



## ‘Physical and mental are the same. Your brain is physical. If you didn’t have an issue with your brain then you would not get depression’.

Ruby Wax OBE has become an advocate for improved mental health provisions, following her own battle with clinical depression. She speaks to *Governance and Compliance* about how companies can do more to support their workers

INTERVIEW BY KIRSTY-ANNE JASPER, DEPUTY EDITOR OF *GOVERNANCE AND COMPLIANCE*

The Mad World London Summit 2019 was held on 8 October. Designed to turn the conversation about mental health in the workplace up a gear, the summit accelerated the shift from stigma to solutions. By focusing on fresh thinking, it attempted to draw in those that have not yet been reached, as well as those that are looking for ways to build on and bolster their commitment to employee mental health, wellbeing and workplace culture. It convened a range of commercial leaders, from C-suite to line managers and next-generation leadership teams. There we met Ruby Wax OBE, who graduated with a master’s degree in mindfulness based cognitive therapy from Kellogg College, Oxford. She founded Frazzled Cafes; meetings which provide a place where people can gather to talk and share their personal stories in a safe, anonymous and non-judgmental environment. She spoke to *Governance and Compliance* about the importance of mental health provisions.

### How did you become the poster child for mental health issues?

Comic Relief put my poster up without asking me. It was a photograph that said “one in four people have mental illness. One in five people have dandruff”. I have both. So, they outed me. And then I wrote a show and I pretended that it was my poster! That’s how I did it because otherwise I never would have said anything.

After I was outed, I toured psychiatric institutions doing my show for two years. Then I wrote my next book which was not about mental illness, it was about being frazzled, which is stress. Stress about stress is good, but it’s the bad stress which we all suffer from.

In my show the audience would speak in the second half, these are big theatres and they were really brave. They spoke from the heart and I thought these kinds of people can meet each other because people do not want to say things in front of their

families, but they do not mind if it’s a thousand people. That led me to come up with the idea of the Frazzled Cafes. We have 15 around the country with facilitators where people can speak honestly, and it’s free. We no longer have that community, church or place which offers that. I always wanted that type of place, because I think talking is half the cure.

### What about the people who have difficulties opening up?

This isn’t therapy and we can’t help people who are in a mental health emergency. Life is tough for stress and the Frazzled Cafes are a good place to come because you really feel your heart opens and you’re with your people. They meet every two weeks and people make an appointment to come.

It’s trying to rebuild the connection to each other that modern day technology has moved us away from.

### **Are these issues more prevalent in certain industries? What about show business?**

Yes, it's poisonous, but when you're 20 years old it's good because you're just running on adrenalin all the time, so what is the difference? When you're 50 years old it's awful, unless you've made it otherwise it'll break your heart. And you don't have the resilience because there's so much rejection all the way through and the rejection is towards you. That's when people end up measuring themselves against others.

When I was younger, I think I was worried that people were stepping on my turf. But now I have made my turf so unusual that they can't step on it. It is a combination of science and comedy, and nobody else does that except Bill Bryson, he is a genius; I'm not even in his league.

I've learned that fame is very addictive, money is addictive, and technology is addictive. It's not good for you because there's no end to it. But I wouldn't be doing my work around mental health now if I didn't work hard before. And it's weird because there's young people who come to see my show because they think I write books, they don't know that I ever did TV.

Show business or comedy has nothing to do with it though. I think if you make people laugh, they feel better – that's why people come to the show. But if you're the comedian and you have a mental illness, it doesn't make a difference because your body doesn't know what you do for a living.

### **What about the difference in how people approach mental health compared to physical health?**

Physical is mental; physical and mental are the same. Your brain is physical. If you didn't have an issue with your brain then you would not get depression. You would get burned out, you'd get anxiety, and you'd get other stress effects. But to me depression is predetermined for one in four people and you need the genes for it. People say it's on the spectrum but to me it's like Alzheimer's, it's not on the spectrum – you either have it or you don't.

If you have the genes and then you have that pressure, you will get it. But if you don't have it you're not going to get it, you'll just be stressed.

### **How would you like to see mental health be addressed by organisations?**

It won't change unless the reward system changes. And I don't know how to do that. I'm looking for a business where they walk the talk and so far I'm not seeing it in Europe or the US. The only place I'm seeing it is in Patagonia, they walk the talk. It's not just the CEO, or the line managers. It's down to the cleaner, everybody needs to feel work is good. I want to go in there and feel it.

But in order to do that, they'd need professionals, they don't need a line manager, they need doctors, they need mindfulness rooms, they'd need frazzled rooms, and they need CBT. They don't need massage

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or other relaxation.

Go and have a massage outside of work if you find it relaxing but that's not scientifically based. It's never had the empirical results that CBT does, it's not a brain changer, it's a relaxant which is good, but then a week later what do you think happens to your body? Nothing. But if you can afford it it's fun.

### **How can line managers help their staff if they're suffering with poor mental health?**

What's a line manager? What is it? I don't even know. As a supervisor, they run the business too, therefore it's a conflict of interest. They won't be trained for it and they're not looking out for it and they generally think it's not their business.

### **People do need to have those discussions with their line managers sometimes. How can we help people have those conversations?**

Well, it's a good first port of call.

In the past you could call a lawyer if it was a physical disability. Now you can call Mind and ask them for advice. You have to be careful, as you can get fired if you have too much time off for sickness. And you might be faking it, but there's ways to look to see if people are abusing the system and lying about mental health issues. Somebody could be taking advantage too if they just want to go fishing, you know what I mean?

### **You are an advocate of mindfulness, how can you incorporate that into the workplace?**

I do mindfulness because that's what I studied. It's about creating a space for calm when you actually need a break. I'll go into the bathroom and sit on the toilet to create my own space, it could be anywhere, just in the corner is fine, but you need to create your own space.

I know that in terms of mindfulness people in the UK are ahead of America because it's in parliament, they teach it at Oxford and it's in schools so in this country they're already ahead.

Last year parliament started training 200 of their staff on it. But, I've got to say though if you look at what's going on in parliament at the moment mindfulness training is not working. It's absolutely crazy in parliament at the moment.

### **Do you think we're moved away from that idea of British stiff upper lip then?**

Oh, yes, it's no different now than anywhere else. n