



Do We Want to Just Survive or Thrive? - Review on Mental Health in the UK Proposes Advisable Reforms

by Kaitlyn Stevens

“Thriving at work” is not a phrase I have heard too often. Of course, I have heard plenty of variants of “the early bird gets the worm” and “survival of the fittest,” etc., etc.; I have even heard stories and fables, such as “The Ant and the Grasshopper.” This is one of the famed Aesop’s fables, wherein an ant toils day-in and day-out for weeks, so that when winter comes, it has enough food to survive; the grasshopper, who did not work as diligently, is left to starve when the ant refuses to share on principle. As children, we were expected to hear this and think that working hard is always the way to go, and if someone who had “slacked off” needs help, well, why should we?

I know this seems an odd thing to pause on, especially in a conversation about mental health, but I cannot help but wonder how the ant *felt*, forced to work at maximum capacity just so it would not go hungry. Some might say that, surely, this effort was worthwhile, since at the end the ant is victorious. However, now that I reconsider the story in adulthood, *is* it a victory only to have enough to survive the winter?

Aesop does not take pains to describe the ant’s mental state, certainly due to the fact that a) it is a children’s story and b) this is an *ant* we’re talking about. But the point of fables - or morality tales, as they are sometimes called - is that they convey a message or value to the reader. And I think the idea that the states of our bodies and our minds should come after our paychecks, our livelihoods and our financial security has been steeped in our society for decades, if not longer.

Mental illness is quite relevant in the current social climate, according to the [Stevenson/Farmer review](#), and just based on the people I know, I have no trouble believing it. With an abundance of debt, increased political instability and higher costs of living in America alone, people feel the toll of this turmoil in their hearts and minds. According to the [National Institute of Mental Health](#), an estimated 18.3% of all adults in the United States – that’s over 44 million people – have a mental illness, yet in 2016, only about 43% of this number received treatment. They carry on at work all the same, though not without perseverance, and not without the fear of unemployment if they do not. But there should not have to be a choice between personal wellness and career success, and furthermore, there does not have to be.

Currently, there is a young sector of the workforce who came of age in the recession and who wants more than anything to reform the system they have inherited, but who also wants to survive in this economy long enough to have the means to make it happen. So many of these workers allow their mental health to take a backseat, because we have been told there is no time or place to address mental health at work, told that such an endeavor would burden our employers with costs. But this

report suggests that this is simply not true, and in fact, that paying more attention to mental health among workers will actually *increase* productivity and cost-effectiveness.

Reforming how mental health is addressed in the workplace could revitalize a whole generation of workers. One of the first steps towards achieving this, as the review posits, concerns how employers and employees alike view the topic of mental health. Mental health is a spectrum that includes everyone, from those at the peak of wellness to those at their lowest points. Nobody stays in a single, constant spot on this spectrum for their entire life, and acknowledging this fact removes some of the stigma surrounding mental health, which makes it easier for more people to come forward when they are disposed by it. Not every illness has a quick-fix that can be solved as easily as writing a prescription, but neither does it have to be an issue that puts someone out of commission permanently.

How employers engage with the topic of mental health is key to implementing the core standards outlined by this review, too. Clearly, one vital thing an employer can do is provide a safe, healthy environment for all workers. Assuming that is a given, other no less important measures include mental health awareness among employers and a workplace that encourages employees to participate in frank, open discussions on the topic of mental health. But a growing number of self-employed workers and employees who work remotely must be taken into account as well, especially since isolation can be a factor in causing and/or exacerbating issues with mental health. In these cases, the report recommends using technology to communicate with NHS-approved health and wellness support systems, so that their mental health is not left unattended.

Such measures sound simple when explained thusly, although the benefits of these standards can be monumental. The report identified employers that have already implemented such standards in the workplace and still others that want to do so, motivated by a willingness to do right by their employees. Another motivation that should provoke many to follow suit is a desire to do what is best for business, and as it turns out, taking care to address mental health can save employers and organizations money.

Seeing this confirmed by research and numbers is gratifying in the face of arguments that employers cannot afford to “coddle” their employees. In reality, it appears they cannot afford to be ignorant nor unprepared for this issue when it inevitably arises. Knowing the facts and figures point towards profit should pave the way for Stevenson and Farmer’s core standards, since a spoonful of fiscal gain tends to help the social reform go down.

Perhaps too many reports focus on reform merely in the ways in which it will change the status quo, and when that sort of transition is laid bare, it can sound like quite the undertaking, even if that change is for the better. In the United States, we are still waiting for reform on a system in need of more mental health professionals and more comprehensive coverage in healthcare. When discussions on mental health only seem to become urgent in the wake of deadly mass shootings, however, it feels as though asking for positive change is somehow asking too much. Hence why the most earnest, compelling conclusion this review makes is that with a concerted effort of employers and the government, the improvement of mental health in the workforce is a goal that can absolutely be attained.

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