

How is your mental health?

Many business leaders think of stress and anxiety as necessary by-products of running a company. But in our fast-paced competitive world, how aware are you of your mental health?

Words Richard Dunnett

From the rudder steering the boat to the heartbeat of the business, the popular metaphors for chief executives or entrepreneurs conjure up images of strength, resilience and armour-plated confidence. But consider that every year one in four Britons experience some kind of mental health problem – so why should we assume that directors are immune?

While there is no evidence to suggest that business leaders are more prone to mental health issues, says Poppy Jaman, chief executive of Mental Health First Aid England (MHFA), the multiple demands on a director's life mean they might be more at risk. "Leading an organisation can be lonely," she says. "Everyone is looking to you to lead but when you're stressed many feel they need to think carefully about where they go to have that conversation."

It's not just corporate bosses at risk. With around half of all start-ups going to the wall within the first five years, it's no wonder SME owners feel vulnerable too, she says. "You're in an extremely competitive environment, constantly thinking on your feet, working long hours and perhaps bringing in the majority of the household income. Ultimately, the buck stops with you."

Carole Spiers, chair of the International Stress Management Association, has coached many directors. Most wouldn't dream of ignoring the warning light on the dashboard; so why, she asks, do they ignore the warning signs when it comes to mental health?

"There's a high expectation on them to manage everything. They very often don't want to share their feelings because they have to put up an image of being strong. Even when psychologically they're not feeling 100 per cent, there's a thought of having to be seen to deliver. They could be feeling fragile, vulnerable, or experiencing a lack of decisiveness and irritability. Maybe they're feeling near to tears for no obvious reason."

The always-on culture of top-level

business has meant that many chief executives have confided in Spiers that they are experiencing panic attacks and high anxiety levels, but are unsure how to manage it.

"They understand they need to make time for themselves but they don't allow themselves the opportunity to do it. Some have a need to be needed. They wonder if they can go on holiday. Sometimes I have to ask, 'If you died tomorrow would the business continue in your absence?' for them to realise that they're not dealing [properly] with the dangers of tiredness and exhaustion."

"One sought help only after his children pointed out that he couldn't even play a board game without holding his mobile phone in his hand. I can't tell you how many Type A, hard-driving people ignore the stress responses. They're the people who say, 'Carole, it's never going to happen to me.' You get into this CEO status where you think you're untouchable, but your body is still just a body whether you're a CEO or a first jobber."

Nothing to hide

High remuneration – or at least a public perception of all business leaders taking home six-figure salaries – may add to the perception. When it emerged in 2011 that Lloyds Banking Group chief executive Antonio Hórto-Osório was taking leave of absence due to extreme fatigue, 54 per cent of respondents to a *Guardian* website poll believed he was "paid well enough to take it".

The stigma that still surrounds mental health in wider society means it is often thought of as weakness, says Jaman. "The last thing a chief executive wants to be expressing is weakness. If society understood mental health and mental illness – and the difference between the two – people wouldn't feel they had to hide something. If you had something physical wrong with you, your board would be very supportive because they can see it. But with mental health, some

boards think this person is unpredictable, irritable and wonder if they can make and act on a decision. Some people still think mental health or mental illness equates to dangerous."

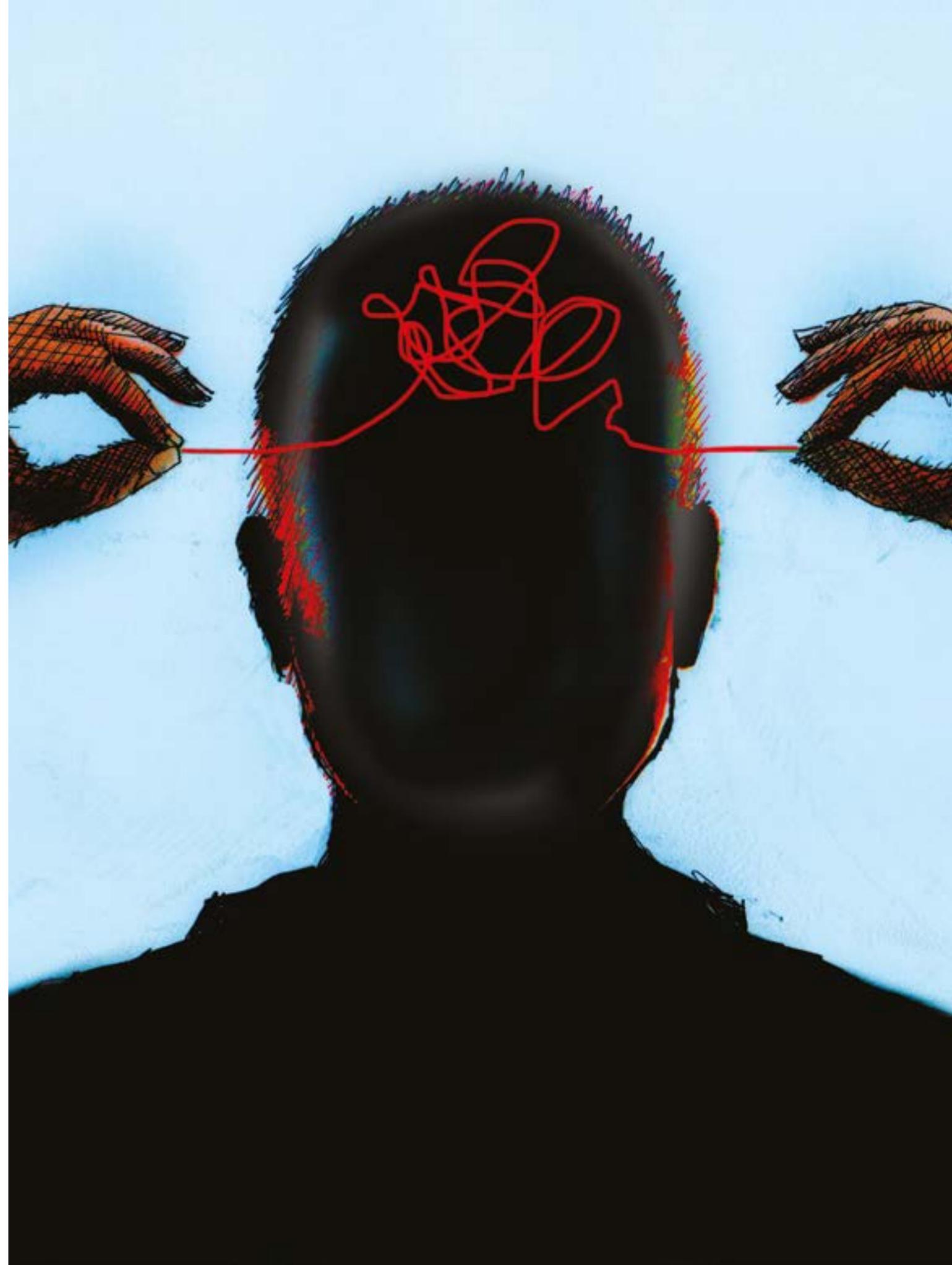
Jaman, who has herself had depression, advises having a clear network of people who know you both professionally and personally for one-to-one support. "Busy people attract busy people but I see [my network] once a month. In addition, therapy has been the backbone of my mental wellbeing throughout my career. I now recognise the early warning signs of depression and as soon as I am going down that road I will call a therapist for counselling."

For Jaman, signs include finding herself surviving on a few hours sleep a night ("but being higher not lower functioning"), eating just a little fruit and water over several days, becoming irritable with her children, stopping exercising or noticing her hair thinning. "When I first took up counselling I was referred by my GP as a way of getting me better alongside medication. But these days I use it as a preventative tool the moment I see the signs," she says. She also advises business leaders to invest in periodical coaching. "Every three years I see a rebirth in myself or the business. It's a common cycle of rejuvenation and re-inspiration and as a CEO you need to reenergise."

Her hope for the future is that a business leader experiencing mental health issues will be able to be open with their board. "Currently the judgement can make them vulnerable rather than empowering them. I look forward to a day – and I don't think it's far off – when our children's generation can walk into a boardroom and say, 'I've had a period of mental distress but I'm on it and I'm OK' – and no one bats an eyelid." **1**

World Mental Health Day is on 10 October

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