

The one thing mental health experts want you to know

ABI JACKSON GATHERS PEARLS OF WISDOM FROM A HOST OF TOP PROFESSIONALS IN THEIR FIELD

Rutherglen Reformer · 2 Nov 2022 · 15 · NIKI TENNANT

TAKING care of our wellbeing is a lifelong endeavour – for both our bodies and our minds – and it won't look the same for everyone.



But if mental health professionals could share just one nugget of wisdom with us all, what would it be?

SAYING NO DOES NOT MAKE YOU SELFISH

“For some of us, saying no can be really hard. It might fill us with feelings of guilt, or even thoughts about being selfish. But the reality is, there’s nothing selfish about saying no,” says Gemma Campbell, counsellor and clinical content specialist at Kooth (work.kooth.com).

“Someone who is able to say no perhaps has healthier boundaries than someone who agrees to things they don’t want to do. Having healthier boundaries isn’t about refusing

to help out, it's about working out our personal limits, and figuring out what we're OK with.

"Over time, this means we're able to think about our own needs, as well as the needs of others."

MEN DO SEEK HELP

"The one thing I wish everyone knew is that men do seek help. By perpetuating the stereotype that 'men don't talk', we end up reinforcing that idea," says Dr Zac Seidler, director of mental health training at Movember (uk.movember.com).

"We need to stop making assumptions and start asking men what they need, because we know millions of men are reaching out for support. We keep telling men to open up, but we have to be ready to listen to what they have to say.

"You can't make someone share before they're ready, but there are a few things you can do to get the conversation going. Keep things low-key, judgement-free, and ask open-ended questions."

IT'S NORMAL FOR THERAPY TO FEEL HARD

"It is natural when considering starting therapy to feel excited and anxious at the same time, even if it's something that's been on your mind for a long time," says senior therapist Sally Baker (workingonthebody.com). "It's crucial to find a therapist you feel you will be comfortable working with. Request an introductory chat so you can find out more about their experience and how they work. "Remember, having to go into forensic detail about your life isn't always necessary anymore to achieve powerful therapeutic results."

EVERYONE IS WORTHY OF SUPPORT AND SELF-CARE

"Many of us experience that horrible sensation where we view ourselves as not worthy. These kinds of feelings have increased post the pandemic. Yet it's important to remember that each of us suffers in some way," says UKCP psychotherapist Dwight Turner (psychotherapy.org.uk).

"Having these thoughts doesn't mean we are broken, and sitting with a counsellor or psychotherapist can be the perfect route towards recognising we deserve that promotion, the applause, or that person we are having dinner with. Seeing a psychotherapist or counsellor should be an essential part of all our mental health self-care."

SLEEP REALLY DOES HAVE A MASSIVE IMPACT

"When we sleep, our brains go through a host of processes, which help regulate our physical and mental health," says Dr Lindsay Browning, psychologist, neuroscientist and sleep expert for And So To Bed (andsotobed.co.uk).

"During sleep we regulate our hormone production, including hormones that control happiness, such as dopamine. If we don't get enough sleep, we can have an imbalance in hormones, which can impact our mood and physical health.

"We also process difficult situations we're facing in our lives through our dreaming (REM) sleep. So when we don't get enough, our brains don't have the time and opportunity to do this, and we are more likely to be depressed and anxious. This is added to the fact that, without enough sleep, we may feel too tired to get things done during the day, and start to feel sad and anxious about that too."

BURNOUT CAN BE PREVENTED

“We’ve been inundated with best practices for work–life balance and self–care. The reality is, people have different needs, interests and coping mechanisms – it’s about striking the right balance for you,” says Dr

Sarah O’Neill, clinical director at Spectrum.Life (spectrum.life).

“Setting boundaries between work and personal time is a great first step.

“Your job design and workload are usually outside of your control, around which you may need to communicate with your employer – even the best self–care strategies can be overwhelmed by unsustainable job roles.

“To truly manage burnout, you will need to engage with your employer when there are areas of your role that are unsustainable, as this is at the core of it.”

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY REALLY IS MEDICINE FOR THE MIND

“Being active can improve your physical wellbeing, but it can also help you maintain a healthy mind. People who exercise regularly have better mental health and emotional wellbeing, and lower rates of mental ill health,” says Gosia Bowling, psychotherapist and national lead for emotional wellbeing at Nuffield Health (nuffieldhealth.com). “Exercise can help relieve feelings of stress by releasing anxietyreducing chemicals and giving you a moodlifting dopamine spike. “Remember: the greatest gains are often seen in those who go from doing nothing to doing something – you don’t have to be an athlete, everything you do counts. Even a short burst of five to 10 minutes of brisk walking can increase your mental alertness and lift your mood.”

The greatest gains are often seen in those who go from doing nothing to doing something

Gosia Bowling, psychotherapist and national lead for emotional wellbeing at Nuffield Health

Children’s Hospices Across Scotland, better known as CHAS, is this year celebrating a major milestone: three decades of supporting children with life–shortening conditions and their families across Scotland.

Thirty years on, we meet mum Moira Miller, whose son, James, was among the first children to visit Rachel House. Although James died 24 years ago at the age of nine, Moira explains how CHAS, to this day, still helps her through her grief.

Bereaved Scots mum Moira Miller says CHAS, which first welcomed her little boy to Rachel House in Kinross 30 years ago, has taught her to hold on to her precious son by keeping him in her heart.

It was 24 years ago when her younger boy, James, passed away at the age of nine. Yet, today, Moira still reaches out to the charity whose support and understanding help her through “when the tough days come.”

James

Miller was born a healthy baby who enjoyed happy, carefree early years with parents Moira and Willie and big brother, Andrew.

But, soon after James’ fifth birthday, his mum found him unresponsive after he’d experienced a fit.

When a consultant delivered a diagnosis of degenerative brain disorder, it was clear that life would never be the same again.

“My James liked football and digging holes in the garden,” explained Moira. “He was happiest when he was outside and dirty. He enjoyed playing with his brother and his brother’s friends. His favourite meal was macaroni cheese. Once he became ill, all these things stopped for him.” Although charity CHAS was still in its infancy when James became sick, construction of Rachel House was nearing completion. “CHAS came into my life the Christmas before Rachel House opened,” continued Moira.

“A lady came to Edinburgh Royal Hospital for Sick Children to see us and invited us to come and see the hospice. We then went for a visit before it opened, with scaffolding still up around it. There were no beds or grass but the soft play area was finished and we could tell this was going to be a special place.”

Rachel House was opened in May 1996 – and the Miller family were among the first to be able to use the facility.

Moira recalls: “The care from CHAS was second to none. When the doctors told us how ill James was, CHAS stepped in straight away. They helped me learn how to care for James and helped me realise that we were still a family that could have fun and laughter.

“We all went on to stay at Rachel House many times.

“They would listen to me. I was so scared of what was happening to James and to me.

“CHAS became a way and a place to meet other families who were going through the same thing.”

Sadly, James died early one morning in July 1998, at the age of nine years old.

“We used the Rainbow Room, which is a special place in the hospice, after James died,” said Moira, of St Andrews, Fife. “CHAS gave us precious time together.”

Now, Moira still takes part in Rachel House’s annual Remembering Day – a service at which every child’s name is acknowledged. “Even now, I need help from CHAS when the tough days come,” she said.

“CHAS has taught me how to hold on to James. I do this by keeping him in my heart.

“He goes where I go.”