

Leadership

Mental Wellbeing  
in the Age of  
COVID

An Interview with  
Dr. Hazel Harrison

By  
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**Amrop**

Leaders For What's Next

# Mental Wellbeing in the age of COVID

## An Interview with Dr. Hazel Harrison

Dr Hazel Harrison is a Clinical Psychologist with more than 10 years' professional experience in both the National Health Service (NHS) and private sector.

Hazel established ThinkAvellana with a mission to bring psychology out of clinics and into the mainstream and has since developed a number of associations within healthcare, business, education and coaching.

She develops and delivers keynotes and workshops on a broad range of wellbeing topics, harnessing her long-held belief that prevention is better than cure.

Hazel holds a Doctorate in Clinical Psychology from the University of East Anglia, and a Bachelor's degree in Psychology and Media from the University of Leeds.



Employees and leaders alike are facing an unprecedented challenge during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite recent advances, the approach to mental health and wellbeing at work is still a burgeoning topic for many organizations. For some, the pandemic has placed wellbeing at the forefront of our attention as our sense of routine, and regimented office-based working environments, have been lost. The stress and anxiety as a result of the current economic

and public health climate, combined with a loss of purpose and meaning, have meant that COVID-19 poses a unique challenge to our mental health and wellbeing.

Now is the time to instill best practices in wellbeing throughout organizations to ensure synergy across the business, and within teams. In this interview Adam Saunders, Global Board Member of Amrop and Amrop UK Managing Partner, talks with Dr. Hazel Harrison, a keynote speaker in the realm of wellbeing.

Adam sat down with Hazel to discuss the challenges to our mental health and wellbeing that we have all faced through the COVID-19 pandemic. We define what mental health and wellbeing are in the context of the individual and organizations, before delving into how we can build best practices to support our wellbeing to see us through the pandemic.

*Interview originally recorded as part of the Amrop UK Coffee First Podcast Series – thought provoking conversations with leaders.*

# Mental Wellbeing in the Age of COVID

## Executive Summary | Key Messages

### A Shifting Place

We are at a turning point in our understanding of the necessity to take care of our mental health in the same way we would our physical health.

## Mental health and wellbeing today

### Repetition is Key

It is important to focus on regular small steps that improve our mental health and wellbeing, reinforcing learning with repetition.

### Set the Example

Everyone is accountable for good wellbeing but it is crucial that this is modelled and shared by powerful individuals in an organization.

## Wellbeing in business

### Kindness is King

Kindness and compassion to ourselves and others can create tremendous ripples of positive change through organizations.

### Experiment

It is important to keep experimenting. Finding methods and ways of working that are successful for each of us, whilst keeping in mind that these methods may differ for others.

## Driving change

### Over-communicate

Only with enhanced communication can we create a space where employees can be vulnerable enough to ask for what they need, for leaders to support other leaders.



# Mental Wellbeing in the Age of COVID

**You describe all people as having "mental health, just like we all have physical health", what does that mean in the context of mental health today?**

Yes, one of the things that has happened over the last few years is a shift for us all becoming more aware of what mental health and wellbeing really mean. We are at a turning point where we are starting to understand the necessity of taking care of our mental health in the same way that we would our physical health.

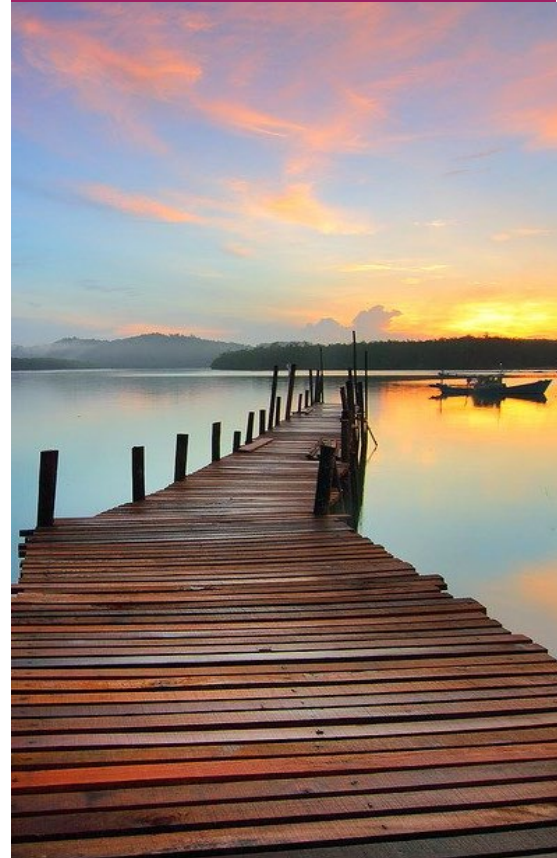
Most people are beginning to alter their perspectives on mental health and are developing an appreciation of just how important mental health is. We are starting to understand that like our physical health, we need to work hard to maintain, or improve, and that we will move up and down a spectrum of mental health depending on a variety of life circumstances and aspects of genetics.

I hope that one day we will reach a place where rather than saying that we have separate physical and mental health, we all say "we just have health" and understand that the two are intrinsically linked.

## **Mental health – why does it matter?**

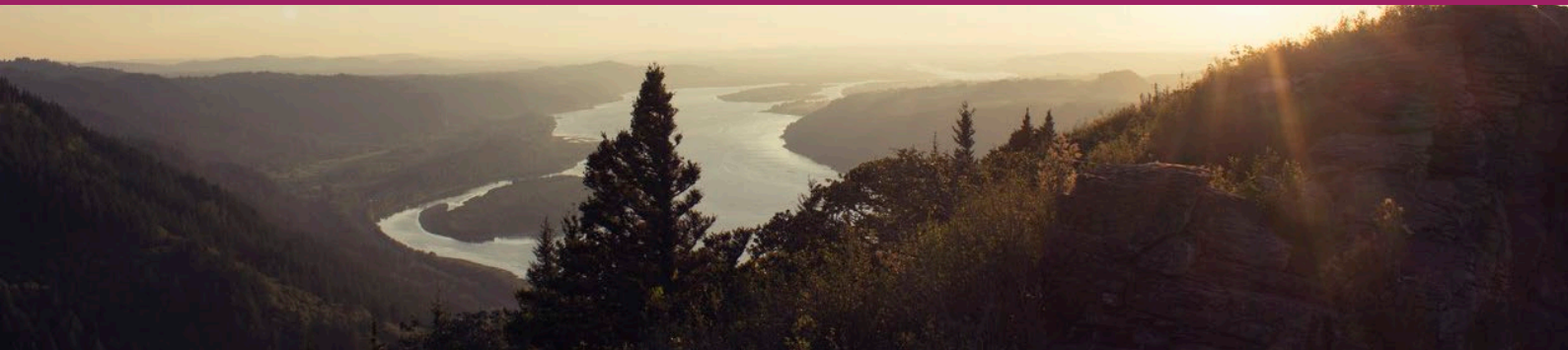
For so many reasons. From a clinical psychology perspective taking care of our mental health and wellbeing is so much about what makes us human — it encapsulates how we thrive and flourish to live fulfilling lives.

Research suggests that in business, individuals with high levels of wellbeing are more likely to be productive and engaged in tasks, and have stronger positive relationships, ultimately contributing to the development of a high functioning team.



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Good mental health in business is encapsulated by small changes that happen daily. It is important to focus on regular small steps that improve our mental health, with learning reinforced by repetition.



### **That being said, what does good mental health look like in business?**

When working with businesses, from FTSE 100's through to SME's, charities and schools, a lot of organizations consider themselves to do a lot for wellbeing. These organizations will typically hold mental health weeks and other occasional initiatives, with activities including seminars, spa days, and yoga sessions. Whilst this is all great, activities that happen once a year in mental health awareness week are not things that will enable us to thrive and function through the whole year.

Good mental health in business is encapsulated by small changes that happen daily. It is important to focus on regular small steps that improve our mental health, with learning reinforced through repetition. Going back to the physical health analogy: as with a physical fitness journey you can't go to the gym for one week a year and consider yourself fit, you have to keep working at it, the same is true for mental health and wellbeing.

### **In physical health we know that smoking, eating fatty foods and drinking alcohol daily are not good for our physical health, do we have any similar guidelines on what actions are detrimental to our mental health?**

This is a changing topic and somewhere I would love to get to, the challenge is that this will look slightly different for everyone, but there may be some similarities. We understand that there are some very common thinking traps that we can all fall into, i.e. starting to catastrophize situations or shifting into a pure black/white view without being able to see the grey area. We also tend to play mind reading tricks on ourselves, when in fact we have not fully assessed the evidence to decide if a situation/thought process is true.

When working with schools I reinforce to the children that sometimes our brain tells lies, this is helpful for adults to remember too. The things we think are not always factual and can be influenced by a whole range of factors, hence we are not always necessarily being driven by fact.

One equivalent to physical health is how we learn helpful thinking strategies that enable us to notice when we are falling into a catastrophizing cycle. It is important to recognize the simple things that we can do to pull ourselves out of these cycles, and practice daily to train our brains into different thought processes.

Change comes from those who can be influential and brave. Sometimes it is about being a bit vulnerable and talking about things we do not typically tend to in an organizational environment.



### So back to businesses in general, where does good wellbeing come from in a business context? Where does this begin and who is responsible?

Everyone is accountable for good wellbeing. But it is crucial that this is modelled and shared by powerful individuals in an organization. This does not necessarily mean the people who are at the hierarchical top — it includes people who are influential and respected by others. When these individuals are more open to good wellbeing and open to sharing their own thoughts, you can start to ripple through a different conversation on mental health and wellbeing.

Change comes from those who can be influential and brave. Sometimes it is about being a bit vulnerable and talking about things we do not typically tend to in an organizational environment, whilst remaining professional.

### In the current environment, what heightened emotions might be at play?

As clinical psychologists we know that the pandemic will have challenged a lot of our daily routine that we took for granted. There may have been elements of our day that were sustaining our wellbeing, for example lots of different connections/positive interactions with people as we move around the office. For a lot of people this doesn't happen any more, or will be happening in a different way.

In England, people are starting to move back into their offices but not in the same way as before. For some there will be elements of a lot of loss — loss of connection to others, loss of meaning and purpose in their day where their role has changed so much that it doesn't feel that they are working in the same way as before. There will be a loss of achievement, a loss of the “boost” when you feel that you are working towards a goal with a team — this may have been taken away too. Many people may be experiencing a heightened degree of stress and anxiety right now, which is very normal. It is important to say that it would be unusual if we were *not* feeling some degree of anxiety as we, as humans, have evolved to respond to threats with a stress response.

This is all within a business context, there will be a whole spectrum of other losses too. Our wellbeing will be quite challenged, and we will need to think carefully about how we sustain ourselves during this time.

**It is important to note that not everyone will be feeling an element of "loss". Loss is a big word, usually associated with bereavement, what does it mean in the context of COVID and mental health?**

Yes, there are some people whose lives may not have changed, but there are also a lot of people through this pandemic who will have experienced loss in a traditional sense and will be grieving for loved ones. This is tragic, but it is important to acknowledge the smaller losses too. It may seem like a pessimistic view but for many of us there are smaller things we are no longer able to do; it is useful to think about these and give them some time to prevent them from seeping out in unexpected ways.

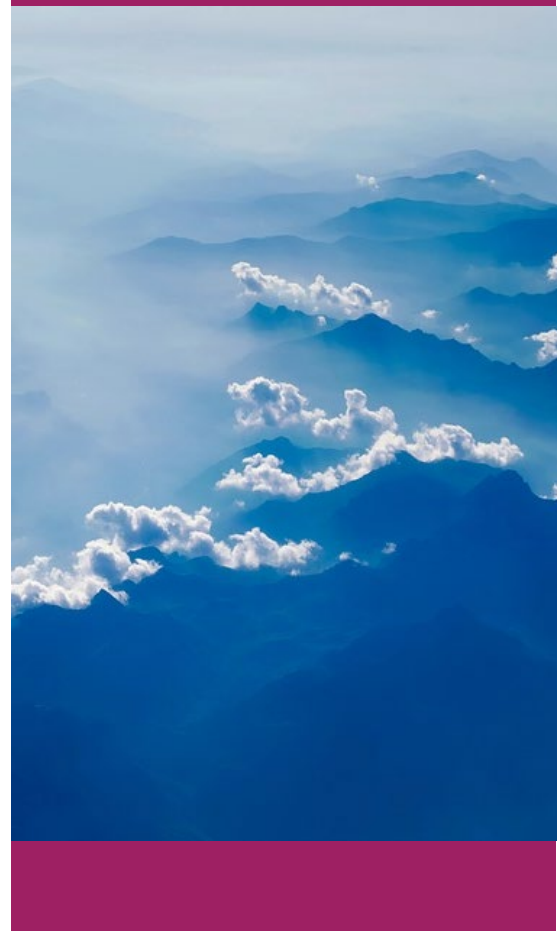
There are psychological theories that can help us understand the processes of loss that we may move through, and the emotional experiences we may have to come to terms with even the small changes that may have happened. Often this will not be linear; we may experience a sense of denial one day and a sense of acceptance the next, before moving back into denial. This is normal and important to recognize as a method to move through this to try and make sense of it.

**People may move through the cycles of loss at different speeds, and in different ways. Do you believe that this adds to the complexity of the situation and creates friction?**

Yes. People may experience fluctuations in their mental health at different speeds. Navigating these different cycles comes back to empathy — one of the core values of how we function with others. Understanding that another person's experience will be very different from your own and acknowledging that is what makes us beautifully human.

Empathy can help us to let go of some of the judgements that we might want to put on other people's experiences. When we judge others, it can also come with a sense of punishment and shame, both perpetuating negative emotions that aren't very helpful for our wellbeing.

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One of the challenges through the pandemic is that the lines between our home and work “tribes” have become blurred and extended.

**One loss for the majority of people is the working office environment, and our office “tribe” — the constant set of colleagues we work with on a daily basis. How has working from home changed our “tribe”?**

I use the word *tribe* as it conjures a sense of belonging, a feeling that you can be a particular person within that set of other people — you know who they are, they know who you are. Before, we may have had distinct social and professional connections, or *tribes*, and ways of being. One of the challenges through the pandemic is that the lines between these groups have become blurred and extended. This can come with benefits, i.e. more time with family, and no commute, but it can also present challenges, i.e. finding boundaries in how we work to look after our wellbeing. Finding ways to define these boundaries can induce some stress and anxiety when trying to juggle the many different tribes and roles we have across tribes.

**Whilst the challenges may vary, nobody is immune to the challenges to our mental health and wellbeing the pandemic has presented. Do you agree?**

Yes, everyone will experience shifts in how we operate through this time but it is important to recognize that these changes are for now and aren't forever. It is important to keep experimenting and finding out what things work for each of us. We do not know how to do this — there is no blueprint on how to handle a pandemic - so it is important that we all find what works for us, and realize that one method won't necessarily work for someone else.

One of the most important things we can do is to find a time to reflect on what is working, and what is not working, to actively change and shape our coping mechanisms day by day. Scan through your day and assess which parts were good, which parts did not work so well, and what changes can be made to make tomorrow better. I reiterate here the importance of self-compassion and kindness. Find ways to be kind to yourself — acknowledge when your efforts are good enough and allow yourself to let go of a task for the day. Most people set the bar high and strive for perfection but we have to be realistic and balance our expectations with the reality of what's happening in the world right now.





At times it is more productive to say, 'this is good enough for today', and bounce back for a stronger day tomorrow.

When having a bad day, understanding when to let go will be a troublesome concept for a lot of employees. As a leader, how do you ensure that you understand when your employees are having a bad day, so that you can empower them to understand it is OK to have the occasional bad day without feeling like they have to bury themselves in work?

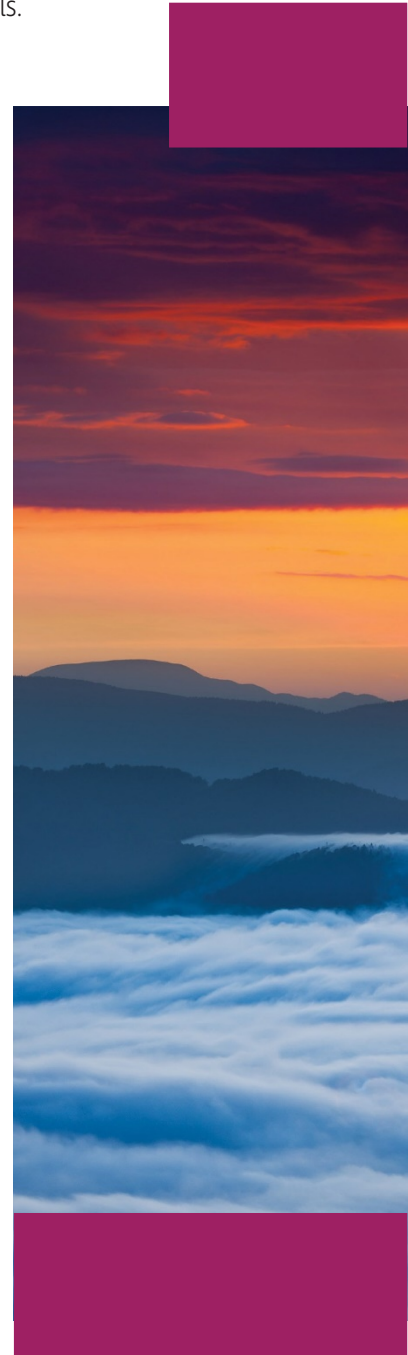
As an individual it is crucial to be kind to yourself and recognize when it is OK to give yourself a break. This is not to say you can stop trying and have mediocre days all the time, but people that can let go are much more likely to keep working towards difficult goals.

At times it is more productive to say, "*this is good enough for today*", and bounce back for a stronger day tomorrow. People that do this are more likely to achieve their long term goals because they have found ways to be kind to themselves, which enables them to keep going and does not allow the inner critic to take over.

In an organization, when a leader allows employees to acknowledge the bad days, they empower their team to feel understood, and listened-to, which ultimately facilitates how well the team functions together. We must acknowledge that there will be days that are hard so we can collectively bounce back quicker.

**Some final questions from industry. During this period of time the work pipeline has been reduced, it is all homework and no practical work. How do we keep people motivated who are used to doing their work together at a high pace/intensity?**

When a lot of motivation comes from doing your role with other people, an inability to do parts of your job in the same way may result in a lack of a sense of achievement, demotivation, and loss of energy. It is key that we enable a sense of meaning and purpose again, one possible solution is to find a way to connect with others and give back. This will look very different across organizations, but as with self-kindness when we do kind things for other people it reduces our levels of stress and helps us feel more connected.



In a normal office environment when there is a pressing matter that the leadership team is dealing with, people would by osmosis understand that something is happening. Remotely, employees may just get a sense of a lack of presence and engagement. How do leaders/businesses/teams safeguard against that?

Being authentic and available is crucial. When working in the office environment, less effort is required to communicate with the team but working from home means non-verbal communications will slip through the cracks.

One approach is honesty, making employees aware that leadership are navigating a situation and will not be as available as usual. Alternatively, offering windows of availability will offer open avenues of communication.

This availability is equally important on a day-to-day basis. Finding opportunities to communicate with the team in fun ways, i.e. virtual quizzes or drinks, will enable your presence as a leader to be felt and will keep you engaged as part of the team.

**To summarize, this is centered on communication. If leaders can create an environment where employees can be vulnerable and not judged, they have the facility to be on a positive trajectory out of this.**

Yes, that is fair and a great summary of what I feel is possible when we create this safe communication space. Psychological safety and feeling that as an employee you can communicate what you need from your leaders are key. As is creating a space for leaders to be ready to listen and help. Leaders are not immune to this, it is important for leaders to find a space to take care of themselves too.

Being authentic and available in times of crisis is crucial.

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## About Amrop

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