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The Rail & Road Pod – Episode 2: Brew Monday, Mental Health and the Railway

On this episode of the Rail and Road Pod we are discussing the important issue of mental health and finding out more about the rail industry's long-standing partnership with the Samaritans.

Host, Kenny Walker, is joined by Jason Alexandre, a trainer with the Samaritans who gives his insight into Brew Monday's events and some of the work they're currently involved in.

We are also joined by Ian Prosser, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Railways at the Office of Rail and Road, to discuss the rail industry's Million Hour Challenge. Paul Johnson from Network Rail, a listening volunteer shares why he volunteers for Samaritans.

Kenny Walker, host

Hello, folks, my name is Kenny Walker, and you're listening to the Rail and Road podcast.

On this episode, we're discussing the important issue of mental health and finding out more about the rail industry's long-standing partnership with the Samaritans.

I'm joined today by Jason Alexandre, a trainer with the Samaritans who can give us an idea of some of the work they're currently involved in, and an insight into the suicide prevention training they deliver.

Also joined by Ian Prosser, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Railways at the ORR (Office of Rail and Road), who helped set up the rail industry's Million Hour Challenge.

And, finally, Paul Johnson from Network Rail, who is a listening volunteer and was also closely involved in the launch of the Million Hour Challenge.

I'm sure this is a discussion that will resonate with many of our listeners. So I'm thankful to our guests for joining us today. Mental health is no doubt an emotive subject and one that has been in the news quite regularly this year following the coronavirus pandemic.

Since March last year, from the beginning of the first lockdown, Samaritan volunteers, some of whom from the rail industry, have provided emotional support more than a million times across telephone, email and letter. That's every seven seconds someone contacts Samaritans for help.

And currently one in five calls for help have been about coronavirus with continuing calls from people feeling concerned about isolation, unemployment, mental health and illness, as well as family and finance.

This is a 24/7, 365 days a year operation, and that hasn't changed because of the pandemic. Undoubtedly, the work of the Samaritans is invaluable.

And with today being Brew Monday, the annual fundraising campaign to bring people together, it's only fitting that I come to Jason first. Jason, tell us a little bit about Brew Monday and how people can get involved?

Jason Alexandre, Samaritans

Yes, certainly. Well Brew Monday we've been running each year and it's generally run on the third Monday in January. It's usually known as Blue Monday. Because people are feeling quite low, you are in winter.

So we're turning on its head to something positive. It's about reaching out, checking in and staying connected. So Samaritans is encouraging people to reach out to someone they care about, and connect over a virtual cuppa this winter for Brew Monday.

Although we might be physically isolated from each other at the moment, it's even more crucial than ever to stay connected. And the rail industry is also getting behind this campaign as well and they're encouraging their staff to connect over a virtual cuppa.

We're also doing some "how to listen" events through the branches, and that's really just sharing those SHUSH listening tips. So how to listen, how to care, how to be patient, how to use open questions, saying it back and to be courageous in having those conversations.

The current pandemic restrictions do mean that Samaritans volunteers can't be at stations talking to passengers, but we've been very fortunate, illustrator and author Charlie Mackesy has designed a beautiful illustration, and is going to encourage that message to inspire people to connect. The picture is a mole speaking to a piece of cake saying

something like: Can I share you with a friend? It's a beautiful illustration. And these are illustrations are going to be shared digitally across station screens and social media.

I really do hope that would inspire people to get connected. If people want to find out more about Brew Monday, they can go to the Samaritans website: samaritans.org/brewmonday and there is some further information there.

Kenny Walker, host

Thanks very much, Jason. I look forward to seeing these illustrations that you mentioned.

If I can bring in Ian. Now Ian, as mentioned at the start, you're involved with the Million Hour Challenge. The Million Hour Challenge is an ambitious and interesting concept. Can you tell us a little bit more about how this came about?

Ian Prosser, ORR

Yes, this came about a few years ago when myself and Mark Carne who was chief executive of Network Rail at the time were contemplating how we could do more in relation to our work that the industry has been doing with the Samaritans previously, which had been going on now for some years and had been highly successful.

One of the reasons was that people were coming to us, those that had been trained by the Samaritans and asking what else could they do? How else could they develop? So we came up with the idea of a Million Hour Challenge, which is a million hours of volunteering for the Samaritans and trying to actually also raise money for Samaritans, another target of a couple of million pounds. And there is two real reasons for the Million Hour Challenge.

One is actually there to support and help the Samaritans because our work has been going on in industry, in making those early intervention at stations and elsewhere has actually seen an increase in demand for the Samaritans activities.

And we know over time that their services are being increasingly used. And so therefore it is an opportunity for railway staff who have in some of the organisations, volunteer days to actually volunteer and help the Samaritans going forward, in a whole set of different ways. And I'll come on to some of those in a moment.

The second reason was that it's well known that volunteering for an organisation like the Samaritans or one of the charities is actually extremely beneficial for the individual and for the organisation they come from. Because what it does is it raises the awareness of mental health inside those organisations because people start to talk about it a lot more.

And obviously, we've been wanting to improve the mental health awareness and mental health performance, if you like, in the industry over a number of years now, because we did feel that we were lagging behind other sectors and with a very male dominated industry is not necessarily something that people will talk about.

So volunteering and doing some of the training that Samaritans provide or even becoming a listener can be really be very helpful in actually opening people up to having conversations in the workplace and therefore improving our own knowledge and understanding and improving the way in which we deal with each and every one of our own mental health, because it is extremely important.

And obviously in recent times, it is important to actually look after each other. We have been through a storm and we are all in different boats in that storm. But it's so important to help and look after each other, particularly in the years ahead.

So the idea is to get as many hours as possible from volunteers in the rail sector. It can be done in a number of ways. There's not just the listening people who some people have become listeners through the Million Hour Challenge, but it's also in fundraising and doing other activities like administration and support for the branches.

Myself, I have become a trustee for my local branch, which is there to help and support the organisation which is thriving. So there's a number of ways and fundraising will be very important in the years ahead as well for Samaritans.

So there are a number of ways that the volunteering can be done, and particularly also some of the training, some of the listening training that's available online from the Samaritans will help us all improve as managers, improve as individuals and people to help that support, enable to listen and support each other as we go forward, which will be some rocky, rocky times.

So that's really the background of the Million Hour Challenge and why I think it's so important that we all continue to try and push it forward going over the next few years.

Thank you Kenny.

Kenny Walker, host

Thanks very much. And yes, just to reiterate your point, it is important that we look out for each other and hopefully the Million Hour Challenge reaches its targets. Ian, thanks very much.

Jason, we mentioned at the beginning that you're a trainer with Samaritans. What kind of training is available? And has this been affected in any way by the coronavirus pandemic?

Jason Alexandre, Samaritans

Yes, well, we had training specific with the rail industry for well over 10 years. We set up a partnership just over 10 years ago, and Samaritans have train now, over 22,000 people within the Rail Industry such as BTP in that context. And there's two kinds of training specific to the rail industry which I'm involved with and I give.

The first one is the managing suicidal contacts training, and that's around identifying people who are vulnerable, how you approach them, how you can get a conversation going, how through that conversation you can encourage them to a place of safety and then how we can hand that person on to help for their road to recovery.

And we also do trauma support training and that supports anyone who is going through trauma. And both of those courses are supplied and funded through the partnership.

So anybody within that industry who's listening to this podcast would be able to get on that as long as they work within that railway context. There's no charge for that training. And COVID has effectively changed how we've done that.

Often, we would be doing this face to face, but now it's virtual and that's actually opened up a huge number of opportunities. Those people that would sometimes find it difficult to get to those training locations, now can sign up virtually. And if they want to do that, they just email railcompanies@samaritans.org.

There's pretty much online training available every day for those people who want to develop those listening skills. The listening volunteer training, again, that continues. Again, that would normally be done face to face, but that's now also gone virtually.

All the shifts are still in branch, but we are looking at different ways. And as we go into the future, looking at how we can support those volunteers in future to suit people's needs, including, for instance, online chat.

We really noticed over the pandemic that not much more of the service has actually been maybe going on to things like online chat and stuff like. So people are using the service differently, and therefore Samaritans is responding to the way that they're being required to change. And we're looking at how we can do that with the volunteers and those listening volunteers.

Kenny Walker, host

Thanks very much, Jason.

So we've heard from Jason on what the training is and how you can get involved. But what does being a fully trained, listening volunteer mean in reality?

Let's bring in Paul from Network Rail. Paul, I suppose a good place to start is why you became a listening volunteer and what this involves.

Paul Johnson, Network Rail

Yes, sure, Kenny. So I've been a Samaritan now for just over two years down in the Reigate branch in Surrey. And I remember having, it was like a nagging feeling, that I really wanted to give something back to society but couldn't quite work out how I was going to do this.

So what I really wanted was I wanted to do something that I could fit around, you know, a full time job and family commitments. And I kind of wanted to do something that I thought I might actually be half decent and kind of cheekily as well I was looking for something that maybe even, you know, I could benefit from doing myself.

So a friend pointed me in the direction of an open day that the local branch was having. So I went along just to find out more. And as soon as within five minutes, I knew this was the right thing for me.

And one thing that they kept saying over and over again that resonated with me is, you know, yes, you're going to make an absolutely massive difference to people's lives, to the callers. But actually, ironically, you'll probably get more out of it as a person, Paul, than you put in, which didn't actually make any sense at the time, but actually now I think is true.

So I signed up, I got through the interview process and then took the training. Now, the training at the Samaritans is phenomenal. Right at the beginning of the training, we were all asked, you know, how confident we felt about being able to take, you know, some of the calls that we would imagine that we would have to take.

And most of us said, yeah, we still don't feel we can do this. And once we'd actually gone through the training, you know, we were all able to quite categorically say, actually, we feel prepared.

And as we began to do the calls, you could see how well we were prepared to be listeners. And I know I can say that, you know, the two and a half years, I've never had a call that I've not felt confident to deal with. Some of them clearly very difficult and challenging. But I've always had that ability.

So you get the necessary training to to do the job. And for me, the shifts, the way shift work is great because I can choose the shifts that I do based around, as I said at the beginning, work, family commitments, etc. So you're expected to do at least 15 hours a month. That's four or five shifts a month. And a quarter of those need to be night shift because it's essential that we provide that 24/7 availability to our callers.

Now, one of the perceptions that I had in a number of people I think still have is that the only callers that we get are suicidal callers and yes, of course, we get, you know, a number of suicidal callers and we provide the, you know, the emotional support that we can.

But actually that the types of callers we get is far broader than that. And I mean, it's incredibly broad that would take way too long to try and give an exhaustive list. But, you know, they can be around finances, relationships, mental health. And as we heard earlier, more recently, over the last 10 months, COVID related and particularly the the consequences of COVID in terms of the isolation, increased isolation and the impact on mental health.

But whatever the reason that the people are calling Samaritans, you know, when I pick up the phone, I have no idea what it is that calls going to be about. But what I do know is that they're calling me for a reason.

They want me to be there for them to listen, to provide that emotional support, to give them that space and that trusted confidence in order to talk about something that's clearly, really, really worrying and concerning them. And they want to talk about.

So the way I feel at the end of the shift, I always ask myself the same questions. Do I feel that today I've actually made a difference. And every single shift I've done so far, I've been able to say yes.

Clearly some days a lot more than others some calls, if I'm honest, it's almost like a privilege to be able to hear callers talking about things that they've never been able to talk to anyone about before. They haven't got anyone or it's just too, too painful to talk about because we provide that space for them to open up.

So it's a phenomenally rewarding thing to do, and I think it's fair to say it's actually really

So the first thing is that I'm now a lot better at listening. So whether it's at work or whether it's with friends and family. So less jump in and trying to solve everything straight away. It's listening and letting the talker try and resolve things for themselves rather than trying to fix things.

And I think the second thing is I now have a much greater appreciation about my life and how fortunate I am, how lucky I am. You know, I didn't realise that people had lives like some of the callers. It has really changed my attitude towards my life about what I have and how I should live my life.

Kenny Walker, host

Was there any advice, Paul, that you could give for someone who's thinking about becoming a listening volunteer or even advice for someone who may not be interested in being a listening volunteer but would like to help another way?

Paul Johnson, Network Rail

Yes, absolutely. I think in terms of being a listening volunteer, I think the only regret I have about becoming a listening volunteer is that I didn't do it sooner. And if you have any inclination or gut feeling that you might want to be a listening volunteer, you get in touch with your local branch, you know, follow your gut instinct now.

But as you say, Samaritans aren't just about listening, volunteers for me listening volunteers are the coalface. So, you know, people like me need to be there to take the call, but I can't take the call for the listener if I don't have a phone that works and if I don't have the underlying technology and if we haven't sorted out the rotas and if we haven't paid the electricity bill. So it's a bit like, you know, charity is a little bit like a business.

All these things need to be done in the background so that people like me or other listening volunteers can sit and be there for our callers. And most branches, nobody gets paid. It's all voluntary. So maybe maybe the cleaners get paid. That's it.

So all this all these things need to be done so that people like me can be there when our callers need us. So if you think you can help with any of the sort of things that you could imagine that would go on in a branch, I would strongly encourage you, you know, to get in touch with your local branch and appreciate things that are obviously a little bit different at the moment.

But all these things need to be done. And if you just make yourself known, talk about what your particular branch needs help with, then the way I see it, is, you know, you're going to

sorting out the rotas, without people making the IT work and the phones work and getting the electricity bill paid, sorry.

You know, it has the same impact to the caller. And of course, as we heard right at the beginning, you know, fundraising, absolutely essential. It's a charity. You know, we need money to be able to provide the service to our callers. So just strongly recommend, you know, 2021, get in touch with your local branch.

Take a look at the websites, the Samaritans website, the Million Hours Challenge. There's so many different ways to get involved. And they'll tell you more eloquently than than I can. So please take a look.

Kenny Walker, host

That's great. Thanks very much, Paul. And thanks to Jason and Ian for joining us today.

As we've heard, this could be the year 2021 when you make a difference and there are various ways that you can volunteer. So please take a look and for more information or to get involved in supporting Samaritans as part of the Million Hour Challenge, please head to millionhourchallenge.com for more details.

And finally, before we go today, folks, whatever you're going through, Samaritans, volunteers are always there to listen without judgement. Call for free on 116 123 or email jo@samaritans.org or visit their website. Thanks for listening.



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