HEALTH+ SAFETY AT WORK

# It's not me but it's not you either

Submitted by Kellie Mundell on Mon, 2016-02-01 10:29

I've been reviewing some material sent to me about progressive approaches to mental health issues in the workplace. The Australian "hands up" technique – as in "hands up if you or someone close to you is a sufferer of …" – is an excellent example. It's a timely reminder that mental health in the workplace is a hugely widespread problem and that, as with any systemic issue, it is best tackled proactively and progressively. As many as one in five people are suffering at any one time. Compassion and tolerance are important.

Such initiatives always remind me of a day when I, a so called professor of psychology, got it wrong. Running a board session for an organisation some years ago, I was heckled from the start by a chap who was head of a technical function of the company. Every time I suggested a universal truth he'd say "I don't do that" or "I wouldn't do that" with some indignation and then not let me move on until I'd conceded that this was so. He also made clumsy interjections about colleagues' motivations – usually stating: "I suppose you'll want/think …" (whereas actually no, they didn't or wouldn't).

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It was annoying and inappropriate and I found that, caught up in the need to do my job and get the team through the session, I responded directly to this pain-in-the-ass behaviour without thinking the cause through.

I introduced another universal truth with the words "Normally …" then turning to my heckler and repeating (for comic effect) "*Normally* …". Later, introducing something not usually contentious, I paused, pointed at him, smiled and said "Don't say a word you!" I also got a big laugh. I've been working with such teams a long time now and like to think I can deal with a heckler with appropriate humour. Indeed, I was assured later that I had "dealt with the notoriously difficult X very well" and overall the session went swimmingly and finished on time.
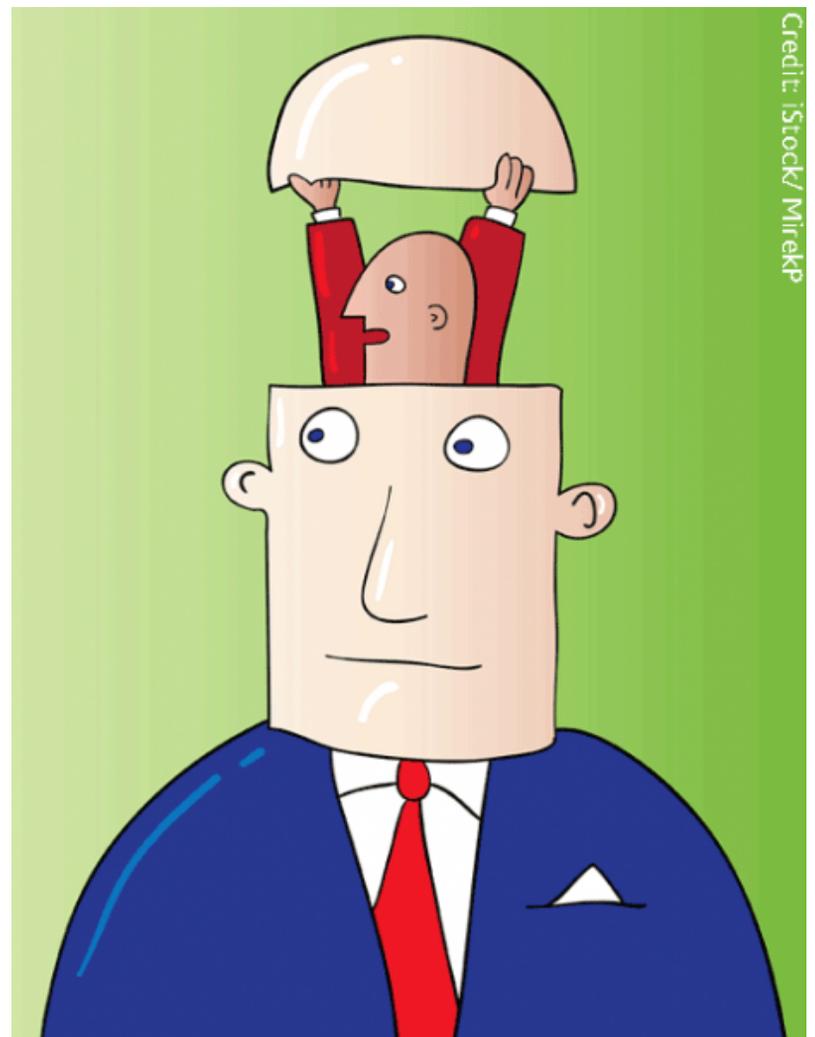
Towards the end though, when I tried to involve X in an activity as in "we're through all that sparring nonsense and are friends now!" he declined. We clearly still *weren't* friends.

It dawned on me, looking closely at his face, that this highly successful engineer was actually almost certainly rather autistic. (The signs were there from the off of course and many readers will have realised this from paragraph one).

The nature of autism is such that I will just have been one of a long line of people and situations that he finds distressing. The discomfort of the interaction will most probably have been forgotten within hours – replaced by another. (That's illustrated well by Russell Crowe in the film *Beautiful Mind*.)

I sought him out later to say: "I couldn't convince you I'm a good psychologist but you're clearly a great designer" which salvaged my conscience a little but I think of this as a serious near-miss. He's a back room genius with autism and not, for example, a pilot with depression. Sometimes we say to an isolated individual in a group "We're not laughing at you we're laughing with you" and get the response "But I'm not laughing". Dealing with awkward colleagues we may quip "I'm not laughing at you … I'm just laughing *near* you!" (As I'd have claimed in that session). We all need to be aware that, sometimes, as well as thinking 'but *I'm* not laughing' they may by *screaming* inside or even thinking "you'll not be laughing for long".

Challenge: *Increasingly, organisations are rolling out training in how to spot emerging mental health issues in colleagues and appropriate responses. These issues are far more prevalent than people imagine. Does your organisation have a process that proactively addresses such issues? If not, please be the first to suggest it does.*

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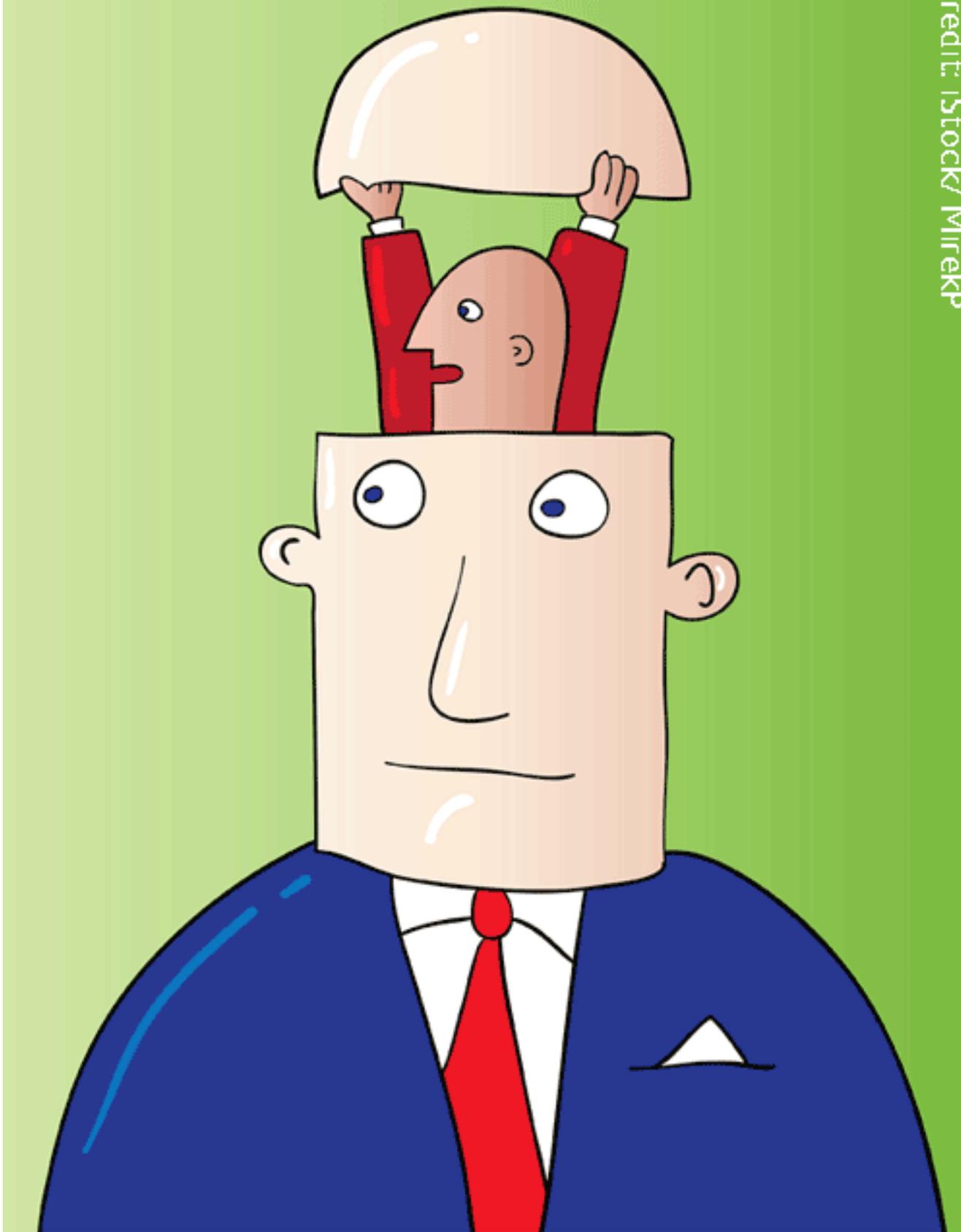
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