



The Work Couch

NAVIGATING TODAY'S TRICKY PEOPLE CHALLENGES TO
CREATE TOMORROW'S SUSTAINABLE WORKPLACES

Episode 9 – Mental health at work (Part 1): Turning despair into hope, with Jonny Benjamin MBE

Ellie: Before we start today's episode, we wanted to give our listeners a quick content warning. We'll be discussing themes around mental health, including suicide, severe mental health conditions and mental health in the work context, which some listeners might find distressing. With that in mind, we would advise listener discretion as to whether you feel comfortable listening to this episode.

Hi and welcome to the Work Couch Podcast, your fortnightly deep dive into all things employment. Brought to you by the award-winning employment team at law firm RPC, we discuss the whole spectrum of employment law with the emphasis firmly on people. My name is Ellie Gelder. I'm a senior editor in the employment equality and engagement team here at RPC, and I will be your host as we explore the constantly evolving and consistently challenging world of employment law and all the curve balls it brings to businesses today. We hope by the end of the podcast, you'll feel better prepared to respond to these people challenges in a practical, commercial and inclusive way.

Today, in the first part of our mental health mini-series, I am thrilled to be joined by Jonny Benjamin, MBE. Jonny's incredible story has touched so many people here in the UK and all around the world, when his search to find the stranger, who talked him down from taking his life on Waterloo Bridge, went viral with the hashtag #findMike. Today, he's going to share his experience of mental illness, how a stranger on a bridge changed his life forever, and the hugely important work he's now doing to champion mental health, especially among young people. Jonny, thank you so much for joining me today on the Work Couch.

Jonny: Oh no, thank you for having me. Yeah, I'm really, really excited to be here. Thank you.

Ellie: It's lovely to be joined by you. Thank you. And, and as I said, many listeners will have read about your Stranger on the Bridge story. They may have watched your very powerful documentary on Channel 4, but for those who haven't, can we just hear about the circumstances that led you to that point of crisis, in January 2008. So, if you can take us back to the beginning first, when did you start to suffer with mental illness?

Jonny: I was really young, really, really young. My parents first took me to a psychologist when I was five. So, you know, from a really early age, we knew there was something there. But it wasn't talked about, you know, I'm sure it's the same with you and many listeners just was not discussed, you know, growing up, just, there was no awareness, there was no education. No one had the language. It was really tricky. And then it got really difficult for me in my teens, as it often does, I think, you know, mid-teens, mid-teens to late teens, really, really hard. And I just spiralled, and then became very seriously unwell when I was 20. Put into a psychiatric hospital, given this sort of diagnosis of a form of schizophrenia. And that's what led me to going to the bridge because I didn't see a future. There was nothing in front of me it was just illness and that's all. I didn't want to live like that.

Ellie: And so, we know on that cold winter day in January, which is a month we know is actually a really difficult one for a lot of people with their mental health, you'd made a heartbreaking plan.

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- Jonny:** Yeah, I mean, it, you know, it had gone through my mind so many times, but I was in, like what they call the suicide ward, it's a horrible name, but you know, basically people watch you 24/7. And yeah, I'd spent a month and I just, I was about to turn 21 and I was just like, I can't, it was just, I couldn't even bear another minute, let alone another day, week in that place and in my head. So yeah, so I made the decision to run away to go to this bridge and that was it.
- Yeah, I made it the night before I ran away. And yeah, once I, you know, once I said to myself, I'm doing it, it was like, right. There was no going back once I made this, you know, what a decision to make, but once I made it, it's like, yeah, this is it, this is it. And yeah, it was very final and concrete in my mind. That was it. Just to say as well, I didn't mention, but another big part of this was I was struggling with my sexuality as well. And I come from Jewish, I grew up in a Jewish family, went to Jewish school, Jewish community, I could not deal with my sexuality being gay. And so that was another factor in why I went to the bridge. I just couldn't live with it, couldn't deal with it.
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- Ellie:** So, with that mindset and the fact that you felt like you had absolutely no other option, a complete stranger approached you. Just tell us about that, we now know, life-changing conversation.
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- Jonny:** Yeah, I went to the bridge and yeah, out of nowhere, this stranger appears and stands next to me and starts to try and engage with me.
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- Ellie:** Do you remember that? Do you remember it clearly?
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- Jonny:** I don't remember it clearly. I remember bits of it for sure. Cause I'd never had an interaction like it before. Where someone was willing to just be there and like really kind of just, yeah, be with my pain. If that makes sense. No, no one, even, even my psychiatrist in hospital would just visit me every morning and just talk at me about how unwell I was. I was, you know, really sick and I had to take these meds and I didn't know what was going to happen to me. And, um, but this interaction with this guy was just, um, so different. Just, he was just so okay with, I was in complete despair, and he was just, um.
- Yeah, he just kind of, he stood there really grounded and he just, you know, kept on encouraging me to talk. And yeah, I didn't want to talk at first. I just wanted him to leave me alone, but his persistence and his calmness and just his compassion and patience, just, yeah, as the time went on, I kind of...
- I, started to move over to his side, if that makes sense, just a bit. It was really powerful just having, I think maybe, because he was also a young guy like me, I think maybe looking back that might've helped. It was really profound, just the way that he was with me. It wasn't just his attitude. It was also what he was saying because, you know, he was trying to ask me questions and he was also, you know, adding his thoughts and his thoughts were really quite positive, you know, that I would be okay.
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- Jonny:** And then towards sort of the end of the conversation, he was really trying to encourage me to come away, to go for a coffee. And I started to feel, this sort of sense of connection, and this sort of safety and...I mean, I really, I know I keep saying it, but I hadn't felt that way with anyone, like this sort of sense of someone really listening and understanding and it was just, it was really powerful.
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- Ellie:** But sadly, you weren't able to carry on that conversation because the police arrived. That must have been incredibly traumatic.
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- Jonny:** Yeah, it wasn't, it wasn't the best interaction, you know, it'd been a really, myself and Neil, we spoke for about half an hour, and I had eventually come off the edge and I was on the pavement, and we were about to go for this coffee. And then, gosh, out of nowhere, the police came charging in and, it got really sort of messy quite quickly. I got restrained. I got handcuffed.
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- Ellie:** which is the sort of protocol, I suppose, in those situations.
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- Jonny:** Back then, well, even today actually unfortunately. And that was it. I got dragged away and our conversation ended so abruptly. You know, being so, uh, kind of calm and he was really getting through to me. And, next thing I was in the back of this police car and the police were shouting at me why have you done this? Yeah, they were really quite aggressive. Now we have done some work with the police, so hopefully things might be a bit different. But back then it was, yeah, that was tough actually.
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- Ellie:** But Neil was treating you like a human being and, as you said, accepting your pain, which was a completely different approach from what you'd experienced before and after, I guess.
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- Jonny:** 100%
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- Ellie:** Despite you having to go back into psychiatric care, that conversation you had with Neil, it crucially offered you that tiny glimmer of hope and that did stay with you, didn't it?
- Jonny:** Yeah, yeah, because I was taken away by the police to be sectioned and I got what we call a section two. So that means you have to stay in hospital. So yeah, that was quite tough going back into hospital. But that conversation had an impact. It really had. His positivity that I would be okay.. It really stayed with me, his words, you know, because I believed him. He was so convinced that I would be all right. And yeah, that's what I needed to hear, you know? So yeah, it stayed with me for years.
- Ellie:** Literally years. And I think it took time. I think it was a number of years for your mental health to get back on track. But when your health improved, tell us about your mission to find Neil, to thank him. You wanted to thank him for those amazing actions he took.
- Jonny:** Yeah, look, I had to be in a good place. You know, I had to go public with such a difficult thing, I had to be, yeah, in a good place. It was actually six years in between you know, the incident on the bridge and me then looking for Neil. Because... there was a lot I had to work out in my head. I had a lot of therapy in that time.
- Jonny:** But when I was in a better place, I just wanted to raise awareness. I wanted to give something back. I wanted to, yeah, obviously find Neil to thank him, as you say. And thankfully I was working with an amazing charity called [Rethink Mental Illness](#), national UK charity. They do such incredible work. And they were the ones that suggested, well, why don't you do a social media search to find this guy? And I said, yeah, okay. And you know, you launch these things, and you don't know how they're gonna go. And somehow it seemed to capture people's attention and people really got behind the search, which was really, surreal. And yeah, it went viral on Twitter, in January 2014. And yeah, people were searching for him with me, which was, it was amazing actually.
- Ellie:** Yeah, it must have been incredible. And I imagine you had a lot of people approaching you, you know, who'd gone through similar situations and that, and that must have been amazing, but also quite hard to absorb as well, you know, you have to protect your own mental health during that process.
- Jonny:** Yeah, yeah, I absolutely, I was particularly touched. There was a lot of people that got in contact who had lost loved ones to suicide. And, that was really hard. I tried to talk to everyone and, you know, because that's, it's all about the talk. Like that's what I learned during that period, like people just need to talk and need to be listened to. And it doesn't happen enough out there in the, in the world. So, it was a privilege to get so many messages from people but hard to read so many tragic stories, to be honest.
- Ellie:** Yeah, absolutely. And anyone who hasn't seen your documentary, I'd really urge them to watch it. It's incredible. And you do meet some people who've been through a loss, and that is difficult to watch, but I think so important. And listeners will be able to see on that documentary that incredible moment when you and Neil, not Mike, but Neil.
- Jonny:** Yeah, I know. Yeah, that was, yeah, I did get his name wrong. Which you know what, we laugh about it now. And it's kind of, it's just part of the story, you know, the fact that, because as I said, it ended so abruptly with the police that I didn't get his name right. And you know, but I don't know, it kind of added to the whole search, the journey and it made it even sweeter when we were really reunited.
- Ellie:** Absolutely, it's so amazing to behold that moment when you're finally reunited. How did you feel in that moment six years later?
- Jonny:** I can't ever put it into words actually. It was so many emotions. I think for both of us, because, you know, for him, he never expected to see me again. And for him to see me, and I didn't realise at the time what it meant for him, but for him to see me in such a different place, because obviously when he last saw me, I was at rock bottom and now, you know, I was articulate, and I was able to tell him everything. And yeah, it was again, it was really profound that reunion and then just kind of what followed on from it. Cause you know, it wasn't just that one meeting, that reunion. We then were like, well, what can we do together? Which was, yeah, never, never expected that, neither of us expected to then go on and, you know, be good friends and work together. And yeah, quite incredible.
- Ellie:** It's fantastic. And what really shines through is you are now best friends, you're colleagues, and you're doing extraordinary things, Jonny and Neil, and you in particular, you're advocating for that better mental health support, especially for young people, because we know that is a major problem. So, tell us what you're doing with your charity [Beyond](#).
- Jonny:** Yeah, so we actually, myself and Neil, we set this charity up in 2018 because we started working together. We started campaigning. We started giving talks. And I was particularly affected by going into like schools and
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colleges and universities and hearing, well, hearing the same old story about, you know, long waiting lists for help, not good enough help when they got it. And myself and Neil, we said, well, let's, why don't we like change things? Why don't we do something about this? And so, we set this charity up Beyond with the aim of putting help and support in place early on, you know, for young people instead of, you know, as we kept hearing it, it would always get to the crisis point before something happened. And so, we said, well, let's focus on the early intervention or the preventative part of mental illness. And that's what we started doing in 2018. And since then, we've put help and support in place, schools, colleges, all over the UK, all sorts of different things, basically, like art therapy or animal therapy or counselling, or sometimes it's training for staff. Whatever is needed with the schools that we're working with we'll provide it, which is great, but we're kind of inundated at the moment, as you can probably imagine with the pandemic and the lockdowns and the real effect it's had on particularly young people's mental health. I don't think we've addressed it properly, you know, that impact still from those lockdowns, I think.

Ellie: Absolutely. I'm sure you're seeing a lot of that and I'm sure there's just so much work to be done,

Jonny: Yeah, there is.

Ellie: but it's brilliant that you're part of that. And you came to RPC's offices recently. You gave a talk to mark World Suicide Prevention Day. And you mentioned earlier your experience of being an inpatient and how you were observed, you were checked on, perhaps people were filling in paperwork about you and your mental health, but you never felt that anyone actually listened to you. So that skill of listening, which Neil did without judging you or what you were saying, that is such a crucial aspect of supporting someone with a mental illness, isn't it? It's that simple sometimes.

Jonny: Yeah. And I have to say, today I'm very lucky. I have a psychiatrist who truly listens. I feel very fortunate. And for me, my mental health, you know, unfortunately I've had a few relapses and I've had to go back into hospital for short periods. But with my psychiatrist, it is just, it's so different today because, yeah, she listens, she understands.

And, we haven't spoken about it, but the impact on my family, you know, having a psychiatrist who, cause when I'm not well, you know, my parents, particularly my dad has to maybe be my carer for a bit. And she talks to him, and she listens to him and she, you know, works with him, which makes such a difference because the impact on, you know, loved ones is huge. Again, they're often forgotten about, but they play such a crucial role, you know, particularly when someone is unwell. So, I feel very privileged that I have a psychiatrist that just gets it and really is compassionate and kind.

Ellie: Yeah. That's really interesting. You mentioned that she is also very open to talk to your family. And I guess that comes with you being okay with that, obviously. But I can appreciate from experience with relatives, with mental health, that getting everyone else on board with your journey of recovering is so important.

Jonny: It is, it is, but I have to say it's not, I mean, it took years again, took years that's been a really tough journey for all of us, my parents, my brother, my friends, because none of us could talk in the beginning. We just didn't know what to say. We didn't wanna address it. It was the elephant in the room for years, honestly years. And only in the last few years, really. I guess we educated ourselves. Got support, you know, my parents got support. There's again, amazing charities out there that people don't know they give family members support as well. Rethink and [Mind](#). And that was a lifeline for my family. So, we've all been on a difficult journey. And it's still tricky at times, you know.

Ellie: Of course. Yeah.

Jonny: It's still, so, you know, I've got loved ones that still find it hard to understand, you know, it's, that's why we're doing the work we do in schools to educate young people early on with like, the language and how to listen, because none of us got that growing up. So, we don't know how to talk and have that conversation. It's really tough.

Ellie: And another thing, you mentioned is that sort of that positivity from Neil, you know, when he said, "Don't be embarrassed, you know, you'll be okay". And, and just taking away that shame that you had.

Jonny: Yeah, I know we are talking about these things more, but not enough, because those things, shame and stigma, gosh, they have such an impact on, on people with mental health issues and, particularly when we go into companies, to workplaces and, you know, it makes me quite sad that often people will come and talk to me and Neil in private and say, "I can't tell anyone in the office about this, but", and that's such a shame. You know, we, Neil often talks about, you should be able to bring your whole self to work and you should, but I know it's not, it's not easy, is it? You worry about what colleagues are going to say, how it's going to impact, how they talk to you and work with you. But I do, I feel like things are slightly getting better maybe in workplaces, you know, still a way to go, but yeah, you know, we, we're getting there, right? I think.

Ellie: Going in the right direction. Yeah, yeah.

Jonny: Yeah, I think so.

Ellie: How do you think your experience would be different now? If you were seeking a diagnosis and treatment now, obviously you mentioned very long waiting lists, but how is that sort of experience different now?

Jonny: I think there's definitely more kind of openness and willingness, not in all cases, but, you know, particularly when we go into schools, it's quite amazing how open young people are about, "Oh, yeah, I've got this, I take this medication". And I was like, oh my gosh, like, when I was at school, no one would have dared to talk about taking antidepressants or seeing a therapist, you know. I do find that quite amazing that the younger generation are open to these things, and I feel that's really positive. I mean, yes, there are still, long waiting lists and difficulties getting diagnosis and good treatment, but at least, people are willing to be more honest and open. And also, I think when we talk to young people, they're, going into the workplace that they want to find a workplace that is accepting of mental health challenges that will make adjustments. I mean, again, when I was, in my early twenties, I wouldn't dare go into my workplace, start a job and say, "Oh, I've got, I've got mental health issues." I wouldn't, I wouldn't have done that because again, shame, stigma, embarrassment, but now young people are actually standing up and saying, "I want to work somewhere that, gets this stuff." And that's positive, right? Really positive.

Ellie: It's brilliant because it's sort of bringing mental health into the same arena as a physical disability or another challenge that you need to tell your employer about that affects you and your life. And you might need a bit of extra support. And it's really positive to hear that. And I guess feeds into how important it is for employers to get to grips with as you say, the language and exactly what you are doing on the ground to help people. And it's great having policies, but it's really much more than that, isn't it? So, if you could give some advice from your lived experience to a colleague or a manager who really wants to effectively support somebody who has a mental health issue, what would you say? What are the sort of key things to do or not to do in that situation?

Jonny: You know, there's something that we talk about a lot called asking twice. So, you know, often you might be worried about, a colleague and you'll ask, "Is everything okay?" And they'll say, "Yeah, I'm fine". Because it's hard. It's hard to be open. But we say, if you have that gut instinct that they're not okay, go back and ask again. Maybe in a different way. Maybe it's...on a walk, maybe not in the office environment. It can be really hard within actually in the office or even like on a zoom. We do a lot of, virtual meetings and, you know, having to look at each other on a screen and that could be hard. So, I know for example, some companies will do like before they start an online virtual meeting, they'll do like 10 minutes walking, talking to a colleague with just the headphones in. So, you're not having to look at another. Yeah. And I like that because

Ellie: Oh interesting. Yeah.

Jonny: It is hard, you know, it really is hard particularly, you know, post pandemic with the way we're working, it's, I don't know about you, but now, I feel like it's just nonstop and to get time to properly talk to colleagues and cause there's so much to do, but just giving that colleague real time and patience and, checking in again and then again and then again and because it's particularly, you know, us being British, we, you know, we don't want to pry too much

Ellie: Yes, I think it's that fear of saying the wrong thing or making it worse. Yeah.

Jonny: Yeah, absolutely. But, you know, as Neil always says, just being true to yourself, just listening to your gut. And because me and Neil talk about this a lot. There's lots of training and it's great. It really is great. But don't forget to be yourself in that conversation. Really be true to yourself and talk to someone, talk to a colleague, like another human being.

I think, again, living in the world that we, it's a really difficult time in the world at the moment. And just being a good human being to another friend or colleague and just checking in just and really listening and not judging and validating whatever's going on for them. That can make such a difference in this really tricky time that we're living in. Cause a lot of people feel very lost and I know a lot of people finding things challenging right now, so don't underestimate the difference of just checking in and listening, really, really listening and just offering some kindness and compassion, you know, it makes such a difference.

Ellie: Well, and in your case, you can see the amazing dividends that that act of kindness that Neil made has resulted in. So, I think it's a really important message for everyone to go away with actually to just remember that kindness is essential to helping people. Jonny, thank you so much for joining us today.

Jonny: Oh, thank you, no thank you. Thank you.

Ellie: Thank you. Thank you for sharing your story. You really bring home how important this is as a topic. How we can all help by offering to just listen, just give someone that time and showing them that there is always hope. And despite the huge challenges we've talked about and accessing treatment, there are amazing organisations such as Beyond and others who can help. So, thank you so much.

And for those of you who are listening who are struggling with your mental health, please don't suffer alone. Call your GP, the [Samaritans](#), [Mind](#), [Rethink](#). There is always someone to listen. Or if you prefer to text, you can use the text service from [Shout](#) on 85258. Well, that brings us to the end of part one in our mental health mini-series. Please join us next time for part two when we'll hear from Neil Laybourn about his side of the Stranger on the Bridge story and how businesses can implement really effective mental wellbeing measures.

If you would like to revisit anything we discussed today, you can access transcripts of every episode of the Work Couch podcast by going to our website, <http://www.rpc.co.uk/theworkcouch>. Or if you have questions for me or any of our speakers or perhaps you have suggestions of topics you'd like us to cover in a future episode please do get in touch, you can email us at theworkcouch@rpc.co.uk. And finally, to make sure you don't miss any of our episodes please hit the like and follow button.

Thank you all for listening and we hope you will join us again next week.



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