

MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS

Abbey Petkar explains the importance of protecting the mental health of our workforce.

Mental health is a subject that just a few years ago was rarely spoken about, a hidden challenge for many who were unable to raise their concerns and an unimportant issue for organisations who saw it as yet another item on the list for HR to deal with “at some point”.

Security professionals are, like so many other key workers, on the front line keeping people safe. They are at risk like others from COVID or indeed other illnesses and even physical attack. Yet they are also emotionally and psychologically at risk. National and international press and other industry’s highlight the mental health challenges faced by so many people at the moment. However, we as an industry are doing very little to raise awareness and support our hard working, under-pressure workforce.

Times have changed and via a host of campaigns, influencers and research, the world has woken up to the fact that there is a genuine global mental health crisis. People are overworked, stressed, depressed, anxious and far more; they are suffering in silence on a daily basis and there needs to be a significant shift in perceptions and attitudes leading to genuine support and healthcare if we are to combat the situation. This statement was true a year ago before we went into the first lockdown here in the UK, before social interaction and the ability to exercise and be free was effectively stopped. The result is an even greater decline in our mental health and wellbeing and a national and global population facing a wealth of new challenges. I do not for a moment question the need for the lockdowns, but we must all be aware of the consequences and for those of us working in senior positions in the security industry we must do everything we can to help our workforce and their families.

Mental health issues have affected us all to some extent over the last year; from the parents struggling to home school kids, the furloughed workers, the unemployed, the frontline key workers to the kids themselves – the majority of who didn’t get to see their friends for months. Statistically speaking the majority of the security workforce is male and sadly very few

people realise that young to middle-aged men are among the most vulnerable when it comes to suicide risks. We must all do what we can to protect our workforce – not just from the obvious, but also the silent dangers.

One of the Magenta marketing team, who has also trained as a psychotherapist and hypnotherapist, often talks about the importance of the Three Ps when it comes to mental health – Positive action, Positive Interaction and Positive thought. In conversation, writing and lectures he discusses the need for each of these positives to impact our daily lives and the need for them to be balanced if we are to achieve optimum mental health. When each of these positives take place, we produce the right chemicals in our brains to support mentally healthy behaviour and are able to cope with almost anything life can throw at us.

SECURITY GUARDS ARE STILL NOT TREATED AS FRONTLINE KEY WORKERS, WHICH AFFECTS MORALE

Now put those Three Ps into the context of the Coronavirus pandemic, lockdowns and ongoing restrictions. Positive action is all about doing things, not just exercise (though that is close to the top of the list) but achieving goals, getting things done and generally ticking things off lists are all positive actions. For a year now our activities of all types have been limited and for many people stopped completely with vulnerable individuals unable to leave their homes – once the house was redecorated and the garden tidied in the first lockdown there was nothing left for many to do. For our security workforce it was no different for those on furlough and stuck at home. Whereas for those capable of work the only thing they could do was go to work – they were quite literally venturing out from the safety of their own homes into unknown risks on their lives, putting them under incredible levels of stress and fear.



The challenges of COVID have placed extra pressure on front line security workers

From a positive interaction point of view, we are at our most primitive level a tribal species. Some people might not like crowds and large groups, but we all feel better when we are talking to and spending time with others – even if it is just one other individual. Again, this has been tough for many during the last year, with family links and day-to-day contact with friends severed. Not knowing whether someone else might be infected adds another burden of stress and even when you do meet you worry that the law has changed, and you are unsure about whether you are in the wrong. For our security workers who are able to do their job you might think that at least they get some more interaction in their lives. Think again, though, the pandemic creates question marks about their colleagues, changes how they interact with each other, adjusts the processes and procedures they follow and adds changes to something they were comfortable and happy with. It’s true that a little bit of change is good in our lives – but when everything changes at once it leaves people stressed and worried.

Lastly, there is positive thought. Telling someone to cheer up and look on the bright side of a situation is never a good idea, but 15 months into a global

pandemic it is utterly pointless. True we have a world-leading vaccine rollout programme, but we also have unknown variants, a potential third wave in other parts of the world and a deep abiding fear that this is not the end. Under those circumstances it is hard to find the space for positive thoughts. Are our security guards supposed to think positively about another unknown amount of time doing the work of frontline key workers while not being treated with any level of equality?

IMPACTING MORALE

We have a responsibility to our workforce in the security industry in a number of ways and as I alluded to above, this starts with the fact we are still not treated as frontline key workers, which has a huge toll on our security guards. Firstly, this means their morale is impacted – they are out there, day after day protecting people, places and products yet they are not given the recognition for what they do outside of their own companies. I like most responsible directors in the security sector recognise and reward my team, provide encouragement and do all I can to be uplifting, but it is still a blow to their morale when

the government doesn't include them on official lists of keyworkers.

The nation's security guards are travelling to work on public transport with the additional risks that entails. They are frequently dealing with individuals who ignore laws and regulations because they, by their very nature, are those most likely to require the input of a security guard in any given situation. They are at risk, but they still do their jobs because they are professional; because they feel they should and are supporting their community; because they feel a responsibility to their employers; and of course because they have a responsibility towards their families, where they are often the main breadwinners. It is also worth noting that there is a higher proportion of BAME men working as security guards than in many other sectors and as the media has reported the BAME community faces some of the greatest COVID risk. All of these factors weigh heavily on the minds of our security guards, damaging their mental health.

THE WORLD HAS WOKEN UP TO THE FACT THERE IS A GENUINE GLOBAL MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS

Shift working is also a fundamental part of the 'average' security guard's life. Any mental health expert will tell you that poor sleep impacts our mental health and poor mental health impacts our sleep. It is a vicious circle made worse by working odd hours, shift patterns and nights under the best of circumstances – under COVID it is dramatically worse. In response to this, we are trying to stabilise the working patterns for our staff to ensure a true work life balance with not just time for rest and recovery, but also ample opportunity to adjust to different hours and shifts. It is not an easy thing to achieve, but is truly worth it for the sake of our staff. Healthier staff also have the benefit of being better staff, more capable of doing their jobs, so it is ultimately a win-win situation. However, even if there was no direct benefit to us as the employer it would benefit our team, so is worth doing.

I'm working closely with my whole workforce to ensure on-going mental health support for our team, their families and any of the communities they work with. I implore my counterparts in other organisations to do the same. A key part of what we do is as simple as gathering advice and thoughts from respected sources and sharing them through a variety of channels. These include mental and physical health advice because the two go hand in hand. When we improve our bodies, we improve our mental health and vice versa. We have an opportunity and a short window to help a generation of security guards stay healthy – now is the time to act ●

Abbey Petkar is managing director of Magenta Security and throughout his time at the company it has not lost a customer through poor service. To maintain Magenta's success and promote his vision for the industry Abbey is a vocal commentator on a host of industry issues.

The security industry must do all it can to protect its workforce from this silent danger

