

Introduction

I am delighted to have been asked to chair this seminar as part of European Week for Safety and Health at Work, hosted by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions with the support of the Health and Safety Authority on increasing the awareness of mental health issues in the workplace.

I believe that the workplace is the final frontier in our journey towards breaking down stigma in Ireland. Conversations are happening around kitchen tables, in classrooms, in communities, at national level in the corridors of power and in the media. However, for a long time I have been very aware at the lack of conversations about mental health in the workplace. Is it any wonder as after all the recession has made people very wary about letting their mask slip and showing their vulnerability at work. However, stigma in the workplace existed way before the recession but it just got worse as the recession brought the fear of losing ones job and livelihood.

When I talk about mental health whether it's as a journalist, or as a HR specialist, or as a trainer part of the mental health awareness in the workplace programme with See Change, or as Wellness Recovery Action Plan facilitator – a self-management mental health tool anyone can learn, or as the Director of a mental health support service called Insight Matters which I co-founded with my partner Anne Marie Toole and together we manage a team of 23 therapists in our busy city centre practise. I am always very conscious to speak about mental health from a personal perspective instead of speaking about it in an abstract manner.

I am passionate about mental health because I have mental health problems. I first began experiencing these in 2005, I was working in a busy city centre

based recruitment agency as a Senior Recruitment Consultant. I was single handily bringing in 70% of the companies annual income. I was working around the clock as these were the demands of the job but I also felt this horrendous pressure to perform better than my colleagues. The main reason for this was my employer had applied for my work permit and without it I would lose my ability to live and work in Ireland. I felt disempowered and constantly stressed. Just to tell you how stressed I was, I managed a team of nearly 100 temporary employees on my own. I was responsible for 20-30 contracts around Dublin from hospitals to nursing homes, hotels to industrial catering units and for 2 weeks a month I would manage the 24Hr on call service – when I say 24Hr I mean 24 Hr, calls would come in at 4 am for last minute bookings to cover sick leave and these calls would continue over the weekend. I never got paid extra for it but could I complain? No! So I swallowed it all. As if that wasn't enough I had an incessant feeling that I was meant to be doing something else with my life... at that time I didn't know what but it kept me up at night, it was relentless.

In 2006 I started thinking about suicide... seriously, I would drive home every evening and think one little swerve and it would all be over. The only thing that stopped me was that I would hurt others in the process. I remember trying to tell one of my Directors that I was struggling and the response I got was “sure we are all under pressure”. So I got help outside of work, got myself a therapist and started working through my issues. Turns out the job was just the catalyst as I had a number of underlying issues that I had been carrying since I was a young child... including sexual abuse, being rejected by my parents when they found out I was a lesbian, being fired from my first radio job in Sri Lanka for being open about my sexuality – I tell you my therapist had her work cut out for her because it turns out that immigrating from your trauma doesn't make it

go away. But it was in that place of self-reflection that I realised that nagging feeling I had about doing something else was my calling to reclaim my dream job in the media. Turns out my mental health crisis for me was the best thing that could have happened as it made me correct the course of my life and now I am delighted that my mental health experience had driven to help others find their way towards recovery.

So that said now you might have a greater understanding of why I am so passionate about the topic but also my story might give you some insight on first what a person who has mental health problems looks like - how impossible it is for people to simply leave their problems at home but it will also show you that people who struggle with mental health in the workplace can bounce back, be productive and even be an asset to your organisation if given the right supports but most importantly it's an employer's duty of care to ensure the mental health of their personnel is supported as its part of a health and safety – it's the law, it's an employee's right. Saying something like “ah sure we are all under pressure” simply isn't good enough anymore. So the question is what do we say, how do we say it and how can we introduce the topic of mental health in the workplace? We are here to ask these questions and hopefully by the end of the seminar you will have the awareness and practical skills to become a mental health ambassador or champion... remember it must start with you – be part of the change!