{Pull} My plan that morning involved visiting some open water with a very heavy rucksack attached to me

{Pull} I received professional medical treatment during the Christmas and New Year break which steadied the ship – but still went back to work as scheduled a week later

{Head} Executives on the brink

{Stand} Unsupportive cultures and haphazard HR strategies are leading to unmanageable professional stress, finds Ben Laker

{Intro} In high-flying finance jobs, depression is an epidemic. This was the terrifying conclusion from my latest research ITALS *The Salesperson’s Secret Code* ITALS, which suggests more than one-in-five employees face stress, depression or anxiety. Why is this the case? After interviewing 1,000 of the world’s most iconic salespeople from major global organizations, I began to understand why.

One executive interviewed was vice president of a very prestigious firm who led the UK field sales executives in his area of work. He was a highly successful operator, and yet on Boxing Day 2015, he decided to end his life. This is his story…

{Body} I have worked in financial sales for the past 20 years. This time last year I was suffering with a horrible illness called depression. The World Health Organization believes that mental health affects one in four people in their lifetime, which is quite staggering considering how little the subject is discussed at work. 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.

Twelve months ago I knew something was very wrong as I felt like my head was being crushed. I was 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. You feel desperate and alone. This had been gradually getting worse over approximately six months. But, due to the stigma associated with poor mental health at my firm and 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 is simply never discussed in a sales environment. (I thought: “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. I was also determined I would just get over it, just as 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 tortuous. Again, it was me who eventually cancelled it because I felt that work wasn’t the right 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 – it was my way of 'pushing through' hoping it would pass like a bad cold. But it didn't.

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). The meeting was my annual appraisal. It didn't go well. I felt sick even thinking about the meeting beforehand because I was then very tired, anxious and desperate to tell someone I needed help. But the 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 me, which 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 (it’s 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. Yet no help was offered – just a “sorry you have been feeling down”. This experience simply reinforced my initial views on showing any vulnerability in a sales role at a large company. I was left with the choice of 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 unwitting encouragement I chose the latter later that year.

{Xhead} Five ways to better employee mental healthcare

How do I think company's can help employees who work in demanding financial services jobs take mental health well-being more seriously?

1. BOLD **Make sure people are not isolated** BOLD 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 BOLD **regular, documented and planned**BOLD 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. BOLD **Don't keep making people feel afraid**BOLD 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'. It is 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 BOLD **ask for training** BOLD 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'! BOLD **Allow informal conversations** BOLD 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 rebalancing things – and its normally quite dramatic.

{Infographic}

The mental health stigma

A lack of communication and trust between managers and employees is compromising professionals’ mental health

43% Proportion of personal objectives meetings that were sporadic and with neither a clear plan nor agenda

46% Proportion of managers that ask for feedback on their performance less than once a year

40% Proportion of employees that report being “comfortable” speaking with their manager about their own mental health issues

Source: Dr Ben Laker et al, ITALS *The Sales Persons Secret Code* ITALS research 2016

{Plug} 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, the 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)

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