Still Small Voices

A personal story:

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Everyone of us has a level of Mental Health. That level is not fixed but can change over time, in response to experiences and circumstances. It can be impacted on by a number of factors. I have always been an advocate for prioritising mental health. My relationship with my own mental health has been a long and, at times complex one.

The 9th – 15th May saw the annual National Mental Health awareness week. Ironically, SATs week for those of us in Primary teaching. It saw a rush on social media across many platforms to share tips and hints for better wellbeing.

For me, my Mental Health is a reflection of how I am responding to the ebbs and flows of life. Developing a toolkit for my own mental health has been an ongoing project, to which I am always looking to add new tools to help me maintain my mental health. I think this maintenance is key.

Staying well and looking after your wellbeing can be hard at times. We tend to act when things get worse. They say if you are thirsty, then you are already dehydrated, and it is the same with Mental Health. We often don't notice the deficit, until we feel the effects of the deterioration. What I think many miss is the need for self-awareness. It is key that we spend a good deal of energy and time developing our awareness. Noticing our triggers and tolerances can be a real game changer. These signs are highly individual and so recognising them is a vital first step. What are the early indicators for us? What 'symptoms' occur? Is it an intolerance of something we normally cope well with? Is it a particular time of the year? Month? Week? Are there events in daily life which feel different when we are beginning to experience a deterioration in our mental health? There is often something subconsciously recognising these subtle changes before we consciously do. A little voice telling us that we need to take action.

Recognising the stressors in our environment is also crucial. Often, it is the little things we fail to notice that can have the biggest impact. These can be internal, or external: The parent who shares a distressing situation, the child experiencing their own response to trauma. Watching others go through distress is hard and the feelings of helplessness in the face of other's distress can be equally, if not more, difficult. This vicarious trauma we are so often exposed to, especially in schools, can deplete us.

There is a pressure to be well too. As a result, we also become quick to pathologise, when what is happening is actually a natural response to stress or events in our lives. Sometimes it can feel like we are not in control, and a diagnosis or label would help us feel in control. However, realising I had a much higher level of control over my mental health that I initially thought was a game changer for me. The understanding that I could take action to influence and protect my mental health was huge. Once we recognise when things take a dip, we can act to redress the balance. I call it 'circling the wagons'. For me, it is drawing my boundaries more firmly, recognising that I can't give to others so much right now, learning to slow down and taking positive steps to bolster myself. It is also trial and error – seeing just what is working right now and adjusting. Prioritising our own self-care when we need to is essential.

Coaching often brings up themes of self-awareness and self-care. These are key to maintaining good mental health. I often find there is a small voice inside, which knows exactly what each of us need.

I shared that I had always had to work on my mental health with a colleague recently. Their response – but you always look like you have got it together. I realised recently, that that is because I learned to listen to the small voices within, which understood what I needed. I hope you can learn how to listen too.