‘My work offers an opportunity to bring positive change into businesses’



I studied for my degree in integrative counselling education as a mature student after my youngest child started school. During my course my father passed away. This turned out to be one of the most stressful times in my life, juggling grief, a young family, academic pressures and extended family issues. I therefore decided to explore stress management for my thesis, and was pleasantly surprised when the relaxation techniques I was practising as part of my research made me feel relaxed and focused. I can say without doubt that it was this practice that meant I avoided a potential breakdown.

This is how the passion to help other people who were experiencing stress was ignited within me. After I graduated I went on to do a diploma in stress management and set up a part-time private practice in counselling as well as offering training in stress management and related issues. I went on to getting a second qualification in organisational stress management and became a fellow of the International Stress Management Association.

The path to delivering training within organisations happened by chance when I secured work with Birmingham City Council, which at that time had around 50,000 staff. The council were considering an organisation-wide stress project and asked me to contribute. I had the opportunity to develop and deliver training within the legal framework to managers as well as employees. This experience gave me the confidence to set up my own full-time consultancy in 2005. During the early part of setting up the Aum Consultancy (**www.aumconsultancy.co.uk**) we acquired most of our contracts through networking and direct contact with personnel from organisations. Over the past decade employee assistance programmes (EAPs) have taken up the wellbeing function. As a therapist in private practice I had relationships with several EAPs, and the transition of acquiring training and coaching as a subcontractor with EAPs happened organically. Now I have a team of affiliates across the country offering a range of wellbeing packages. We shifted the focus from stress to holistic wellbeing as our work and range of training packages developed over the years.

This journey has not been without challenges. In the early 2000s there was a huge stigma around stress and mental health. There is more awareness now, although some stigma still exists. I remember delivering training at a university during that time where the group of managers were very defensive and would not engage with the prospect of stress impacting them, although the indications were clear that there was burnout and overwhelm within the group. I was enthusiastic about sharing natural wellbeing strategies, but the group complained because I tried to introduce meditation, which was perceived as threatening. As therapists we work with defence mechanisms and resistance regularly so my team and I soon learned to expect and overcome this. We felt heartened when delegates slowly loosened up as our input progressed, and by the end of the training were asking for more relaxation practices.

There is also the expectation of a quick fix for delegates to the many deeper organisational issues, such as multiple changes, lack of resources, relationship conflicts, poor management and communication processes that cause stress. Organisations have a legal duty of care towards their employees under the health and safety legislation, and just offering counselling through an EAP or delivering a few days’ training does not resolve the ingrained cultural issues. As third-party providers we are sometimes met with resentment about the organisation making a token gesture, and often the stress issues that are highlighted in our work are not followed up due to lack of resources or commitment from the organisation.

Despite the challenges I absolutely adore my work. It has variety and is an opportunity to enhance the lives of individuals and bring positive change into businesses. I feel excited to work with the relational dynamic with an individual as well as small and large groups. In any given week I would be seeing counselling clients, offering individual or group supervision, training, consulting or overseeing the work of my affiliates. I also love writing, so for the past decade have published 10 books specifically on this work and other related topics. I am fascinated by anything and everything that impacts the wellbeing of the human mind, body and spirit. ■



About the author

Hansa Pankhania MBACP (Snr Accred) is a counsellor, coach, trainer and published author of 10 wellbeing books for adults and children. She and her team at Aum Consulting offer coaching and training on wellbeing, stress prevention, mental health, resilience building and related topics. Her mission is to help individuals to live a life of joy and boundless energy as well as develop thriving workplace cultures. **www.hansapankhania.com**

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