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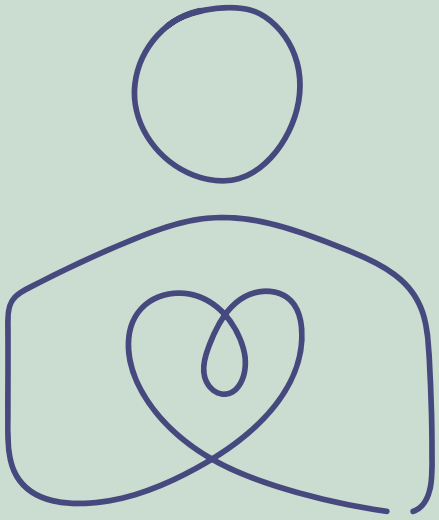
WHY HEALTHCARE STAFF ARE THE WORST AT SELF-CARE (and why we should care)

BY ROSIE CAWTHORNE

Exploring the paradox of healthcare workers who excel at caring for others but often neglect their own well-being.



LIFE LESSONS

TRAINING & COURSE FACILITATION

WE HEALTHCARE WORKERS

– yes, that means you: the HCAs, support workers, doctors, nurses, admin staff, porters, domestics, chefs, maintenance teams, and countless other NHS and private healthcare professionals – we are the superheroes of our time. We swoop in to save the day with a helping hand (or two), armed with cups of tea, wipes, medications, stethoscopes, and sometimes frustratingly thin gloves (that split when you look at them), instead of capes and tights. We may not be able to fly, but we sure can rise to a challenge.

Here’s the plot twist though: while we’re utterly fantastic at caring for others, we’re not so great at caring for ourselves.

It’s like James Bond letting himself go (getting a bit tubby) and forgetting his gadgets, or trying to embark on an epic road trip with flat tyres and a dodgy exhaust – it just doesn’t make sense, right?

You’d think that most of the people who preach about the importance of health would be in downward dog each morning and sipping on green smoothies. But no, many of the healthcare workers that I train are often found knocking back large amounts of tea and coffee (or worse - Redbull and Monster energy drinks, to keep them awake) and skipping meals, or eating quick nutrition-less meal deals, all whilst telling their service users to eat balanced diets and get some rest. It’s almost like they think they’re invincible. (Spoiler alert: they’re not.)

Studies show that healthcare staff are more likely to neglect their own health compared to other professionals.

According to the British Medical Association (BMA), a staggering 80% of doctors reported experiencing stress, with almost 40% describing their stress levels as severe or considerable. And it's not just doctors; nurses and other healthcare staff often work long hours with little rest, leading to high levels of stress and burnout.

Why is this? Well, imagine your job involves constant crisis management, life-and-death decisions, and the emotional toll of caring for poorly, elderly or otherwise challenged humans.

Add in the pressure of high workloads, staff shortages, cultural and/or diversity challenges (with both staff, and service users), staying up to date with training, in house policies, best practice, legislative knowledge and all coupled with the lack of time to even pop for a wee, or grab a cuppa sometimes.
Now you've got a recipe for self-neglect.

A report by the **Royal College of Nursing (RCN)** found that more than half of nurses worry that their job is affecting their health, with many feeling they don't have enough time to look after their own wellbeing, and we all know that worry is the thief of joy, right?

Meanwhile, healthcare workers are often so busy caring for others that they forget to do the basics for themselves – like eating lunch or getting a full night's sleep. It's a bit like being the chef who cooks gourmet meals for his customers but ends up forgetting to eat himself or just grabs some cold leftovers.

The **Health and Safety Executive (HSE)** here in the UK has compiled statistical evidence and conducted research and studies on stress, depression, and anxiety among healthcare workers. Here are some key findings and statistics from their research:

PREVALENCE

Healthcare workers, including doctors, nurses, and support staff, experience higher rates of work-related stress, depression, and anxiety compared to workers in other sectors.

CAUSES

Factors contributing to stress in healthcare include high workloads, long working hours, emotional demands, dealing with human suffering and death, organisational issues, and lack of support.

IMPACT

Stress, depression, and anxiety can lead to burnout, absenteeism, reduced productivity, and in severe cases, turnover and early retirement among healthcare staff.

SAFETY CONCERNS

High levels of stress and mental health issues can also compromise patient safety and quality of care, as stressed and exhausted healthcare workers may be more prone to errors

INTERVENTIONS

HSE emphasises the importance of organisational support, training in stress management and resilience, improving working conditions, and fostering a supportive work environment to mitigate these risks.

Overall, the statistics and findings from HSE highlight the critical need for addressing stress, depression, and anxiety in healthcare settings, to protect the well-being of healthcare workers and ensure quality patient care.

Guess what else? Well…. it also turns out that healthcare staff in the UK are puffing and vaping away at higher rates than the general population.

Who would’ve thought it, right? Here are some facts and sources to back this up:

1. Research Studies: Various studies have shown that some healthcare professionals, especially nurses, are lighting up more than other professions. For instance, a study published in the Journal of Public Health revealed that nurses are more likely to have a cheeky smoke break compared to doctors and other healthcare professionals. Maybe it's the night shifts, or perhaps they just know where the best hiding spots are

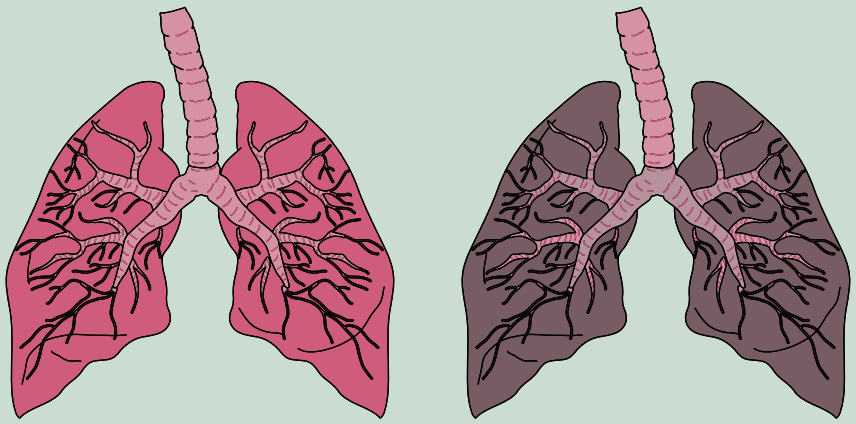
2. National Surveys: Data from national surveys, like the Health Survey for England, often highlight that healthcare workers are leading the pack when it comes to smoking and vaping. These surveys provide solid stats showing that those in healthcare are more inclined to indulge in a sneaky fag or a vape.

3. **Occupational Stress:** Let' face it, working in healthcare is no picnic, and the stress levels can be through the roof. Research from the British Medical Journal (BMJ) points out that the job stress and endless hours are big reasons why healthcare workers might reach for a smoke. It's either that or knitting, and smoking is just faster and allows for breathwork right?

"Slow Breath in..... and slooooow breath out, now repeat"....

and suddenly you feel calmer....

4. **Qualitative Evidence:** Interviews and surveys with UK healthcare professionals often reveal that smoking and vaping are popular ways to unwind. Many healthcare workers admit that quitting is tough, especially with the pressures of their job. Plus, everyone needs a break, and a quick puff can seem like the perfect excuse to step outside for some 'fresh' air.



Evidence Sources:

- Study from the **Journal of Public Health:** This study discusses how nurses in the UK are more likely to smoke compared to other healthcare professionals

- **Health Survey for England:** This national survey provides all the juicy details about smoking rates among different occupational groups, including healthcare.

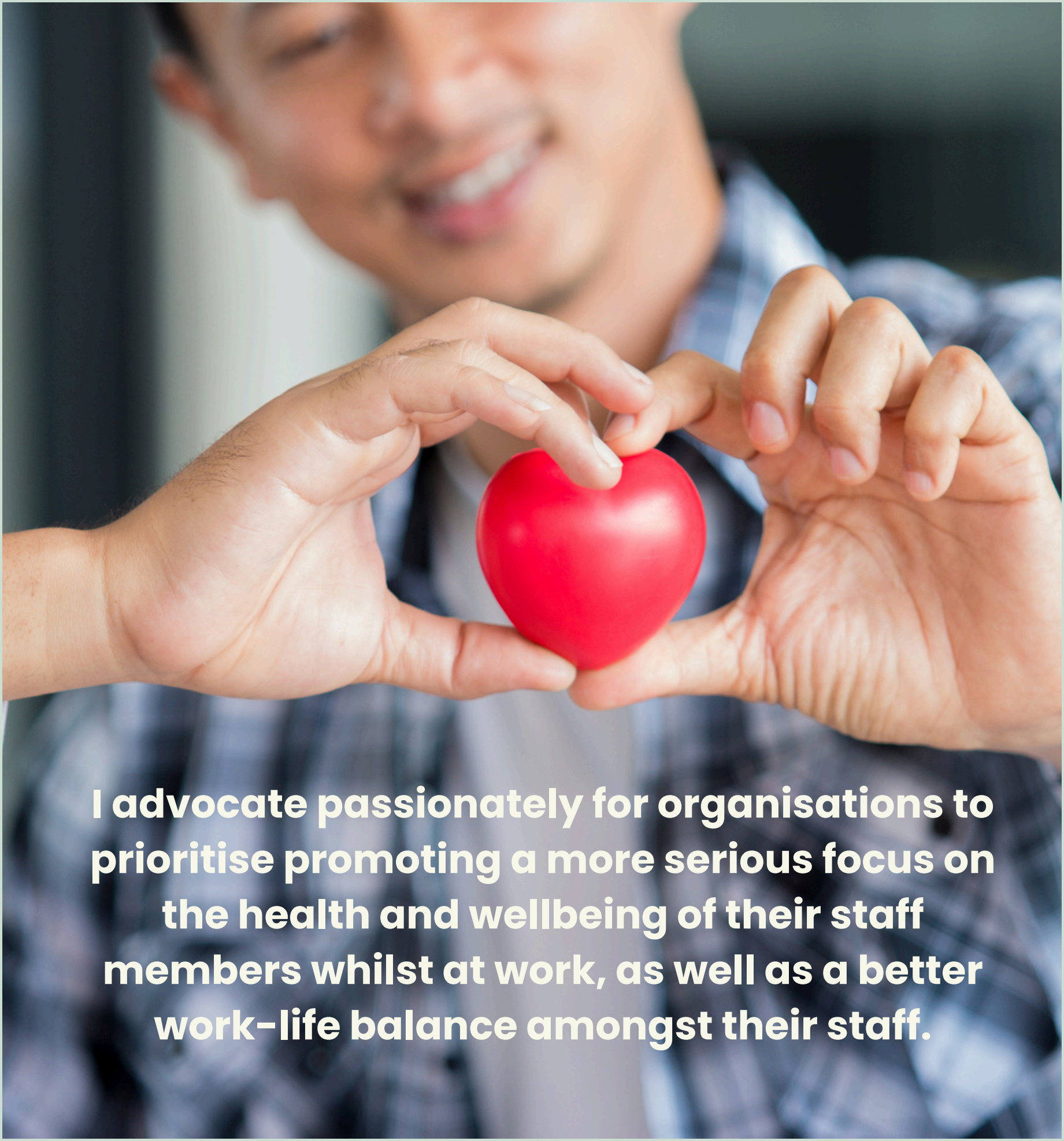
- **British Medical Journal (BMJ):** Articles in the BMJ explore how job stress and marathon working hours are driving healthcare workers to light up or vape.

So, there you have it – higher levels of smoking and vaping among UK healthcare staff are well documented and could be blamed on the unique stresses and demands of the profession. Because sometimes, even healthcare heroes need a moment to themselves (especially as vodka is not an option).

Positive Vibe Tribe

But let’s not drown in misery and gloom; there’s hope! We are not necessarily doomed to become mentally unwell, reliant on unfavourable crutches to support us, such as alcohol, smoking or drugs.

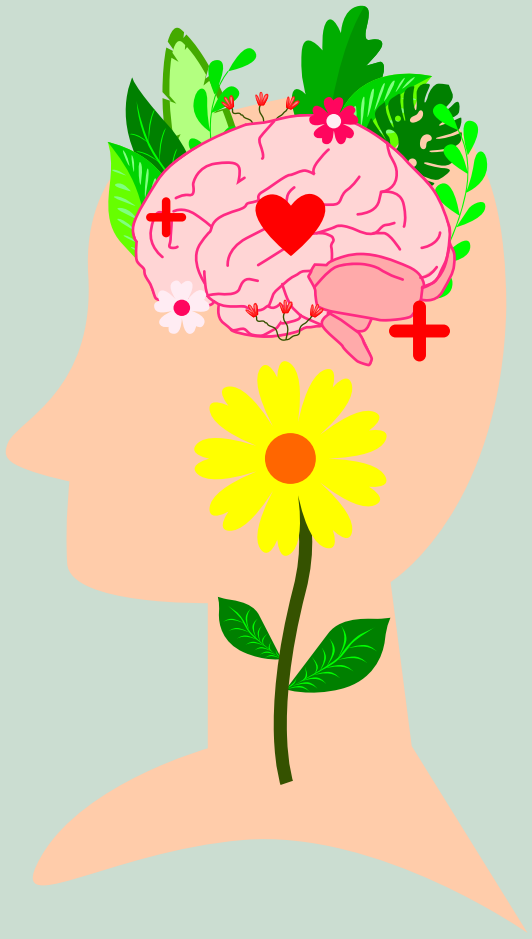
Many healthcare organisations are beginning to recognise the importance of self-care for their staff. I know this firsthand, as I collaborate with several amazing organisations that genuinely value and appreciate their employees. These organisations are actively creating opportunities for their staff to participate in training programs focused on mental health, stress awareness/management, effective communication, nutrition, and overall well-being.


I advocate passionately for organisations to prioritise promoting a more serious focus on the health and wellbeing of their staff members whilst at work, as well as a better work-life balance amongst their staff.

The healthcare staff that I work with tell me how wonderful it is to have the opportunity to learn by engaging more with each other, through honest communication, in a blame free environment which is without judgement and promotes authenticity. They tell me that through understanding about themselves first, they are then able to understand more about the other human beings that they care for and therefore provide a better standard of care.

George Orwell said -

"To see what is in front of one's nose needs a constant struggle."

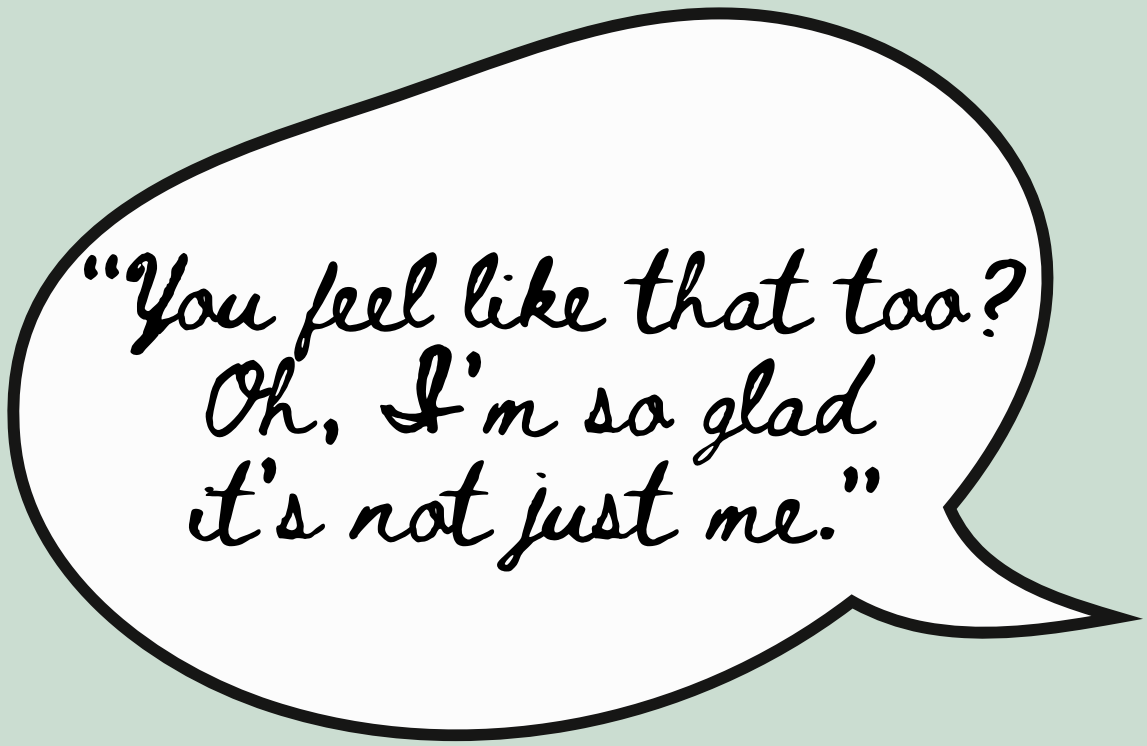


This quote reminds us that, the human tendency to miss the obvious and the ongoing effort needed to remain perceptive and aware of ourselves and our own behaviours, is real.

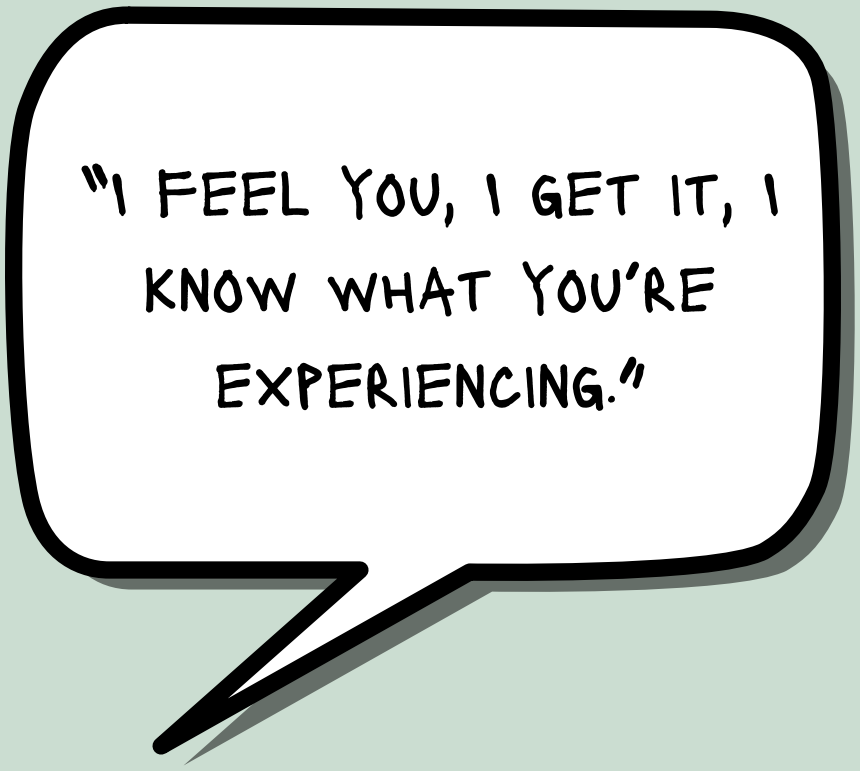
In order to really understand others, we need first to understand ourselves. It touches on the idea of self-awareness and perception, which is crucial for understanding others.

I am passionate about healthcare, and the healthcare staff that I work with are incredibly important to me.

The organisations I collaborate with understand that the type of training I provide values the individuals that are taking part, as well as focussing on their diverse needs, meaning that staff can feel safe to share their experiences, thoughts and questions comfortably, identify problems more effectively, build on better understanding and communication, and recognise that they are not on their own. It also provides a crucial opportunity for staff to simply TALK to one another, sit back, catch their breath, and share moments of,



I find that healthcare staff rarely get the chance to genuinely connect and communicate on a level that says,



In healthcare particularly, we need to make space for this more often.

By writing this I hope to have evidenced my beliefs that the majority of Healthcare workers are pretty bad at self-care, and we all need to care about this.

We need to hold them with more value, hold their hands a little tighter when they need it, pat them on the back a little more often. We should let them come to the table and share their thoughts more frequently , and actively listen a little more to what they are saying.

We need to see more of what is in front of our noses. **Without them there is no care in our healthcare** and in a world devoid of care, we would find ourselves adrift in a sea of indifference, where compassion is scarce, and humanity loses its way.

To all the healthcare heroes out there, remember: you can't pour from an empty cup. Take that break, get some sleep!!!, eat that salad, and maybe, just maybe, book that yoga class. If nothing else though, put that bloody Monster drink down will you!!!! Put yourself first, show yourself some love. Your service users need you at your best – and so do you.

I see you, you incredible humans.

Let's take a collective breath and give ourselves a high freaking five...

See you in training

Sources:

1. **BMA Covid 19 Survey 2020**
2. **RCN Employment Survey 2019**
3. **HSE Statistics**
4. **Study from the Journal of Public Health**
5. **Health Survey for England**
6. **British Medical Journal**

If you want to contact me you can find me here

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