

Mental Health
in the Workplace -
Who Cares for the Carers?

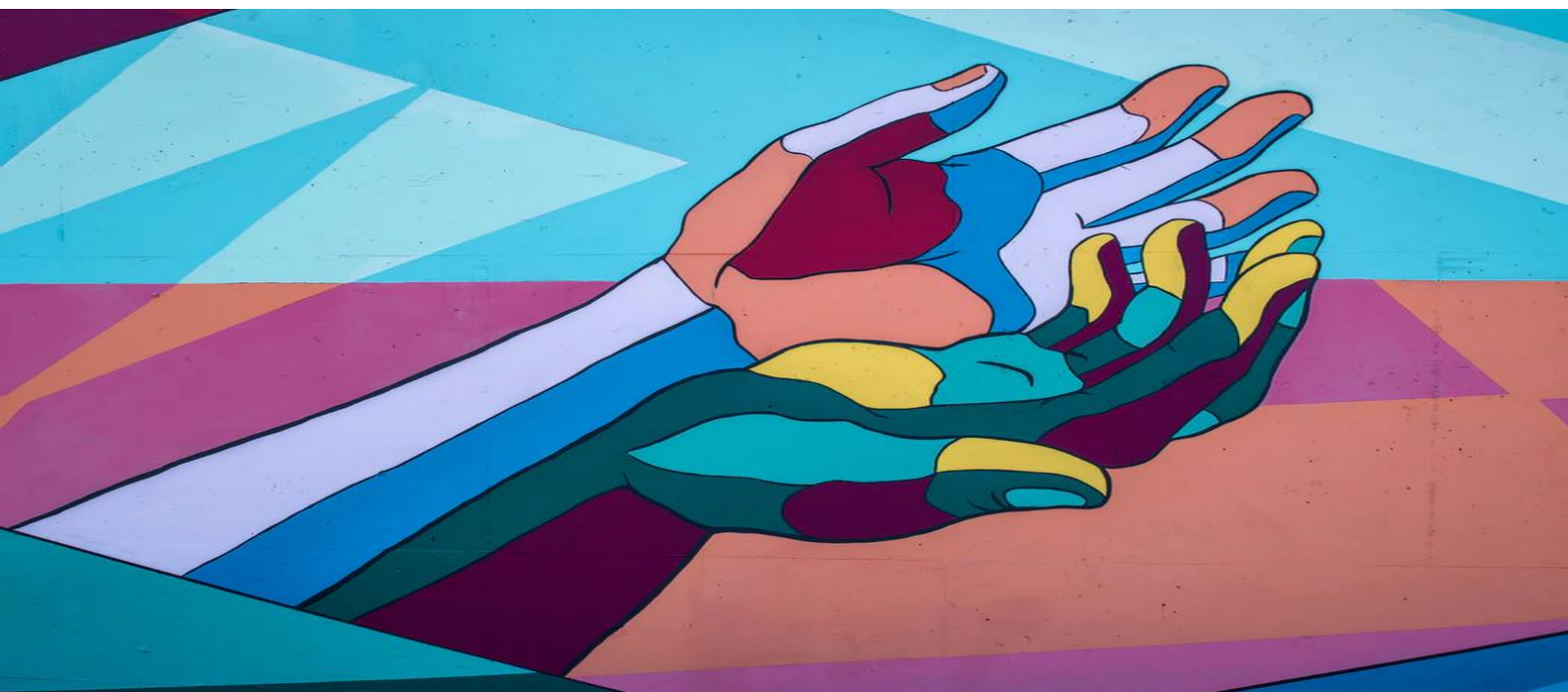
Mental Health in the Workplace - Who Cares for the Carers?

A simple online search on “HR mental health” brings up a very long list of articles and thought pieces about how HR should do more for an organisation’s mental health; how HR is best placed to implement, monitor and improve mental health interventions across the workplace but - who is caring for the carers? How do we make sure that we don’t break ourselves in the process of supporting others? As far back as 2018, an article in HR Management asked the same question: is HR neglecting its own mental health?

2020 must have been the toughest year yet for HR professionals – not only dealing with “business as usual”, which in a good year can be stressful, but in the UK we have also had the twin impacts of Brexit and the COVID pandemic to navigate. A survey across EMEA in 2020 by VMware showed that of the 950 HR Directors surveyed, over half were already worried that remote working because of lockdown would mean that relationships with their teams would suffer, one third felt pressure to be “present” off the clock and roughly the same were reporting that stress levels had already increased. It is therefore unsurprising that HR colleagues are being expected to lean in even more than usual and are being relied on by colleagues to make even more decisions which call for a combination of strength, emotional intelligence and empathy.

None of this is alien territory for most HR professionals but we have experienced a far more magnified set of pressures than ever before and because these situations are our norm, it can be easy for businesses to forget that the carers need care too. Let’s take a little advice from the airline industry – we need to fit our own oxygen masks before helping others.

Charles Alberts, Head of Health Management at Aon coined the expression “vicarious stress” when describing the extremes experienced by HR. This is defined as “When we listen to others and how they are feeling, such as stressed, anxious, depressed, we run the risk of taking those feelings on ourselves and feeling overwhelmed”.



How do we make sure we are taking care of our HR people?

One suggestion is supervision – in the same way as counsellors or therapists are required to undertake supervision as part of their development and this would be a good way of ensuring good habits are made and maintained. This requires time and thought to get right and it is vital to make sure that this experience is seen as safe, non-judgmental and supportive.

Another suggestion is the provision of coaches and mentors for HR professionals to work through their experiences – either internally or externally to the organisation. A small investment in the right skills could make a very big difference to the overall well-being of the function. Some organisations have gone as far as to offer unpaid time off for HR employees to care for their own wellbeing. This is a good practice however, sadly, this is financially impracticable for many.

In many respects, the last year has given rise to better consideration of each other's feelings and this is seen online in the media and social media and certainly, in my experience, this is now manifesting itself in more colleagues asking after each other's wellbeing – more so than ever. We have seen a new trend of asking each other "Are you ok?" and then – "No really; are you ok?" Perhaps more consideration of each other's feelings and well-being will be one of the more lasting legacies of 2020? Let's hope so.

Work Horizons

At Work Horizons we are highly experienced in HR strategy, helping organisations to address profound challenges and make the shift to a more purposeful, productive working culture. If you would like to discuss any of these ideas, we would be delighted to hear from you.

Please visit workhorizons.com or call 0121 663 1710.

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