

# Founders' Choice Award

OUTSTANDING SERVICE TO MENTAL HEALTH

## Barbara Harvey

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If mental health were a celebrity it would feature as "going up" in Caitlin Moran's weekly *Celebrity Watch*. A topic that was once addressed in whispers is becoming mainstream, accelerated by 18 months of this relentless pandemic. And that's a good thing, right? Yes. But.

Yes. My own awakening came about through two experiences. One, when someone I love developed Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, stranding them in a dark, tortuous cycle of rumination and the other, when a travelling companion experienced a psychotic episode leading to a week in a secure psychiatric unit. Both knew they were deeply unwell; both were too scared to explain what was going on inside their heads. Both delayed

the treatment that ultimately helped them recover. When, with the support of like-minded colleagues, I focused on what we could do at work to prevent such pain, "making it safe for everyone to talk about their mental health" became #1 of the two ambitions we had of our programme.

But. The fluency with which many now speak of anxiety and depression and the way organisations are now working to address mental health is truly encouraging. But familiarity with these words must never make us forget what they mean. Poor mental health carries a huge human cost; it robs young people of



Barbara compares the mental health journey to a recent hill walk: we can look back with pride but the way ahead is tougher

the ability to enjoy the freedom of their youth, steals pleasure from university students, turns the working week into a trauma, breaks relationships, wrecks careers. Takes lives.



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After labouring for an hour up a steep hill in Scotland recently we came to a cairn with the warning "steep path". And yes, that steep hill did indeed get steeper! And that's where I think we are with mental health. We can be proud of how far we've come, but the way ahead is tougher. Now we must get to the root causes of poor mental health. For businesses it means understanding how the way we work contributes to our people's mental health. We must be bold and go beyond fixing people to fix workplaces. We must make work a place that builds resilient, healthy-minded people; a place that leaves people better off in every way. ■