

Claire Russell interview podcast transcript

Caroline: Hello! And welcome back to the show, our guest today is Claire Russell who's the founder of Mental Health in Business which provides in-person and online mental health training, as well as 1-2-1 coaching, and resilience toolkits for men women, and home workers. I think we can all agree there's not a day that goes by without a conversation around mental health in the workplace, so I'm really glad we have Claire on the show, she gives us some fantastic practical tips that you can use about to create that culture at work that promotes good mental health. So keep listening!

Caroline: Claire, it's absolutely brilliant to have you as a guest on our 'Mind Your P's' podcast. How are you doing?

Claire: I am really good, thank you. Yeah, really good. It's really good to get the chance to come and have a chat with you on here. So yeah, all good.

Caroline: Where are you talking to us from today?

Claire: I am in my office at home. So I work at home most of the time and did long before the pandemic, actually. So it was no big change for me here in Rugby. So I'm tucked away in the nice peace and quiet of my office.

Caroline: Oh, lovely, lovely. You were telling me that it's absolutely freezing where you are before we came on the call?

Claire: It's absolutely freezing. I can't believe it. I got dressed this morning for summer with a summer dress on, and I've ended up going and getting changed to putting a jumper on and putting the heating back on. It's absolutely freezing.

Caroline: It's crazy, isn't it? It's absolutely crazy, I know. Listen, tell us a bit about 'Mental Health in Business' - is your business, but it's not always been. So tell us a bit about why you're here today and why 'Mental Health in Business'?

Claire: Yeah, absolutely. So I started 'Mental Health in Business' about four years ago. Before that, I was an insurance broker for a long time, 25 years. I started out in the insurance industry straight from school. I didn't really know what else I wanted to do and ended up in a job in an insurance brokerage and fell in love with it. I mean, how you can fall in love with the world of insurance, I don't know, but lots of people seem to. I had a great career, a really great career, and I started my own business when I was really young. I was 20 when I started my first brokerage and ran that for a very long time, really successfully. I loved it, loved being a business owner and everything about it really. I had a really good decade or so running that business. Then I sold it to a very large insurance business who had approached me and wanted to buy the business. In the end, I got talked into it, and that led me to quite a big change, really. I went from running quite a small business to then being a very senior decision maker in a really big business. It was a massive sea change and it brought a lot of stress with it as well. I did that role for a few years, and then I did another similar role. Then in that second role, I ended up having a breakdown. Having that experience of mental illness was just a massively eye opening experience for me. Because until that point, I always thought I was someone who didn't have stress. I didn't experience stress. I remember one time just saying to a friend of mine, I'm not the kind of person that would ever experience mental illness. I

didn't mean anything negative by that, I just didn't think I was. I thought I was really resilient and really strong. Then suddenly, I found myself having a breakdown. And so it really opened my eyes to my own vulnerability. It also opened my eyes to what a lot of people around me must have been experiencing as well. That kind of led me--I took some time out of the industry for a couple of years and I went and retrained as a coach, as a mental health trainer, as a suicide prevention educator, and also as a listening volunteer with Samaritans. That was the beginning of me then moving into doing the work that we now do in our business.

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Caroline: Wow. That stress and that breakdown, Claire, I mean, how did it manifest itself? Was it physical? Was it in your mind? What was it?

Claire: Yeah, that's a great question, Caroline. It didn't just happen overnight. With the benefit of hindsight, I can look back and I can see that it was something that happened cumulatively over a number of years, probably three or four years. During which time, the level of stress that I was working in, the conditions that I was working in, it's really high stress and that was persistent. That was just all the time. I can see that, first of all, anxiety started creeping in. That anxiety started relatively low level but became very, very acute and really quite debilitating. I ended up having horrendous, very, very acute panic attacks. I mean the most notable of which happened on the M6. I was driving into work during rush hour and I had a really acute panic episode in the car, and I stopped my car in the middle of the M6 in rush hour. I mean, I didn't have any idea what was going on. I just wasn't with it at all, and ended up being moved by the police and all sorts. So anxiety was creeping in, first of all, probably over about two years. Then depression started to creep in alongside that. What I found was I was masking it. I was trying to hide it from people. I held a very senior role in the business. I didn't want people to know that I wasn't well, that I wasn't coping, so I hid it. I masked it every way that I could. Drinking a lot more alcohol than was normal for me, that was one of my ways of masking it. Because I'm sure you're aware, the insurance industry is well known for its social aspect. There's a lot of drinking that goes on, and so that was a great way for me to mask it. We'd go out with people and drink alcohol, and it changes how you feel in the moment, at least. It just all built up. Then one day, I just completely snapped. That kind of me hitting rock bottom really did happen just on one day. I don't remember anything that happened before this, but I must have been making my way to work. I have no recollection of that journey. The first thing that I remember is I was standing in New Street Station in Birmingham on a train platform, I should have been in the office by this point and I hadn't made it to the office, and I was looking at a train coming towards me. I just remember having the thought if I step in front of this train, I won't feel like this anymore. It was a split second that I had that thought. I'd never had anything like that before. It was a split second. That was me snapping. I realised that I'd had that thought, and I called somebody and said, look, I don't feel safe. I need somebody to come and get me. And that was it then, I just completely fell apart. That was the real rock bottom moment for me.

Caroline: Wow. What happened then, Claire? How did you, I suppose, fight back, come back to where you are now?

Claire: Well, I knew that I needed some time off. I knew I needed time out and time away from work. I ended up walking away from the role that I was in, and effectively at that point, walking away from my career, because I couldn't see at that point any way of going back. So I walked away. I think it was probably about 18 months in total that I didn't work. During that time, I got therapy. I was working really closely with my GP who was incredible. I was on medication. I was on all different forms of therapy.

Then during that time, probably about six months in, I'd always wanted to volunteer with the Samaritans, it was something that I'd wanted to do since I was a little girl, and I decided I would use this time where I wasn't working to do that. So I went and enrolled with Samaritans for their training program, did the training, and then started volunteering as a listening volunteer. That was a big part of my recovery. I think being able to help others, for a lot of people, is really important. You get a great sense of reward and satisfaction out of doing that. So for me, it was a big part of that recovery process. I started doing that, and then from there, I started doing various other forms of training and things that ultimately ended up leading me to doing the work that I'm doing.

Caroline: Yeah, and you feel well now?

Claire: Oh, brilliant, yeah, absolutely. During that time, I received a diagnosis of severe depression and Generalised Anxiety Disorder, and both of those conditions are there. I will have days here and there where anxiety will creep in, where I'll have those familiar feelings come back in. Similarly, I'll have days where I can feel that depression just gnawing away a little bit in the background. Those familiar feelings of low mood and depression creep in, but I know how to manage those conditions now. Now I know the signs, I know the triggers that I have, and I know the things that will help me if I'm having a bad day. It never gets to a really acute level anymore. I'm able to just spot when it's there and reach for one of the many different coping strategies and things I've got in place now.

Caroline: Yeah, well, I'm glad to hear that you're feeling better. I suppose just to say thanks really, thanks for being so open and vulnerable about where you are, because I think it really, really helps people. From your experience, you're now teaching, coaching, and training hundreds of people across organisations, hundreds of leaders, other managers of people. I mean, this is such a hot topic. It's a big focus for businesses, much more so than ever was. Is that what you're seeing, hearing, feeling across the business community that people are under enormous stress more so than before?

Claire: Yeah, absolutely. I think before the pandemic, we were facing a crisis in mental health, and it's only gone in one direction during the last two years. There are a number of longitudinal studies that are looking at the long term impact of the pandemic on mental health and wellbeing. They all suggest that the numbers of people experiencing common mental health disorders like anxiety and depression have increased really significantly over the last two years. There was already huge pressure upon business owners and business leaders pre-pandemic to do more around workplace mental health. The pandemic has really added to that very considerably. I think for business owners and business leaders, the subject of workplace mental health has just really risen up the agenda. I think it was something that I think pre-pandemic, a lot of business owners were starting to realise that they needed to do more. I don't know, maybe it still felt like a sort of nice-to-do thing, rather than something fundamental to every organisation and to all people in every organisation. I think the thinking on that has really shifted now. I think there's an absolute understanding that this is something that should be sitting at the core of every organisation now.

Caroline: Which is brilliant. I suppose, you know, I speak to lots of business owners and business leaders. I'm part of a Vistage group myself full of brilliant business leaders, and the one question that I hear more and more often, and I ask myself and I speak to my colleagues about is, how do you create that culture of mental health and wellbeing in your business? And I suppose, how do you spot that someone is

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feeling under pressure, particularly as you know, for example, in our business, we all work remotely. I mean, we do come together once a month, and once a week we have a team call, but it's not the same as being in front of someone all the time. I think those are the fears of business leaders right now is how do I create a culture that encourages and promotes and supports people's mental health and wellbeing? And how do I support when someone's struggling?

Claire: Yeah, so there are two distinct questions there, really. How do you create a culture of psychological safety? First of all, we have to create the conditions in every workplace. It doesn't matter what sector, it doesn't matter what type of organisation or what it is that a business does. Any organisation that employs people absolutely has to prioritise creating a culture of psychological safety, first and foremost. What that means is an environment where people feel safe to be able to speak about how they feel openly and honestly, to know that that will be met without judgement, to know that there are not going to be negative consequences if they open up and speak about mental ill health, because that's one of the biggest fears. It's one of the biggest barriers to people being open and honest about their experience and how they're feeling and what they might need. It's that fear of, well, if I open up, then are people going to judge me? Are people going to treat me differently? Is it going to have negative consequences for me in my career? The answer should be of course it's not going to have a negative impact. But the reality is that even today, there are around 300,000 people a year in the UK who lose their jobs because of mental ill health. It's staggering that that is still happening even today. So it's a valid fear that people have, and it's not okay that that happens. It shouldn't happen. It still happens all too often. The problem is that when it does happen, those individuals that it happens to don't have the strength or the fortitude to fight back. If that happened in almost any other circumstance, if people were being discriminated against in almost any other context, they'd be fighting back wouldn't they? They'd be bringing tribunals against organisations and all of those things. The problem is when that happens, when somebody's experiencing mental illness, they don't have the strength to do that. They barely have the fight in them to get up and do what they need to do for themselves each day, never mind get into a fight over something like that. So people walk away. It's still happening too often. So we've got to change that. There has to be an environment of psychological safety, first and foremost, where people know that they can open up, they can be honest, they can ask for help, and that that will be met without judgement, and with kindness and compassion, and that the people within the organisation, whatever type of organisation it is and whatever structure it is, whether it's a small family owned business, or whether it's a larger business that's got formal HR structures in place and all of those things, they just need to know that whoever it is that's going to be able to support them, that's positioned to support them, is going to do that, is going to be there for them, is going to provide the support that they need, and is going to create the conditions for them to be able to thrive and do well at work. That's the first thing. And how do we do that? How do we do that? Well, it's by being honest, really, as business leaders, and taking a really honest look at what's the lived culture within this business, really. There's a big difference between an aspirational culture and a lived culture. I think as business owners and leaders, we've got to be really honest with ourselves and take a really honest view as to what is going on within our organisations. We've got to make sure that people that are in leadership roles within any organisation have had some mental health training so that they can be instigating these conversations, they can be quick to spot the signs, and they can ensure that they are doing their part to create a healthy workplace culture when it comes to mental health and wellbeing. Then the other part of your question around how do we spot the signs, how do we see when people are experiencing mental health, it's a difficult one, especially with so many organisations now working remotely or having some form of hybrid working model. It's not as easy

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to spot the signs if you're not spending lots of time together in an office or in whatever your work type of workplace is that you would normally be in. I think if you're all together in a workplace, then you can pick up on the energetic signals that people give off. You can pick up on changes in appearance and just the way that a person is showing up. You can pick up on those sorts of things much more easily when you're in a room together, when you're in the same space. I think when we're working remotely it's just a bit more challenging. People can hide behind a screen. It's quite easy for people to put a bit of a face on really for the duration of a Teams call or a Zoom call, and then come off that call, and then that's when they're left on their own. I think we've just got to be more vigilant. I think we've got to be watching for any change in the way that the person shows up. They might be quite subtle things. It could be changes in language and email communications. It could be an individual being more or less responsive than they are normally. We're used to using all of these video conferencing platforms, Zoom and Teams and things like that. It could be people avoiding putting their camera on, not wanting to be on camera, or participate in any kind of team discussion and things like that. It's just watching out for that sort of thing and being prepared to have a conversation about it. I think a lot of the businesses that we're talking to, we are encouraging - and they are saying that they are putting wellness at the top of the agenda of all their meetings. And so whether they're team meetings, or whether they are one to ones that they're doing with individuals, they are putting that piece around wellbeing at the top. The first question is always, how are you? Are you okay? Are you really okay? Not necessarily taking that stock answer of, 'I'm fine', 'Yeah, I'm okay.'

Caroline: Yeah, no, that's really, really helpful, Claire. I think it's hard--I suppose, in today's world, where you're almost paralysed sometimes with fear of saying the wrong thing, but I always believe it's about intention. It's about intentionality. If you're not trained and you don't know the things to ask, you could very well go down a route that's not helpful. It's just understanding some of that, really, and how to ask the right questions of someone that you're concerned about, I suppose.

Claire: Yeah, absolutely. There is lots of great training. As you know, one of the forms of training that we provide is 'Mental Health First Aid training', and that's a great training to equip people to be able to have those conversations, to know the right questions to ask, to know how to respond if people do open up with challenges and all those kinds of things. But you made a great point. Fundamentally, it's about intentionality. It's about where is that coming from. I think, provided we're all coming from a place of authenticity and genuinely caring about people, you can't go that far wrong, really. It's okay to be human. It's okay for all of us to be human. We won't always get it right. We might be a bit clumsy in the way that we approach things. It's okay. I've had years of training in this stuff now, and I'll be clumsy sometimes. I'll get it wrong sometimes. Or even someone will share something with me that is so shocking or so difficult that I won't know what to say. I won't know how to respond immediately. It's okay to say, gosh, I don't really know how to respond. I don't really know what to say to that. And I'm so grateful that you've opened up. I'm so thankful that you've trusted me enough to share what you just have with me. We don't need the answers. We don't always need a solution or something clever to say. I think if we're coming from that authenticity and compassion and genuine care, then that will be received in that way.

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Caroline: Yeah, and that's what it's all about. We were laughing the other day about forced fun. You know, this forced fun that we do where it's like we must have a quiz night on Zoom, or we have to have fun. It's actually just, as a leader, you're thinking about ways in which it's not always about the work and you can just take some time out. We were doing our two-year birthday this month. We're doing a big volunteering

day on Wednesday with a lot of our businesses that are local, and it's a beach clean. It's like let's just have fun with it. Let's just chat, be together, be together with other people, other businesses, and let's see where that takes us. Then Thursday, we do a once a month team meet, and we've got an insight session around personality profiling and how we communicate together, just trying to think of things and ways that allow us to consider others, I suppose.

Claire: Yeah, and connect with each other as well. I think that one of the big issues over the last couple of years is that all of us have had fewer opportunities to connect with people. It's a fundamental need that we all have, to experience feelings of connection with other people. For those people that do experience or are prone to experiencing any sort of mental health, that feeling, that lack of human connection can really trigger those sorts of feelings. It can really trigger those feelings of isolation and everything else that goes with it. I think finding ways to communicate authentically—I keep banging on about this authenticity because it's so important. If everything that you're doing, or anything that you're doing within your organisation, if it comes from an authentic need and authentic desire to help people and to create a good place for people to be, you can't go back wrong. But it's just about having that genuine care, isn't it, about how people are?

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Caroline: Yeah, that human connection. And as you say, being clumsy, we're all clumsy at times. And it's like giving permission to say that's okay, isn't it?

Claire: Yeah, absolutely.

Caroline: And listen, you're talking a lot about mental health and your job, and you've been through what you've been through, what do you do to unwind? What do you do outside of work? What are your hobbies? What makes you have that feel good fun factor, Claire?

Claire: Oh, great question. Doing the sort of work that I do, and then it also being a big part of the kind of volunteer work and stuff that I do as well, it's really important for me that I have a proper self-care regime. Because otherwise, it's a lot of giving and a lot of—you don't take on other people's issues, necessarily, but if you're having those sorts of conversations a lot and supporting people a lot, it can have an impact on your own mental health and wellbeing for sure. So I'm religious about my self-care practice and about carving out the time that I need to do that. I've got a really busy family life. I've got two teenagers and dogs, and so it's hectic and there's a lot going on in our house, but I just make sure that I carve out time for myself. I have a sign that goes on my bedroom door. So the only way for me to get any peace and quiet is to lock myself in my bedroom or close myself away in my bedroom. Quite often I'll just go and lie on my bed and stare at the ceiling for half an hour. It's just like having half an hour of peace. I put a sign on the bedroom door that says 'Do not disturb unless you're bringing me tea and chocolate.' The kids will quite often come and there'll be a little knock on the door, and they'll come in with a cup of tea and a nice bar of chocolate for me.

Caroline: Lovely. I love that. So, 22 years old, first business, your first brokerage - I've obviously got a background in the insurance sector side, so I know a lot of the things that you're talking about, particularly the socialising and the client dinners, but what does success mean to you, Claire? Because you've set up and sold a business, you've been through difficult periods, you're now running 'Mental Health in Business' really successfully, and you've got work coming in and lots of recommendations, which is brilliant, but what does success mean to you?

Claire: Oh, gosh, it's changed, Caroline. It's changed a lot over the years. If you'd have asked me that question in my mid 20s, it would have been a very different answer to the one that I would give you now. I was very, very financially oriented when I was younger, and I achieved a lot of success financially. Then I had all the trappings that went with that. Something that I think you learn, and certainly I've learned as I've grown older is those are not the things that bring you happiness. So now for me, success is about having a good balance in life, about being able to have the time to do the things that I want to do. I do work hard. I'm very fortunate to be doing work that I absolutely love. Getting up and doing what I do every day makes me really happy, and I get a huge amount of satisfaction doing it. I don't want to work every hour God sends. I want there to be time for me and for my family. I've got teenagers who are rapidly approaching adulthood, and they're going to be off doing their own things. I want to have quality time with them and do nice things together. So it's just about having balance. It's about being in a position, which I am now, being in a position to choose what I do, and to do work that feels truly aligned with my own values, to work with clients who are aligned with our values as an organisation - so we're quite selective about that - and to be able to have that balance. People talk about work life balance all the time, but it's important. If you're going to maintain good mental health and wellbeing, then you've got to have that work life balance.

Caroline: Yeah. We talk about it as you've got one life really, don't you?

Claire: Yeah.

Caroline: You've got to fit work in it, and you've got to fit the family and the fun bit. It's one life that you need to try and mould into shape. I think, post-pandemic, it's much more important that that life has the different elements of it, that you get that good balance of fun, and connection, and family time, and holidays, and all that great stuff. I'm sure the whole of Britain is going to go on holiday in July and August this year.

Claire: Yeah, absolutely. I've just booked my holiday for October. July and August are always really a busy time businesswise, so I won't be having a holiday then. But October, and I cannot wait!

Caroline: I bet you can't. I bet you can't. Listen, what's next for you, Claire? Tell me more about 'Mental Health in Business' and your plans for the future.

Claire: Oh, wow. I mean, we have enormous plans, Caroline. There's a lot of incredible stuff that's happened, despite the pandemic, actually. It was interesting for us at the beginning of the pandemic because like many organisations, we really did have to change the way we did things. Because pre-pandemic, everything we did was delivered in person. Obviously, it all ground to the halt. There was a bit of a hairy time there where we were wondering what we were going to do. But we are a much better business for it now. It's brought lots and lots of amazing opportunities. A lot's happened in the last two years. As we go forward from here, we're growing our team. So we've just taken on a number of new consultants. We're doing more and more work with organisations that are global. We're growing our footprint outside of the UK. We're going to launching a new proposition into the education sector in the second half of this year. So that's really exciting for us. I'm a mum of teenagers, one of whom has had horrific problems with mental ill health over the last two years. So I've had a lot of experience with what it is to be a parent, having to put my professional stuff to one side and just be a parent to her, whilst she has been going through really horrific times with her own mental health, and seeing what support is available to them. That's made me very driven to be a part of driving change in terms

of what is done for and around children. So that's going to be a big part of our plans going into the second half of this year and beyond.

Caroline: Amazing. I think that's something that's very much needed. Actually, one of my previous guests, one of the guests that's coming up, Gavin Oattes, has actually written a book for teenagers, a fantastic book exactly about how to manage your life really in a positive way. I can give you a link to that as well.

Claire: Oh, yes please. Yes.

Caroline: Claire, listen, it's just you and I have met each we other. We've known each other about 12 months now. Every time I speak to you, I'm always inspired and just in awe really of what you've been through, what you do, and how you cope and manage. So thanks for sharing some of that with us, because I think the openness and the vulnerability, and as you say, the authentic self is just so important. I really like some of your messages about psychological safety, and just being human, and it's okay to be clumsy. I think for a lot of people, that's good news because it is a worry. You do worry about saying the wrong thing or what that might look like. But Claire, listen, I wish you every success in the future. Thanks so much for taking the time to talk to us.

Claire: It's been a pleasure. I have loved it. Thank you very much.

Caroline: Cheers.

Caroline: Fab, some really great stuff there from Claire, every time I speak to her I learn something new. And her point about aspirational culture not being the same as lived culture is maybe a bitter pill to swallow, but I think it's a really important one if you're genuine about creating that culture of safety. So be sure to check out Mental Health in Business they've got a great offering, and they're really lovely people. So I hope you liked the episode, and I'll see you next time.