



Geoff McDonald: "The most rewarding aspect of my work is the feedback I receive. I know that I've saved lives."

## A journey with a clear sense of purpose

Geoff McDonald is one of the most vocal mental health campaigners in Britain. Having experienced a period of severe depression and mental ill health, he is determined to create workplaces all over the world where people feel free to ask for help if they are suffering from mental ill health. He spoke to *Safety Management* about his vision for a stigma-free world.

**Anna Ryland**  
*British Safety Council*

Geoff McDonald comes from Durban, South Africa, where he began his professional career as a teacher, before joining Unilever in the late 1980s, first as a training manager and then as a graduate recruitment specialist. His next step in the company was HR development, initially in South Africa and then in

London with responsibility for the development of talent across Unilever businesses in Africa, the Middle East and Turkey. From 2011 to 2014, he was the Global VP HR for all of Unilever's marketing, communications and sustainability activities.

This period of intense professional work, extended travel and very little rest triggered a bout of mental ill health in 2008, which transformed Geoff's life and changed his outlook on employee health

and wellbeing and on life in general.

"In January 2008, I woke up in the middle of the night with a panic attack. It was my first experience of mental illness. I was diagnosed with anxiety-fuelled depression and had to take three months off work. My ability to talk about my illness saved my life during that period. This also resulted in an unbelievable outpouring of love from people close to me, and this kept me going. During some of my darkest moments, I used to think that I could not let these people down by taking my own life.

"In 2010 I had a relapse, but it was not as bad as the one in 2008. I didn't have to take time off work because I was able to manage my illness better. Then, in October 2012, a very good friend of mine died by suicide. As I lay in bed that night, I concluded that stigma had just killed my friend. I thought this was so unfair: we have been able to put people on the moon; we talk about driverless motor cars and artificial intelligence and yet we still couldn't talk openly about our mental health, even though we freely tell people about our physical health.

"That night, I wrote to Alastair Campbell, whose website and email address I found on the internet. I was familiar with his mental health

advocacy and campaigning work. I asked him whether he would meet with me, open some doors and help me to begin campaigning to address the stigma of mental ill health in the workplace. A week later, we met up in London and since that day, he started to open all these doors and introducing me to people who helped me to begin my campaign."

### The purpose

"The journey which I began four and half years ago has a clear sense of purpose. It is very simple: I'm determined to create workplaces all over the world where people feel that they have the choice to put their hand up and to ask for help if they are experiencing mental illness.

"This sense of purpose fuels me every day and it has taken me to people and places that I could never have imagined."

On this journey, Geoff met Pope Francis to discuss how they can help create a more sustainable and inclusive global economy through his work with the Global Foundation. He also consulted with former PM David Cameron and CEOs from FTSE 100 companies to agree an approach to breaking the mental health stigma in the corporate world. He discussed this issue in several BBC programmes, as well as speaking about it at Cambridge, Oxford, Bologna and Warwick universities and several corporate events in Europe, North America, Japan, India, Australia and New Zealand.

Asked what he considers to be the greatest achievement of his four-year campaigning work, Geoff says: "The most rewarding aspect of my work is the messages and feedback I get from individuals after every engagement I have with an audience and with businesses. Most importantly, I know that I've saved lives. Secondly, I have encouraged other people to go and tell their stories. Every story we tell is like sending a lifeboat out into the ocean and the people who are suffering in silence cling to it. It helps them realise they are normal. Thirdly, I know that over the last four and a half years, I have catalysed conversations in workplaces that would have never taken place. Being able to have the conversation means that anything is possible.

"Part of the frustration of my work is that although I have a really good feel for the impact I am having on individuals, I also want organisations to change. One of the downfalls of my work is that I catalyse a conversation and then I walk away and I don't know what happens. Having said this, I'm beginning to get some responses from staff at the companies, such as Unilever, Medtronic, EasyJet and Kerry Foods, who are letting me know what they are doing to address the stigma of mental ill health and to establish health and wellbeing as a strategic priority.

"Six months after I left Unilever, I met Georgie Mack, the managing partner of Made by Many, a digital design business. Together, we

connected 14 people who wanted to do something regarding mental health. That group has now grown to nearly 1,400 people here in the UK and it is called Minds at Work. This network, soon to become a charity, has a very clear sense of purpose, which is to inspire and equip individuals to go back into their workplace and break the stigma. The challenge of such work is trying to measure the impact that it might be having at an organisational level. Another challenge for me is staying connected with these people and helping them to look after themselves.



**People often say to me: the purpose of a commercial company is to be profitable. I say no, that's not the purpose, that's the consequence of being a good business**



"There is also the issue of trying to balance a real sense of urgency with realism. There's still a big challenge in helping leaders see that by addressing mental health and investing resources to enhance the health of their people, they can have a significant impact on the performance and the productivity of their employees. However, there is still insufficient data to prove this. Yet, if you ask companies about their safety statistics, such as the number of accidents or near misses, they can offer you this information instantly. As they say, we measure what we treasure, why don't we measure the health of our employees?

"It's more difficult to build the business case without such data. Many senior executives only want to do things that will give them a return on their investment. As well as a business case, there is also a moral case. We are still a long way away from the point when we will say: 'This is just the right thing to do.'

"We have numerous studies proving that this is good for business and yet we've made very little progress on this issue. It needs leaders who truly believe that organisations have a responsibility to enhance the health



There's still a big challenge in helping leaders see that by addressing mental health they can impact performance and productivity. Photograph: iStock/asiseeit



Leaders should become advocates of workplaces where people can talk about their mental ill health. Photograph: iStock/Steve Debenport

of their employees, which results in improved performance.

“Legislation may also, in time, force companies to invest and engage more actively in enhancing the health of their people. Meanwhile organisations could start investing in financial wellbeing programmes, courses that teach people how to maintain good relationships and thus foster good emotional health, and mindfulness and meditation programmes. They could also build wellbeing into all leadership and induction programmes, and define the purpose of their organisation, which is a key driver of wellbeing.

“An increasing number of organisations are beginning to consider what their purpose is. People often say to me: the purpose of a commercial company is to be profitable. I say no, that’s not the purpose, that’s the consequence of being a good business. I think we must find a way of creating a greater sense of purpose for people at work. They should feel that they are contributing to a better world.”

**Physical and mental health**

Geoff is very vocal about the disconnect between physical and mental health. “Physical health is less complex than mental health. Therefore, over the years, organisations have made efforts to maintain the physical health of their employees through occupational health, safety programmes etc.

“We have not been educated to think about health in terms of our emotional health, mental health or our spiritual health. This has led to a disconnect between the physical and other forms of health. We should be taking a far more holistic approach to health in the workplace and ensuring that organisations give their employees the kind of training that not only helps keep them physically safe but also protects their mental and emotional health. Only then will they will be able to perform at their best.

“Firstly, leaders should become advocates of workplaces where people can talk about their mental ill health. Secondly, every person in the organisation should get mental

health training to lift the levels of basic mental health awareness and skills. Third, we should all work towards improving the understanding and image of mental health. Mental health is the most damaged brand I have ever come across. When I use the phrase mental health, people immediately mention illness, psychosis, depression or anxiety. When we talk about our physical health, people don’t immediately go to cancer, diabetes or glandular fever. When I walk into a Nike sports store, I see beautiful images of people exercising and they inspire me to buy a pair of running shoes. When it comes to mental health, all the images are negative. Why don’t we mention that Winston Churchill suffered from depression and that this made him a wonderful leader and a consummate professional. The same was true of Abraham Lincoln and Marie Curie. “One of the anchors of CNBC asked me: if you had two candidates for a job and one had revealed that they suffered from depression or anxiety, why would you recruit that person. I said: the person who suffered is probably more empathetic, more compassionate, a better listener and a better human being overall. Therefore, they would have a better understanding of the people working for them.

“It is critical to ensure that we have the resources in place to support people who may not be well and signpost employees to further sources of help

“The Environment Agency has a wonderful tagline expressing their desire to enhance the lives of the people who come to work for them. Not just going home safe. Dame Carol Black said that going to work gives you a sense of purpose, a routine, an opportunity to build relationships with co-workers and an opportunity to learn, develop and grow. Meanwhile, the HSE figures show that four years ago in Britain, there were 10 million working days lost as a result of stress, anxiety and depression. Today, that number is 15.4 million. This shows

that workplaces are damaging people, although I believe individuals should also take responsibility for their health.

"It is likely that we are going to have legislation regulating these issues. However, I would prefer a tax incentive for organisations that are enhancing people's lives, as this would save a lot of money for the NHS and their support services.

"It is also critical to ensure that we have the resources in place to support people who may not be well and to enable line managers to signpost employees to further sources of help. This is the next step once you have leadership, engagement and advocacy, training and a more positive narrative around mental health. It was David Cameron who said there's no point in breaking the stigma if you don't tell people what to do next. However, there is also no point in telling people what to do if there is still stigma."

**Are we serious about wellbeing?**

"Despite public pronouncements to the contrary, many companies still do not treat wellbeing seriously. It is because

leaders do not make the connection between health and the performance of their organisations, so wellbeing is not seen as a strategic priority driving a company's performance. They demonstrate a bit of care around a wellbeing week, to show that they have ticked the box. However, if they introduced wellbeing as a strategic priority, they would put a major change programme in place to ensure its success. This requires:

- Ensuring that leaders are engaged and advocating the cause of wellbeing
- Making changes to the infrastructure that may be damaging people's health, i.e. policies, processes and systems
- Introducing measures to monitor an organisation's progress in relation to wellbeing, and finally
- Defining the milestones to celebrate their successes.

"Another reason why companies don't take wellbeing seriously is the absence of organisational accountability to keep people healthy, even though there are plenty of rules and regulations

requiring companies to keep their employees safe.

"Finally, we also need to build in a degree of individual accountability for employees to manage their wellbeing. I would like to see wellbeing plans being developed for individuals as part of their overall professional development to help them perform better.

"Over the next couple of years, we need to create and promote role model organisations that can inspire other companies to commit to wellbeing. This would encourage reluctant stragglers to come onboard. It would also act as a warning: unless they start making changes in their workplaces today and begin looking after their employees' health and wellbeing, these organisations are going to be very much behind the curve when legislation is introduced and greatly disadvantaged while competing for talent. Meanwhile role model organisations would be able to say 'we enhance the lives of the people who work for us'. What a powerful differentiator this is in a competitive market!"

**SBES**

**lone worker protection**

**LIFE SAVER** **PROTECTOR** **RESPONDER** **TRACER**

Unit F, 47 Blackborough Road, Reigate, Surrey RH2 7BU  
 Tel: +44 (0) 1737 226622 • Fax: +44 (0) 1737 242442  
 info@sbes.co.uk www.sbes.co.uk

**Ex** **EX**