

Mental Health Awareness Week: back to nature #MHAWeek

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Mental Health Awareness Week: back to nature #MHAWeek

This week, 10-16 May 2021 is Mental Health Awareness Week. Hosted by the Mental Health Foundation, the week provides an opportunity for people to focus on achieving good mental health. There is a different theme each year, and this year it is Nature. BDBF Senior Associate and mental health

discrimination specialist, Clare Brereton discusses what Mental Health Awareness Week means to her.

As an employment lawyer, I see all aspects of day to day professional life. This often touches on the personal.

It is the nature of my work that I don't tend to speak to clients when everything is going well. Many of the clients I advise are suffering from serious and long-term mental ill-health conditions. I am often called up on to advise on whether someone is disabled with the meaning of the Equality Act 2010, and therefore whether their employer is under a legal duty to make reasonable adjustments to alleviate the disadvantage caused by their disability. However, each time I consider what adjustments could be reasonable to help someone with a mental ill-health disability, it makes me stop and think. These are practices that should be available to all employees. Helping employees achieve good mental health should be given as much priority as helping those suffering with poor mental health.

The steps employers could take do not need to be onerous. For example, a culture that encourages employees to take a proper lunchbreak, to get outside and connect with everyday nature (which is one of the aims of this year's Mental Health Awareness Week) could have huge benefits. The rewards of such a practice would be reaped not only by employees but by businesses employing a more engaged and healthier workforce.

Connecting with nature

Having Nature as a theme for this year's Mental Health Awareness Week, at a time when the weather is improving and social restrictions are continuing to lift is apt. We should find it easier to get out and connect with nature.

In the UK, many of us are fortunate enough to live near an open green space. I grew up in a village in Cumbria, surrounded by fields. Whilst living in London is a far cry

from those wide-open spaces, I am fortunate to be able to enjoy Hampstead Heath. Whilst home working continues, it is easy for me to connect with nature, weather permitting of course.

As we approach 21 June, many professionals expect to soon return to more frequent trips to the office. What about when we work in central London? How can we connect with nature from the City?

The key, according to the Mental Health Foundation is to connect with “everyday” nature. This includes, for example, urban garden spaces, tree-lined streets, rivers and even office plants. BDBF’s offices are in the City of London, surrounded by this everyday nature. Our office features a large tree in the centre of the workspace. Yet pre-lockdown and on the occasions in the past year when I needed to work from the office I would often fail to notice it, instead rushing to get to the office, grab a bite at lunchtime or catch a train home.

I am not the only one. Londoners have long had a reputation of walking quickly, head down, headphones on, often absorbed by a mobile phone. It is rare to see a Londoner interacting truly with the world around them.

Mental Health Awareness Week reminds us that these are habits that we should change.

Research shows that noticing nature supports good mental health. Let’s take the time to slow down and notice our surroundings. The City of London is close to the river. We should start building in a quick walk by the river at lunchtime, clear our mind and get those all-important steps in to help our physical (as well as our mental) health.

Conversations about mental health

Noticing and connecting with nature is only one part of Mental

Health Awareness Week. This is something that we can do on our own. The second part involves someone else. We need to start talking about mental health and once we start, we should not stop.

I have noticed that people have become more open about their mental health during the past year. It has been a year of unprecedented professional and personal turmoil. My friends and I have talked openly about the difficulties we have experienced in lockdown and how each week seems to get harder, not easier. It is said that a problem shared is a problem halved. I have found it hugely beneficial to know that others share similar feelings and that I am not alone.

Conversations like those amongst friends should also take place in the workplace. I am grateful to work with a supportive and open team at BDBF. Even during deepest darkest lockdown we regularly checked in with each other, through weekly team meetings, informal coffee catch-ups and a Friday afternoon “drinks trolley”. This has meant our team has remained strong and we have not lost cohesion. That said, I can’t wait to be back in the office with my colleagues.

Having open conversations about mental health is something that should be encouraged in all workplaces and there should be a mixture of formal and informal opportunities to enable those discussions.

Employers might set up designated, confidential support helplines, appoint mental health first aiders and implement buddy or mentoring systems. Less formal processes, which likely needs to be led from the top initially, involve people being encouraged to answer the question “how are you?” honestly. This is a unique time. Everyone is being affected by the same thing, though in different ways. We should use this shared experience to help each other.

If you would like to discuss mental health or other equality

issues, please contact Clare Brereton (claretaylor@bdbf.co.uk) or your usual BDBF contact.

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