

OK

NOT OK



Mental health issues pervade society, and the design industry is no exception. But what is the extent of the problem, and what can we as a profession do about it?

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Above: Designer Sara Lopez worked with charities, social enterprises and individuals to develop an easy-to-use mental health self-assessment kit, as pictured below.

I

magine you were in a car accident and had to spend time recovering in hospital. You'd expect your friends and family to rally around, and your employer to cover your workload while you convalesce. Your colleagues would send flowers and sign a card, relatives would help out with the kids. It would be an unpleasant experience, for sure, but at least you could count on everyone to do the right thing.

Contrast that with a scenario in which you suffered a serious mental health problem. Now things get a bit muddier. The remedies would not be so obvious or straightforward; in fact, you might not know what to do at all. When you try to explain your problem to people, they may not understand. They may even be unsympathetic. Or

perhaps you wouldn't tell anyone at all, and just keep trying to soldier on.

If this were the case, you wouldn't be alone. Poor mental health affects half of all working people in the UK, according to a recent survey of 44,000 people carried out by the mental health charity Mind. Only half of those who've experienced problems with stress, anxiety or low mood have talked to their employer about it. And a recent poll by the Institute of Directors revealed that fewer than one in five firms offered mental health training for managers.

Although there's no hard data on mental health problems in the design profession, there's plenty of anecdotal evidence that many suffer from anxiety, depression and the like.

And that's not surprising, believes Sara Lopez, a graduate designer in London who — following her own negative experiences with mental health services — has developed a self-assessment kit called Mindnos



"I believe as designers we have certain sensitivity and empathy that makes us more vulnerable to mental health issues," she says. "We often see our creative selves struggling to fit into strict patterns driven by productivity and profitability. Social media, while it has a good side, can also have a bad influence on our wellbeing when it creates unnecessary expectations of living other lives, and being a different person. Combining that with deadlines and pressures that may affect our personal life can be damaging to the point of burnout."

UNDER PRESSURE

Jessica Christina, a graphic designer working for an agency in Jakarta, Indonesia, tells a typical story for those first entering the industry. While at university studying communication design, she experienced significant anxiety issues caused by imposter syndrome. “In a nutshell, it was the fear of being not good enough,” she says. “Whenever the lecturer was about to present my work to everyone, even though it was for constructive feedback, the anticipation of hearing that criticism was driving me crazy. I was used to the individualistic nature of high school, and wasn’t really used to the collaborative system in design school where everyone could see my work and comment on it.”

The problem continued when she started her first job. “The creative director saw me as an ‘entitled millennial,’” she explains. “Plus I was a woman and from a minority, so I had it pretty rough. The creative director didn’t care about my feelings

of anxiety, and brushed them off, assuming I could just ‘get over it’. After dealing with this shit all day, I found I just couldn’t switch off in the evening and forget about my day job. Eventually, the environment became so toxic, I handed in my resignation. Now things are much better; I work at a branding agency in a job I enjoy, and I’ve kept the anxiety and self-doubt somewhat under control.”

While Christina found her line manager dismissive when she spoke up, others don’t even get that far. Matt C Stokes, a designer and illustrator based in Brighton, struggled with anxiety and low mood for years without ever being able to tell anyone at his workplace.

Eventually, things came to a head. “It was getting quite bad,” he recalls. “I was worrying about things a lot, and it was affecting my day-to-day life and work. So I went to see my GP, and I was referred to a wellbeing service and did CBT (Cognitive Behaviour Therapy), which helped me think differently about things.”



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MATT C STOKES, DESIGNER AND ILLUSTRATOR

THE TOXIC SIDE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media can be both a positive and negative factor to designers facing mental health challenges, designer Sara Lopez believes. “It’s a bad influence on our wellbeing when it creates unnecessary expectations of living other lives and being a different person,” she says. “Particularly, when it makes you feel you are constantly behind or missing something. Idealised lives and

bodies clearly lack honesty, being based on fake appearances where things feel spontaneous or natural but are actually meticulously carved.”

There are positives too, of course. “It’s such a great tool for connecting with others you would not otherwise be able to,” she says. “What are the chances you’d otherwise meet people with similar interests from different parts of the world? It

can be an amazing place to build connections, find hobbies, or even start a business. From an entrepreneurial point of view, it can be very positive too, but it’s still able to generate anxiety when you compare yourself to others, spend too much time engaging with technology and forget to connect in the real world.”

If you fear that social media is dragging you down, do

something about it. “We’re bombarded with people’s nonsensical thoughts, but there’s no law to say we have to be involved with them,” says Brand Nu CEO Radim Malinic. “After my breakdown, I deleted the social media apps from my phone, and the jump in mood you would not believe. It takes a couple of weeks before you stop looking at your phone. And then suddenly, you feel liberated.”

That included thinking differently about how he approached his design work. “Things can go immediately to DEFCON 1 in my mind,” he explains. “And I realised I was immediately catastrophising things if I got a load of emails and suddenly something new had to be done. I was going through the worst-case scenario, disproportionately so.”

Going through CBT helped to alleviate this trigger. “Recently I’ve been able to compartmentalise a bit more,” he says. “So now if I get a bunch of emails about something then I can tell myself: ‘I don’t need to read them yet, there’s other stuff I need to get done first’. So I’m getting much better at just dealing with the day-to-day.”

He’s also been able to take a step back and consider how other aspects of working in design can affect his

different, I guess. I’ve just decided not to bring it up at work.”

BEING OPEN

Others, however, report positive experiences when they’ve opened up in the workplace about their mental health problems, including Ollie Aplin, a designer based in Brighton.

He had a major mental breakdown less than a year into his first freelance contract, when he was working in a three-person studio, essentially as its fourth team member. “They completely understood and were really cool about it,” he says. “They were like: ‘if you want to come in and you just want to chat, we can do that. Or if you just want to stay at home and work, you can do that. Or if you just don’t want to do anything, you want to just chat to us in a couple of



Above: Jessica Christina didn’t always get the support she needed for her anxiety issues.

When Aplin was at university, his mother died. “But I didn’t allow myself to pause or breathe,” he recalls. “I’d been on this path to becoming a designer for so long that I couldn’t let her dying take me off the path.” Then around nine months after he got his first freelance gig, and two years after his mum’s death, he had a breakdown.

“I stopped functioning,” he recalls. “3am in the morning, I just sat bolt upright, having the most intense panic attack I’ve ever experienced,” says Aplin. “And it didn’t shift, it didn’t dissipate. It lasted for about three months and I was in a complete state. I couldn’t work, I couldn’t function, I couldn’t do anything.”

But rather than being triggered by difficulties at work, Aplin believes his breakdown was caused by everything going well. “It was just something in

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mood. “In this profession, we get into this habit of being ever so critical about everything,” he points out. “And I don’t think it helps, because I’m so critical about design all day, and then at home, I’m overly critical about other aspects of my life. Consequently, it’s so easy to become anxious about everything, and then you don’t stop thinking about it.”

Stokes continues to seek help for his mental health challenges, but he’s still not told anyone at his company about them. “I recently got promoted to line manager,” he explains. “So I didn’t really want to mention that I’ve been referred to a psychiatrist!”

He makes it clear, though, while he hasn’t spoken to his employer, he’s not ashamed to open up about his challenges in general, and if they end up seeing his name in this article then so be it. Indeed, he has no specific reason for doubting his employer would respond positively. “Everyone’s

months, or whenever you feel better. We won’t find someone else and we’ll just wait until you’re ready.” They were just totally supportive.”

Aplin’s experience is a telling one, and worth examining in some detail as it reflects precisely how complex and varied mental health issues can be, and how cause-and-effect is not always what it might seem.

Aplin had a difficult childhood. “My mum was bipolar and that led to a chaotic home environment, and I had panic attacks and anxiety issues as a result,” he explains. He became keenly focused on becoming a designer from the age of 14, and his determination to succeed in this was essentially a coping mechanism. “I would have latched on to anything, purely because I just needed a goal; a carrot to focus on,” he explains. “I could battle through all the madness at home, because I had this objective, this bigger goal in my life to focus on.”



my subconscious that said: 'You're now ready to deal with this stuff, from the past. Everything else is secure. You're in a stable relationship, you're in your own house, you've got money saved up. You're in the best place to go 'pop'.'

About a year later, Aplin came out of therapy and returned to work with relish. "I was more fired-up than ever," he recalls. "I moved to Brighton, started freelancing for every agency I could, tried to climb the ranks, dabbled in side projects — it was just work, work, work, let's really go for it."

Then around six years later, at 29, he had another breakdown. "It was nowhere near as intense as before, but it was another moment of: 'What the fuck am I doing?'" he recalls. "Being a designer and the way I was working wasn't making me happy. I had this



Above: Ollie Alpin's MindJournal is aimed at men seeking to optimise their days, increase their life satisfaction and change their lives.

Aplin turn all his experiences into something positive and helpful to people. But his second breakdown points to an uncomfortable truth; that it's not just struggling youngsters trying to make their way in the design world who can suffer from mental health problems. Success, at least success on paper, can be the cause of stress, anxiety and depression too.

AFFECTING ALL

One successful CEO who's been open about his mental health struggles is Radim Malinic, designer and founder of London design agency Brand Nu. On the face of it, Malinic was a shining example of professional achievement. But as he puts it: "This

is an industry full of glory hunters, where people look strong and brave — but we all break underneath."

Four years ago his agency, which is organised on a system of scalable freelancers, was a commercial and critical success. But behind the scenes, he was putting in 18-hour days, and swiftly burning himself out.

"I was trying to please clients on various continents simultaneously," he explains. "So I'd start speaking to Australians at midnight on Sunday, then I'd carry on with London clients and then pick up projects from North America. I was working every waking hour of every waking day."

While others may have collapsed with exhaustion, adrenaline kept ▶

moment where I could consciously go, 'What do I actually want?'"

This led to Aplin halting his full-time freelancing to launch his own product, MindJournal, a therapeutic journal for men, filled with questions, prompts and techniques he learned from his own experience.

Launching MindJournal has been a rewarding experience, and helped

LIMIT YOUR FOCUS



"It's entirely natural to feel overwhelmed from time to time," says Dan Donald, front-end lead at AutoTrader Life. "That might be at home or at work. I know when I have a depressive spell, which comes around every month or two, it can happen to a greater effect. There have been loads of times over the years where I've not always dealt with it that well, and

it's taken a long time for me to feel like I'm back on top of things."

What he's found is that, when you can, it helps to just limit your focus right down to: 'What's the one thing I can do, right now?' "It's about not being distracted by the amount or breadth of what there is to deal with, but instead just focusing on that one task," he explains. "It might be sending an email or doing the washing up. But whatever

it is, take a moment to pause and feel good about that one thing you *have* done."

This one-step-at-a-time approach might seem like a no-brainer but it isn't always easy to do, so you need to commit to the process, he says. "Pause and be positive about doing tasks. Celebrating what you have done, rather than feeling crushed by the weight of all that you haven't yet achieved, can really help lift your mood."

him fuelled. “When you try to build a business, it’s exhilarating because people like what you do, people pay you and it keeps you busy, so your dopamine’s going crazy,” he explains. “And that is serious: dopamine addiction is quite something.”

Like any addiction, though, you end up paying for it in some way or another. And in Malinic’s case, it was the loss of anything people would normally consider ‘a life’.

“I was more than enjoying the work; I loved and adored it every day with a passion,” he recalls. “But I didn’t go out that much, I didn’t exercise as much as I needed to, I didn’t drink enough water and was over-cafeinated.”

But in a spiralling situation, he wasn’t fully aware of that. “I would wake up, I wouldn’t feel that well, but I would just get a coffee or whatever and just keep going. I would work past midnight, which is a lot of hours.”

Eventually, he had a breakdown. “One day I just couldn’t walk down the street. It was so hard. I was having a panic attack on my way to a post office and they kept on coming for a while. I was like: ‘What is going on?’”

But facing up to things was tough. “You feel like the loneliest person in the world, even though I’d been with my girlfriend, now my wife, for a few years then, and she’s since been one of the key components of my healing.”

Malinic was referred for behavioural therapy, and says he’s learned a lot about himself since. “I’ve



Above: Radim Malinic’s Book of Ideas includes a whole section on mindfulness and mental health, based on his own personal experiences.

learned that it’s not problems in my current present, it’s problems that are deeply rooted in my childhood and upbringing,” he says. “And the reality is that you don’t go to therapy to get rid of the fears and anxieties forever. It’s more about: how do we manage, how do we deal with it?”

Part of dealing with it has involved a new attitude to design work. “Part of my burnout and why I was working all the time was, you’re never finished as a designer,” he says. “So if you’ve got any amount of time on any particular day you can easily go on forever. And I was always trying to outdo myself, partly because of feedback from social media. If I didn’t get praise, or I didn’t have enough followers, I was



like: ‘Why is someone more popular than I am?’ It was a very foolish thing to do in retrospect.”

He’s since taken up meditation, but the biggest turning point, he says, was when his wife bought him a dog, and he started to take it for long walks with his phone turned off. “And after doing that for a year and a half, I feel like a different person,” he says.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MINDFULNESS



Whether you suffer from mental health challenges or not, practising mindfulness can help you enjoy your work and life more, becoming more creative and productive. And London-based designer-entrepreneur Catalin Zorzini, who recently launched the free mindfulness app Plum Village (www.plumvillage.app), is a keen advocate. “Thanks to applying some basic mindfulness techniques, like focusing on

my breath, which started to reveal my thinking patterns, I managed to uncover my deep-rooted anxiety and become friends with it, as well as learning to pause and rest on pleasant feelings and emotions,” he explains. “It’s a long story and a work in progress, but I am happy to report that the simple act of watching your breath can have a tremendous impact on your life and work.” It can help to find a physical space in which to mentally refocus, although that’s not always possible, especially in a big city.

“There are times in London when we find it hard just to hear our own thoughts,” says Lee Trott, copywriter at creative agency OLIVER. “But recently, my sister Jade and I discovered the Neasden Temple. It’s the most incredible building in all of London: a stunning, brilliant white Hindu temple. “Having such a calm space to clear our thoughts and centre ourselves has done wonders for our work and our minds. You really can’t put a price on having a totally silent, beautiful space to find yourself.”

He's also made big changes in his working life, allowing him to achieve a better work-life balance. He hasn't needed to drop clients or take on less work, he stresses; it's all been about approaching work with a new attitude and finding ways to be more efficient.

He's collected together all his advice and tips in this area in the Book of Ideas series. Offering advice on everything from inbox control to beating creative block, illustrated with some of his most important and resonant portfolio projects, it's all about "finding a better way of working that's more enjoyable," he says. "Every designer would say they do this because it makes them happy, but it's not always the case."

specific policy on mental health that spells this out. One organisation to do just that is 3Sixty, a digital agency based in Bristol. And as founder Jon Waring explains, it's not only the right thing to do, it's good business.

"We've created an environment that is supportive of people with mental health challenges," says Waring. "But really, that's only a by-product of designing a workplace that brings out the best in people."

As part of the policy, employees are free to take a 'personal day' or work from home whenever they need to. "I much more care about output than I do personal hours," Waring explains. "There is a rather damaging aspect to all industries, not just ours,



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RADIM MALINIC, DESIGNER AND BRAND NU CEO

LESSONS LEARNED

So what can these stories tell us about mental health in the design world?

Firstly, that it's a real issue, with serious consequences, and not something that can be treated lightly or dismissed with a few empty clichés about 'positive thinking'. And secondly, that everybody is different, and the causes and symptoms of mental health problems are varied, complex and often unclear — even to the person experiencing them. Their issues may largely be rooted in work, but they may equally be unrelated, so it's important not to presume.

And that's perhaps the most important lesson; that talking is almost always the key to addressing people's mental health challenges. And so, collectively working to create an open environment where people feel comfortable talking about their problems is the most important thing that colleagues and managers can do.

Depending on the size of the organisation, it can help to have a

where unless you look productive, people assume you're not. I just think that's toxic, especially in a creative environment. You don't get your best ideas sat in front of a screen in a studio all the time. So for me, I don't care how you get it done. I trust you: you're an adult, you're good at your job. You decide the hours you keep, the places you work from. Whatever it takes to get the job done is fine by me."

And whenever anyone needs to talk, that's encouraged too. "We have a fairly candid conversational environment here, and I think people feel safe enough to discuss or disclose stuff that they perhaps might not in a normal environment," says Waring. "In particular, one of our staff discovered some time ago that actually being vocal about her mental health challenges helps — and retaining it and suppressing has the reverse effect — so that's definitely something we encourage.

"In design, there is that notion of continuing to work hard and

improving all the time, which often comes with a cost. It is great to have ambition and feel challenged at times, but be careful not to fall into a constant loop. Working long hours, being stressed and not having time to reflect is damaging in the long run."

Aware of this, Lopez recently joined Uscreates, a service design agency focusing on health and wellbeing. "They are an example of promoting good mental health," she says. "Part of their mission is to make it a brilliant place to work by including things like flexible working, personal budgets for development and social activities. These are simple measures that can make a real difference in the workspace and, particularly in the design field, help make it a safer space to grow and improve your work, by taking care of your wellbeing." ■

**NEXT
MONTH**

PUBLISH YOUR PASSION

We speak to an array of professionals on how to take steps into self-publishing.