

## The power of the small

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Françoise is the head of mental health and wellbeing for Acas, leading on enhancing staff engagement and productivity through improved mental health and wellbeing. She also works with external stakeholders to influence policy, debate and practice on mental health in the workplace.

As a mother of 2 young children, I – like many of you – am currently home schooling. Maintaining a work-life balance has never felt so difficult; and I know this is just one of the many unexpected challenges the pandemic has thrown our way.

On [Time to Talk Day](#) I would like to explain why I believe that 'the power of the small' – making time to say "how are you?" – can, eventually, lead to significant cultural change in the workplace, where people feel able to answer this question honestly.

### Mental health awareness: the silver lining?

To mark the day, we are publishing a new policy paper. The title of the paper is ['The road to enlightenment'](#) and for many this will resonate: it has taken many years, but perhaps mental wellbeing is finally being taken seriously as a strategic issue. This is certainly borne out by the 3 organisations we have worked with and whose experiences we share in the paper. To quote Sarah-Jane Littleford (head of responsible business for Fujitsu Global Delivery), mental wellbeing has become "a runaway issue".

The thing that strikes me about our conversations with these organisations, and many others we talk to every week, is that none of us have all the answers. Talking is great but it is only the first step and it can often lead to more complex, underlying issues. But let's at least keep the momentum going: if we're on the road to enlightenment, let's not get diverted.

### Acas's own challenges

As the employment relations experts, we acknowledge that it can be hard to always practice what you preach. Internally, we have been grappling with the same problems as everyone: parents, like me, teaching and working; those feeling lonely and isolated; and,

significantly, helping those with pre-existing mental health problems as well as those whose health has taken a downturn (especially as we trudge through a dark February in a third lockdown).

[Our framework for positive mental health at work](#) shows how promoting positive mental health is a joint responsibility between employers, managers and individuals. We all know the critical role line managers play, which is why we have run special training sessions to help our managers handle remote conversations and support the mental health of their staff. We also ran line manager 'clinics' to take a deeper dive into more complex personal issues.

## The power of the small

The hardest bit to get right about mental health at work is the big picture stuff: joining the dots between all aspects of work and home life and how things like working conditions and relationships can influence how we act and feel. All 3 organisations in our report are seasoned travellers on the 'road to enlightenment' but, as with all of us, change is gradual. For example, making 'good work' a part of your thinking will not happen overnight.

Short-term strategies are great – training line managers, setting up internal resources to help and support staff (as we have done); but other objectives will take more planning, more commitment and, yes more honesty.

So, in the spirit of honesty, I admit that I have found my new circumstances very challenging. I have supportive managers and colleagues, but we are in uncharted territory.

My one message on Time to Talk Day is this: reach out to the most vulnerable, be mindful also about your own capacity. Focus on your own wellbeing and recognise this has value in its own right.