

How GTR is helping to improve mental health in the industry

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Laura Campbell, GTR's Suicide Prevention Manager, explains how dedicated partnerships – and simply talking to people – can make a real impact on the mental health crisis.

"I actually went to 11 Downing Street recently, and somebody came up to me and asked if I was responsible for training staff to look out for vulnerable passengers using the railway. I replied, 'it was partly me'. He told me that he had experienced moments of feeling depressed and he'd gone to the station during a low period, but a member of staff intervened and said, 'good morning, how are you?' and it was as simple as that, it completely changed his train of thought, he walked away from the station, and was now talking to me."

Laura Campbell, Govia Thameslink Railway's (GTR) Suicide Prevention Manager, has just shared a story about what drives her to get up each morning.

"It is things like that that keep me motivated, hearing about the successful interventions," she said. "I've made three interventions myself now, and it's so scary. The adrenaline's going, you know, it's not something that's easy to do. But the more you do it and the more you hear about other people that have

done it and you think, 'Okay well if, say, Alice, can do it, then I can do it too.' You can't say the wrong thing. Just go for it. And if we can just save one life, it's worth it."

Laura was talking to RBD after GTR strengthened its partnership with Stevenage FC to support young people in the community, helping to combat the mental health crisis following the pandemic. The 'Don't Tackle It Alone' campaign aims to encourage young people to attend Friday Kicks sporting events in their areas. The scheme is designed to offer the younger generation a support network and a safe place to meet. Research suggests that the younger generation have struggled the most with mental health during the pandemic and so Thameslink, part of GTR, is working with this age group to support those feeling vulnerable. To launch the initiative, players from the Academy and first teams wore specially designed kits with the message: 'Don't Tackle It Alone. We Are All In This Together. Always.' The Kicks programme is funded by Premier League Kicks and Sport England.

Laura is passionate about working with Stevenage FC on this because of the positive effect being active can have on mental health. "The camaraderie, and being outside or inside playing football, this idea of taking your thoughts away from whatever it is you're dealing with, is just so good. There's so many statistics around sport and mental health and how good it is for you, and how being part of a team and having people that are looking out for you and noticing changes because they know you, is beneficial.

"The Kicks programme offers young people a safe place to meet. It's somewhere to direct people to, so that was attractive to us. Messages are all well and good, but we don't want to do something just for the sake of doing it. We need to do it because it is something tangible for young people. It is allowing them to be with a team and get support from volunteers from Stevenage FC Foundation."

Laura was appointed to her role in 2020, becoming the first person employed by a passenger operator in such a role. Today there are several staff across the industry undertaking similar work. But has the way mental health is viewed changed in that time? Laura said it has.

"I definitely think there's been a change because more people are talking about mental health, which can only be a good thing. There's the Samaritans' campaign 'It's ok not to be ok'. While there is a lot of talk, my worry is during the pandemic a lot of people have moved to a virtual world and so are not having the same personal connections. So, although you've got a lot of people talking, that can just be noise to some people and it's not necessarily as helpful to them as a face-to-face connection. I think we need to work on connections. I think there is still an element of too much talk and not enough action, which is where the Kicks Programme comes into it," she said.

"I don't think we can ever do enough. The more we talk about mental health, the better things are going to be. And it's not necessarily about leading to something more serious - a lot of people struggle with their mental health and we need to address this upstream before people get to crisis point. So, I think early exposure to mental health and getting people used to seeking help and talking early on is what we need to be focusing on."

Recent statistics published by Network Rail show there is a small shift in the demographic in people using the railway to end their lives. Laura said that the industry needs to be aware of this but should not focus on it. "If we suddenly change tack and say, right, we've got to look out for women and younger people, it's

not the right way to train people to be able to help more widely.

“Our philosophy at GTR is zero harm and we need to be looking out for everybody. We train our teams with that in mind. Mental health is something that can affect all of us, it’s not selective on age or demographic, which is why training is so important to us as we need to have an eye on everyone.”

Laura said that one of the first things she did when she came into her role was to reach out to every single member of the GTR team; there are more than 7,500 staff. “They’re our eyes and ears,” she said. “I’ve made an intervention outside of work and so it gives people the awareness to constantly have their eyes open, even if you’ve had the smallest amount of training. It gives you the confidence to be able to speak to somebody when something doesn’t look quite right.”

She told a story about her husband getting involved in the training. “I made him sit and do the training, it’s a 30-minute e-learning course. Fast forward a couple of years, somebody sat crying on a station, so he approached him, and he said, ‘are you okay?’ That’s all he had to say. And the man said: ‘you know, I’m feeling a bit down obviously’, and my husband said: ‘well, do you want a coffee, should we go and have a coffee and have a bit of a chat’ and it was lovely that he was able to do that and have the confidence to do that. And as I said, you don’t need special training to do it. But it’s just that extra kind of confidence.”

People in crisis are attracted to the railway, partly, because they think they are usually guaranteed to see somebody, said Laura. “Most of the time, vulnerable people are just looking for someone to talk to. We know that the simple act of saying ‘hello’ and ‘are you okay’ can change the outcome, which is why we really focus on training our people on how best to approach those in need.”

As for the industry itself, Laura said that not enough can ever be done, but that is not a criticism. She highlighted some of the work taking place. “I don’t think we can ever do enough. However, there is a lot going on behind the scenes. I attend a monthly session with other train operating companies and Network Rail to discuss, share and collaborate on best practice. So, I’ll say ‘we have this fantastic e-learning, who wants it?’. It’s holding each other’s hand and working together because this is quite a lonely job in a way and just having that support network and being able to work with other people and bounce ideas off each other and find the best way forward is great.”

In March, Network Rail held a conference at the NEC in Birmingham which brought together all our industry partners including the British Transport Police and care workers. We had different people from different countries talking about their findings with suicide prevention. It was really intensive but really good.

As for advice for those in a bad place, Laura said: “We all have bad days. When it gets to the point where you feel like you can’t get out of bed, even the act of just making your bed can improve your outlook. If you can’t have a shower, wash your face. Do all the things that you feel able to do. Just take tiny steps, because you know you can’t be everything to everyone, every day. So just by breaking things down you may well be able to kind of take that step and put your foot in front of one foot in front of each other each time.

“And if you can’t reach out to friends, knowing that there is someone that’s always willing to speak to you, so things like the Hub of Hope, the Samaritans, all these amazing people that just want to talk to you and

you don't have to be in crisis."