

Ten Minutes and Seven More Questions

We give our participants a standard of care we still don't extend to the people delivering it.

A few days ago I sat in a car on the way to work and cried in front of two of my staff.

I'm nearly fifty. I run a company. I'm the one who's meant to have the plan, the calm voice, the steady hand on the day. And that morning I couldn't hold the smiley face, so I didn't try. I told them the truth: I was struggling, and it was obvious enough that pretending would have been the strange choice. For a couple of weeks now the things I usually do without thinking have quietly stopped. The social schedule I'd kept religiously for months went silent — not tailing off, just gone — because I didn't have the energy to write a sentence. The dogs, whose walk is normally as automatic as breathing, got neglected. One morning I couldn't get out of bed to do it.

I'm not writing that for sympathy. I'm writing it because I run an outdoor and experiential education company, and if I can end up in that state, so can anyone who works for me — and so can anyone who works for you.

The thing we don't talk about

I set up my personal Instagram account, years ago now, to talk about depression: to say out loud that it's common, that a lot of us quietly carry it, and that there's still a strange amount of shame attached to admitting it. That's doubly true in this part of the world. In Southeast Asia we don't tend to talk about this sort of thing, and the silence does its own damage.

Here's something else we don't talk about much, though most of us have noticed it. Roughly one person in ten is left-handed. Spend any time in the outdoor industry and you'd swear the ratio out here is higher. The same goes, anecdotally, for neurodivergence — there seem to be more of us with ADHD or autism in the outdoors than you'd find in most office-bound professions. I can't prove the ratios

and I won't dress observation up as data. But the reason behind it isn't really in doubt.

The people who never fitted neatly into a classroom or a cubicle often come alive outside. The research is clear on why: time in green space measurably reduces ADHD symptoms like inattention and impulsivity; nature-based and outdoor learning supports emotional regulation and social connection for autistic young people; and regular time in nature and adventure is linked to better mental health, full stop. Experiential learning, being outdoors, and relating to other people in a different way are exactly what a lot of neurodivergent and struggling people need. We know this. It's half of what we sell.

And yet.

I know companies that won't hire anyone who's had depression. I know programmes that won't enrol a student who's had a depressive episode in the last six or twelve months. We take the benefit of these people, and then we bar the door to them. We build the whole pitch on the idea that being outside changes people — and then quietly decide it's only for the ones who turn up already fixed.

When it goes wrong out here, it goes wrong

There's a reason the stakes feel different in this work. In an office, a bad day is a bad day. Out here, when something goes wrong, it can go severely wrong. Over the years I've had anaphylaxis, broken bones, and a couple of near-fatal falls. I've had colleagues who've had all of that and worse, including fatalities. It comes with the ground we stand on.

So here's the question sitting underneath everything else: we know our staff go through this. What do we actually do about it? We are the people who hold the rope for everyone else. It's worth asking, once in a while, who's holding ours.

The night the door came off

Years ago I was working a charity programme for troubled teenagers. It was a Wednesday evening, and my co-instructor, Rich, and I were due to run swim tests and kayak briefings at a pool, ready for the water day on Thursday. We arrived one student short. The group was sullen and quiet. We were told she was in the toilet. We knew she was at risk of suicide, so we asked the obvious question: is she going to be a while, or do we need to be worried?

The silence we got back was the whole answer.

I ended up taking the door off the toilet block to reach her. By the time I did, she had already begun to hurt herself. I spent the next three or four hours sitting with her, talking, keeping her with us. Her carers were down the pub. Our senior member of staff was unreachable. So Rich and I dealt with it: her, each other, and the rest of the group, who had seen and heard far more than any of them should have.

When it was finally over, I went out, got drunk, and chatted about anything and everything with Rich. That was the debrief. That was the entire support package on offer.

The debrief that wasn't

The formal version came later, at the end of the programme. We were working through the course report, question by question, and I reached the incident and said I didn't feel I needed to talk this one through. What I got back was a request to make it quick, because the course director had ten minutes before she was due deep in another programme. No follow-up. No "let's find time afterwards." Just: here's your slot, there are seven more questions on the form, let's finish and go home.

So I switched off. I've written a report, I said. Nothing more needs saying, then.

That evening Rich and I did it again — out of bed, down to the pub, hours spent doing the thing our senior should have been doing: talking it through, turning it over, letting it out. The pub, twice over now, as the sector's unofficial counselling service.

We give our participants a duty of care we've refined over decades. We still hand the people delivering it a report form and a ten-minute slot.

Even at home there was no soft landing. I tried talking to my mother about it and got a version of "you just need to move on, it's in the past now." She'd spent years as a mental health nurse, and I think by then she was jaded — treating me like one of her own staff. This is the job, keep moving. I suspect she'd answer differently today. But at the time, that was that.

Has anything actually changed?

That was a long time ago. The honest question is whether our attitude in the workplace has moved on, or whether it still comes down to: I know you had that

incident, that episode, that loss — but we need you in tomorrow, because there's no one to cover you.

Widen the lens beyond one industry and the ground shifts under you. A 2022–24 University of Hong Kong study — the first proper population survey of its kind here since the pandemic — found that one in ten adults in Hong Kong had a diagnosable mental disorder in the past year, and nearly a third of those cases were severe. Among young people the picture is starker. Student suicides climbed to their highest level in years around 2023, and while the exact counts differ depending on which agency is doing the counting, the direction of travel is not in dispute. The gender pattern is worth sitting with, too: of the suicide-related cases logged by one prevention service in 2023, women and girls made up the clear majority of attempts, while men and boys made up most of the deaths. Girls are more likely to reach the edge and reach for help; boys are more likely not to come back. Around a third of secondary students in one Hong Kong study reported at least one act of self-harm in a single year.

These aren't strangers. They're the young people we teach and the adults we employ. It's the water we're all swimming in.

Big, tough, and not supposed to feel it

I'll use myself as the example, because I'm an easy one. I'm nearly fifty, I'm male, I work outdoors, I'm big and I'm supposedly tough — and somewhere in all of that sits the old idea that people like me aren't meant to have feelings like this. Man up. A clip round the ear and no room for the rest. I reach for the fifty-year-old bloke as the case study because that's mostly who I am, not because it only applies to him. It reaches everyone. But if the hardest person to give himself permission is the one writing this, that tells you something about how far the permission still has to travel.

And if you're reading this as the person in the car rather than the person who runs the company: it's okay to feel like this. It doesn't make you weak, it doesn't make you a liability, and it doesn't make you unfit for the work. It makes you someone who has been carrying real weight, often other people's, and has felt it. The job attracts people who feel things deeply. That's a feature, not a fault. What isn't okay is a system that expects you to carry all of it and then hands you a form and a lift home.

Walking the walk

So the question I keep coming back to is the gap between what we say and what we do. Not with our participants — we're good with them; we've had decades of practice. With our own staff. Do we practise internally what we preach externally?

Have we actually made provision for when something happens, rather than assuming it won't? Plenty of companies say the right things. The trouble shows up when it's tested — when the honest answer to “can we give this person a fortnight off?” turns out to be no, because the cover was never there and the will to find it isn't either. Professing a value costs nothing. Resourcing it costs a rota, a budget line, and the discomfort of being a person down.

The Australian Adventure Activity Standards are at least trying to push staff trauma care and counselling into the conversation — support for people who've been through disclosures, accidents and incidents. That matters. But it's good-practice guidance, not a mandatory requirement, so it holds only for as long as someone chooses to resource it. Which is really the whole point of this piece. We don't need another professed value. We need something real: a provision that survives contact with a bad week, when the temptation is to quietly decide the show must go on.

What that looks like in practice isn't complicated:

- 1 **Write the provision down before you need it.** A clear line on what happens after a critical incident or a personal crisis: who covers, who calls, what support is offered — and that offering it is automatic, not something you have to earn.
- 2 **Make the debrief a real thing, not a form.** A proper conversation, with time and privacy, kept separate from the course paperwork. Ten minutes between programmes is not a debrief.
- 3 **Name a route to actual help.** A counsellor, an employee assistance line, a trauma-care pathway — something more than a colleague who happens to care and a quiet drink afterwards.
- 4 **Cover the shift.** As leaders, be ready to roll our sleeves up and get back on the ground, so a struggling member of staff can genuinely step back without the guilt of leaving everyone short.
- 5 **Go first.** The culture changes the day the director is the one willing to say “I'm not okay this week” — and to be seen saying it.

That last one is the hard one, and it lands on people like me. Whatever the public persona — leader, director, big tough outdoor bloke — are we prepared to let

ourselves be seen as human? Because talking the talk and walking the walk are very different things. And walking the walk with the clients who pay us is a different thing again from walking it with the people who work alongside those clients, and who actually earn us the money.

We spend our working lives holding the rope for other people — participants, students, the person mid-crisis on the other side of a locked door. The least this industry can do is make sure someone is holding ours: that when one of us needs to come off the wall for a while, there's a hand on the other end, not a report form and the number of the nearest pub.

We've had decades of practice caring for the people who pay us. The measure of this industry is whether we'll extend the same care to the people who earn us that money — starting, some weeks, with ourselves.

If any of this lands close to home, you don't have to be in crisis to reach out. In Hong Kong, the Samaritans' multilingual 24-hour line is **2896 0000**, and the government's Mental Health Support Hotline is **18111**. In the UK, the Samaritans are on **116 123**.



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Grow Through What You Go Through

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Related reading

Safeguarding Starts with Strong Systems — the companion piece on why care has to be built into the system, not left to good intentions.

If this is a conversation your organisation needs to have, helping teams put real provision in place — before it's tested — is part of what we do. Get in touch at mike@outside-in.online.

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