**[Executives on the Brink: The Taboo of Mental Health in the City of London](https://kar.kent.ac.uk/cgi/users/home?screen=EPrint::View&eprintid=68278)**

**By Ben Laker**

{Abstract}

*The World Health Organisation believes that mental health affects one in four people in their lifetime. This article discusses how companies can help employees who work in demanding jobs take mental health well-being more seriously*

{Body}

Long hours and unsupportive cultures in the City can lead to “unmanageable stress” writes Ben Laker. This is one conclusion from his latest research The Sales Persons Secret Code, which suggests more than one in five employees face stress, depression or anxiety. Why is this the case? After interviewing 1000 of the world’s most iconic salespeople from organisations including Adidas, Apple, Cisco, Deloitte, GSK, JP Morgan, Microsoft, Oracle, Steinway & Co. and Vodafone his research team began to understand why.

One executive interviewed was Justin Stone, a Vice President at JP Morgan who lead the UK Field Sales Executives in Asset Management. Justin was a highly successful operator, and yet on boxing day 2015, he decided to end his life. This is Justin’s story…

I have worked in Financial Sales for the past 20 years and this time last year I was suffering with a horrible illness which is called “depression”. The World Health Organisation believes that mental health affects one in four people in their lifetime which is quite staggering considering how little from my experience the subject is discussed at work in financial services in the City of London. The recent increased media coverage on anxiety, depression and suicide in men has given me the courage to share my story because I hope my few words can help someone avoid my dark, lonely and frightening experience.

So this time 12 months ago I knew something was very wrong as I felt like my head was being crushed, struggling to sleep and I was no longer looking forward to anything. My experience of the anxiety at the beginning of my illness is when you feel everything but your senses are amplified, then the depression is when the feelings are replaced with a new feeling of loss, desperate and alone. This had been gradually getting worse over approximately six months, but due to the stigma of mental health at my firm and in the industry trying to tell someone who would listen “I’m falling fast” was incredibly difficult. I was too scared to let my dirty dark secret out of the bag because it’s simply never discussed in a sales environment (It must just be me feeling like this, so keep quiet or look very weak). I told one or two closest colleagues that I didn’t feel great but I simply didn’t feel like I could share the full truth – I was embarrassed and also determined I would just get-over it, like I have done with many other things in my life.

I even reached out to HR at one point at the end of the summer of 2015, but after delays in setting up a meeting I decided to cancel the meeting. I also attempted to meet with my MD who was my acting line manager at the time due to my manager leaving the business in the Autumn, but again trying to set up this meeting was slow and again I cancelled the meeting because I felt this isn’t the place to hang out my dirty washing. What is odd on reflection, is that during the months building up to my ultimate low point I pushed harder and harder at work to get results as it was my way of “pushing through” hoping it would pass like a bad cold – but it didn’t.

Eventually a few months later I did have a meeting with my acting line manager on my last day at work before the Christmas break (December is a very challenging month for depression as its the most social of months, but you feel like crying rather than wearing a party hat). This meeting was my annual appraisal and lets say that it didn’t go very well. I felt sick even thinking about this meeting beforehand because I was then very tired, anxious and desperate to tell someone I needed help but this meeting was not the place for such a display of weakness.

Four days later on boxing day at my lowest point my fuse eventually went BANG!I decided I was going to take my own life because I had calculated that I was no longer valuable to society and I couldn’t take the pain anymore. My plan that morning involved visiting some open water with a very heavy rucksack attached to me.

For whatever reason I wasn’t meant to leave the world that day, but it was a hugely traumatic event for my wife and I which has completely changed our outlook on life forever. I received professional medical treatment during the Christmas and New Year break which steadied the ship, but I still went back to work as scheduled a week later which now sounds crazy! When I returned to work in the New Year I told one of my closest colleagues that Christmas was “difficult” and I didn’t feel great, but again the culture didn’t allow weakness so I kept silent and now my secret was even darker than ever before.

With the support of my wife, one close friend and medical help, with huge determination I slowly started to feel an improvement in my mood in the coming months but I did have big blips of anxiety/depression (its not a nice straight line of recovery). On one occasion my new and much more supportive line manager commented that something seemed different with me and my performance at work and I explained that I did have a recent episode of anxiety, but no help was offered – just a “sorry” you have been feeling down was the response. So my initial views on showing any vulnerability in a sales role at a large American Bank were then reinforced even more. I was left with the choice of me accepting this or moving to an employer who might promote a better understanding of mental health by removing the stigma attached to it. With my employer’s unemotional help I chose the latter later that year.

How do I think companies can help employees who work in demanding financial services jobs take mental health well-being more seriously:

1. Make sure people are not isolated. In my case I had very little clear guidance on how I was performing “objectively” which created massive anxiety in what was a very scrutinised role in the company.

2. Test and check that your managers are conducting regular, documented and planned one to one meetings which discuss “clear objectives” and also have a permanent agenda point which is: how are you coping with the pressures of work” and “how can I help support you”.

3. Don’t keep making people feel afraid by creating a culture of uncertainty. For example telling people “one of you in this team “will not” be getting a bonus in the January”. Its a cocktail for disaster from my experience.

4. If you are a manager and feel uncomfortable in understanding how to support employees with mental health issues “ask for training” from your HR team – don’t put it off as it could save someone’s life. On reflection there were clear indications I had problems to the “trained eye” but people need to be aware of the signs of mental health.

5. HR and Senior Leaders – start creating dialogue on the subject with your people“now”! Allow informal conversations on the issue with specially trained staff. As the financial crisis clearly displayed in 2008, if you keep chasing a number without consideration of real people’s lives, nature always finds a way of re-balancing things and its normally quite dramatic.

If “you” think you are suffering with Mental Health issues remember that “you are not alone” and from my own experience you are stronger than you think! Don’t blame yourself and make sure you stand up proud and ask for help and know that getting better is a real option which can “start today”!

Only 40% of employees are “comfortable” speaking with their manager about their own mental health issues. When I asked people how often does your manager coach you towards your objectives the results were that 43% of the time meetings were “sporadic” with no clear action plan or agenda (meetings less frequent than every 12 weeks). When I asked how often does your manager “ask for feedback” the response was 46% of the time they only ask at the annual appraisals or never ask at all.

One year later I’m humble and grateful to be in a much better state of mind and now in the “light” which is a wonderful thing to “deeply” appreciate again. I hold no bad feelings towards anyone and just hope that someone “acts” upon my feedback.  I strongly believe we can attract good things in life by looking for them and believing anything is possible.

*{CREDIT} This article includes insights from The Sales Persons Secret Code (LID, 2017), a global study into how salespeople behave and driven, which reveals the secret code behind consistent and high-level success. Based on 20,000 hours of research, this book is for any sales professional, or indeed anyone involved in the sales process of their company, who wants to learn the secrets of successful selling. [www.salespersons-secret-code.com](http://www.salespersons-secret-code.com/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)*