

That can be a great way to just bring things down a bit and actually can make people sit up and go, Oh, I didn't, I didn't actually realize.

**Chas:** Yeah. Another tactic is to confide in somebody else around the boardroom table that you trust and say, look, I really don't like the way he's behaving, could you call it out please, for these reasons and see what they do, you know, and they should do it.

They should call it out and they should either go and talk to that particular person outside the meeting or frankly do it in the meeting, in the meeting itself would be brilliant. Yeah, but I've not, I've not seen it yet.

**Angus:** Okay. Thank you.

**Amy:** Absolutely. Find allies, isn't it? Yes. Thank you. I'm very conscious of time and we still have your top tips and not least the rapid fire questions to come as well.

So let's shoot through these top tips for us, Chas. Your first one here is avoid quick fix list.

**Chas:** I think I've already mentioned that as well, and these are, these are probably my personal top tips, right, for you to look after yourself as an individual, but frankly, they almost fit the corporate culture as well.

So, you know, avoid quick fix lists. Don't, if you think you're going to change the culture, it isn't going to happen overnight. It's going to happen over quite a long period and it's, it needs to be worked on continually, you know, people who are outside the cultural boundaries need to be brought back in check and so on and so forth.

But again, this is about the New Year's resolutions, you know, you can't suddenly have a strategic plan for an organization, say, right, we're going to work on our culture, we're going to be far more mentally health aware, let's have a workshop on it, right, off we go. We'll set these values and off we go, and then nobody actually lives by the values.

Well, I mean, that's hopeless, isn't it? So avoid doing things, that just look to be a New Year's resolution, frankly.

**Amy:** Absolutely. Convert to living with depression rather than suffering from depression.

**Chas:** Yeah, I thought, I've said that bit as well, and it's about understanding yourself. But from a corporate point of view, it's about understanding that there will be people in your organisation who do live with depression,

and recognising that and putting the right support networks in place and giving them permission, all right, to actually have an off day. You know, don't ask them to be to be present all the time, just say, look, oh, you know, look, you're not good today. Why don't you go home, have a rest or something? Yeah, be kind to others,

I love that. just because I love being kind to other people. it makes me feel good, so it's quite a selfish attitude, actually. But you know, really, really simple things like holding a door for somebody or letting a car out or helping a somebody with a heavy suitcase on the stairs to the underground, you know, it's just so, so easy to do.

It doesn't take anything out of you, but gives you a fantastically good feeling. So do that.

**Amy:** Absolutely. I, I, I would, I would argue with your selfish bit. I think it's a, it's a fabulous, it's fabulous for you and it's fabulous for the other person.

**Chas:** Oh, I do it for me of course.

**Amy:** Separate I am a failure from I failed.

**Chas:** Yeah. So, because something goes wrong if you're not pushing back the boundaries then you know, you're not developing yourself, is what I would argue. And you are not going to succeed all the time because you're pushing yourself outside your comfort zone. So, say I failed, that didn't work that time, but that doesn't make me a failure.

It doesn't make me somebody who always fails, who's no good at anything. And a lot of people will try and put you down and say, God, you're useless at everything, aren't you? Right. And it's not that, it's just that you've tried to do something quite brave and quite courageous, but it hasn't come off. So learn and move on.

So separate those two.

**Amy:** Yeah, the first, the first one is like. Your identity, isn't it? I am a failure, whereas I failed is just I tried something out. I was being creative, I was being innovative. It didn't actually quite work. I'm reading Amy Edmondson's book at the moment, you know, around psychological safety,

and she's talking about one organization which every so often people get to celebrate their failures. Right, so they talk about, they talk about the idea that didn't go to fruition within the organization, but they're, yeah, they're just, it's just celebrating.

**Chas:** Can I just, can I just add something there very quickly?

Sorry, but when you talk about your failures and you live with mental health, Right, you do help. Yeah, you're doing it with because you want to show people how funny you are. Right, you're actually entertaining them, and it's not good. It is not good because you do go away thinking that you are a failure.

So you make a joke about everything because it endears people to you, because you don't you think I'm a failure I need to get people to like me. You know, so, I mean, it's a very complicated one, actually. You need to be very careful with it, I think.

**Amy:** Indeed. let's just zip through the last two here, because I'm very conscious of time.

You've got sleep there, and three, let's, three things you're, you're either proud of or grateful for every day.

**Chas:** Yeah, I mean sleep, sleep's fairly obvious. You need sleep. You need, there's a guy I'm interviewing next week, this week actually, Andy Salthead, Salthead or something, and he talks about spoons, energy spoons.

So you've got a certain number of spoons in the day. If you use them up, you can't carry them forward. So if you use more spoons during one day, you're in a deficit the next day. So, So get sleep, get some rest, make sure you've got enough spoons. That's his analogy, by the way, perhaps not what I would use, but very clear, but sleep is important.

And these three things, I don't think of it proud, I think of, awe, things that I feel in awe of. So you go round, I don't know, St Paul's Cathedral. And it, and it just takes my breath away that somebody could build that thing. If you look at very simple things like a tree, you think, oh my god, you know, look at the, look at the, look at the shape of that tree, the colours, the, you know, and it just makes you feel brilliant.

Look at the sun. You know, anything in the universe, frankly, that, that you suddenly takes your breath away is good for your soul.

**Amy:** Absolutely. Chas, a few quick fire questions. So, quick question, quick answer. Here we go. Are you ready?

**Chas:** Oh, I suppose so,

**Amy:** yeah. What does, what does vulnerability mean to you?

**Chas:** Oh, blimey.

I don't know if that's not a quick answer. Vulnerability means, well, showing vulnerability means recognizing that you're a human being.

**Amy:** Lovely. What little thing do you notice, zoom in to celebrate every day?

**Chas:** What do I celebrate every day?

Trying not to lose my temper and get irritated and sparking a bad conversation with my wife. That's, but that's all born of depression, actually.

**Amy:** So you celebrate when you, when you've managed not to lose your temper.

**Chas:** Yeah, basically I've managed myself out of falling into a depressive black hole.

**Amy:** What message would you, would you give your younger self?

**Chas:** I'd say recognize that you do have a mental health condition, don't be ashamed by it. Maybe don't talk to too many people about it, but work on making yourself feel better. So do all the things that I've done over the last six years or seven years or whatever it is. I should have started those when I was probably 16.

**Amy:** And what message would you give, sorry, would your younger self give you?

**Chas:** Why the hell didn't you do it earlier?

**Amy:** What's going to revolutionize workplace mental health, Chas?

**Chas:** No, it's not, is it? No, I honestly, I don't know. I'll have to think about that one. I'll have to come back to you on that one.

**Amy:** Do, come back to us.

Thank you so much.

I'm going to pass over now to Angus.

**Chas:** Can I just answer my own question very quickly?

**Amy:** Which question? What's going to revolutionise workplace mental health?

**Chas:** No, how can we create a psychologically safe workplace?

**Amy:** Okay, you've got three seconds.

**Chas:** What I would love to do is find a CEO or a chairman of a FTSE 100 company who lives with a mental health condition to go out public because that gives everybody permission, actually it's okay to do it.

That's my plastic bag moment.

**Amy:** Fantastic. Thank you, Chas. Let me hand over to Angus. Thank you so much.

**Chas:** That's great. Thank you. Thank you very much.

**Angus:** Thank you very much, Chas. I look forward to that, chairman of a FTSE 100 company doing that. Yes.

**Chas:** So do I

**Angus:** Thank you for your honesty, and also the courage that you've demonstrated by being so open.

You know, this has been very, very straightforward. The message is very, very straightforward. You've been very, very open and I would say, you know, you've made yourself vulnerable by being so open. So thank you for that, and let's hope more people get that link between organizational performance and mental health and what it really means.

And also let's hope that people, are able to feel free to call out that bad behaviour. Yeah. Those are massive things that are going to make a difference. So thank you very much, Chas. It was fascinating.

**Chas:** I really enjoyed it, actually. Great. Thank you. Thank you for inviting me.

**Angus:** That's an absolute pleasure.

Thank you. Thank you. It's a real pleasure to have you on. Thank you. So on the next Wellbeing Hour. We have Sue Sanders. She is the Director of Learning and Development at Motorsport Sport UK. So 25th of January, 12 noon. She's talking about racing through life, knowing when to take a break. And dates coming up,

we have Sue there on the 25th. We have Chris Abbey, who is director of HSE, operational delivery at Altrad. Altrad's a major engineering company, they sponsor the French rugby team so they work at a huge scale. Then 21st March we have, Tamana Ayazi and she is, I'm going to struggle with this, an Emmy Award winning documentary filmmaker.

She made a film called In Her Hands, which is on Netflix and, she escaped from Afghanistan when the Americans left. She now lives in London and I think her story is going to be fascinating. So please join us. Follow us on LinkedIn. you'll see when things are coming up there. Also, we're on Spotify,

we're on Apple Play and whatever else all the things are. so follow us on those podcast channels and you'll see the podcast coming up. We'd also love to hear from you and hear what you're doing in workplace mental health. and we could tell you more about our tailored solutions for senior leaders, people, managers, and frontline people.

So, please get in touch, we'd love to hear from you. Thank you very much. I think we were just bang on time, so thank you everybody for joining us today,

**Amy:**

You. Thank you.

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