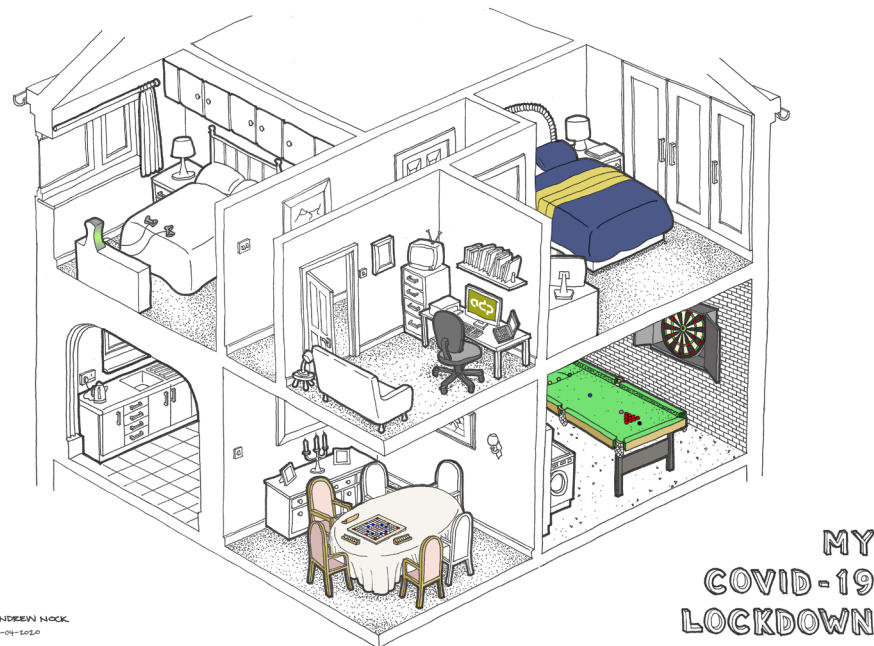


# From where I sit

## Struggles, support and recovery, by Andy Nock



From where I sit, I see recovery, but more poignantly, I feel recovery. My working life and the studio atmosphere is barely comparable with what seems a bygone era of not more than nine months ago. Of course, the new board has played a significant part in that, but there is no denying that perennial tyrant named Covid has generated some of the most noticeable changes.

I've stepped into two of the new roles created post-pandemic at ADP – one being an associate – but the one I believe is more noteworthy is being appointed as the London studio mental health first aider, and that's what I intend to focus on when writing about my current ADP experiences.

Firstly, what does mental health mean at ADP? Where do sustainability, belonging and engagement (SBE) position themselves in the context of our collective mental health? In my mind, sustainability is a simple one. Feeling unhappy or unable to maintain our best efforts, even for a short period, requires change. Without that, those feelings and difficulties concentrating will inevitably spiral into further demise. So, we as ADP and I as a mental health first aider need to offer our support to create a sustainable mindset for all. Everyone works differently and small changes here and there can go a long way to maintaining someone's work health.

**Belonging:** that's about feeling a part of something. In March, prior to new arrivals, the studio, frankly, felt a very subdued place. Home working at times manifested the studio into a deathly quiet space. Furthermore, we were stretched, so projects were also lonely. Fortunately, during that time I found some solace in the comfort of others, spending time with a small group after work in the local bar. Those catch-ups were priceless, even if they involved 90% moaning, they stopped us feeling alone – the very essence of 'belonging'.

Back to the present, and the studio is an entirely transformed place. The recovery is well and truly underway, and the sense of team is rushing through the door again. Admittedly, this did come about through sheer numbers of newbies, but it was also facilitated by an intent to make the studio a happier place and arrange gatherings to promote that intent.

**Engagement** is a little trickier in this context, but I believe this is where the responsibility on myself comes into play the most – and on the other mental health first aiders across the practice. Engaging, first and foremost, means listening, and if possible, understanding, but it should be remembered that understanding isn't inevitable. Someone else's situation can only be truly understood if you've experienced it yourself. As such, being a good listener is key.

Engaging also pertains to being aware, and to some degree that is about helping yourself. Personally, if I'm struggling, I have the ability to take a step back and engage with my own thinking. It isn't always easy to do that though, and some struggle more than others to remember to take a reflective step back at the right time. Some of us get into stressful work situations and can't remove ourselves, and it is those of us who are perhaps most likely to then need support.

So SBE is more than just an approach contributing towards the success of a project. It can apply to us as human beings. We have frailties and idiosyncrasies: essentially, we have a human brain, which – no matter who you are – isn't a machine, so we have to keep our psychological side healthy. Any tool that can assist in enabling that is a good thing.

Given the criticality of mental health, I thought I'd open up and share a few past woes. This is more a "from where I did sit" during lockdowns, at a time preceding those post-work catch-ups with the team.

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To start the story, I despised home working. Some lucky folk loved it, some tolerated it, but for me, it was defined by solitude. Both around the house and in the context of work, loneliness prevailed above all else, exacerbated by the need to spread a limited resource group across a myriad of projects. The feelings of stress and loneliness grew daily, before a serious health issue for a family member, twinned with the additional pressure of supporting my mom through it, conspired into a fairly awful situation.

The worst was in February 2021, where due to Covid restrictions I could only meet family outdoors, and as a pair. I'd split my time wading through the mud with dad for an hour, before mom rocked up in her wellies and swapped over. In the time with dad it came to light that he'd struggled to talk about emotional concerns with mom, and he felt I was better equipped to do so. Subsequently, my hour spent with mom had a weighty pressure attached to it, trying to help her where I could but knowing it was within a short time frame, before hastily having to return to London. I'd roll back into the city feeling pretty blue, not knowing whether to be more concerned about work or family issues.

Eventually, I called the doc to get some support. He pointed me in the direction of the Headspace app, which I'd highly recommend to anyone, whether living with concerns or blissfully happy. He also offered a little reminder that committing to some exercise in the evening would serve me better than trying to take my mind off things with a couple of rum and cokes.

What I also forced myself to do was inform colleagues of the situation I was experiencing. For fear of my voice cracking if I talked it through, I instead sent an email to my senior London team members. As soon as I did, things began to change. The gloominess lifted. I received emails in return and support was shown in the form of attempts to ease the workload where possible.

The gloom raised further still when a senior colleague called me up a couple of times to check in. Those phone calls really took the kilos off the shoulders. The reason for that? You know you are part of a good thing. ADP has always been, and I'm sure will always continue to be, full of good, down-to-earth, willing-to-listen human beings.

Following what were difficult times for all, we now have in place a mental health and wellbeing work group, who meet monthly and have a primary focus on what's best for our colleagues. We also now have our people manager who feeds into the aforementioned wellbeing group, again with ideas that first and foremost benefit us as employees. Lastly, but by no means least, we have the mental health first aiders in each studio, who are all part of the wellbeing group, and have one interest, and that is to help their fellow human beings wherever they can. If that means listening only, and valuing confidentiality above all else, then so be it, sometimes being a sound board is the most important thing. Other times it could just be signposting to information and support available.

So, you'll now understand why at the beginning I said that 'poignantly, I feel recovery'. I feel ADP recovering, I feel myself now far removed from those miserable lockdown days, and I feel confident that with the support network we now have in operation, ADP is a great place for its employees. There will of course be constraints – it is a workplace and it has to operate for the majority as well – but I think we all work for an organisation willing to adapt and action helpful ideas, which is why new initiatives have been put in place with a primary focus on mental health and wellbeing.

If you are someone who's struggling – for whatever reason, however small – I urge you to speak with either a colleague, a mental health first aider, or, as I've shared, by all means feel free to get in touch with me. I promise I'm a good listener and those lockdown times taught me a positive thing or two.

From my desk to yours, be well!

**Your mental health first aiders are:**

- + Birmingham: Claire Mantle, Karen Ward, Annabel Aucott, Natalia Lopez, Claire Hunt
- + Manchester: Vicky Fitton, Will Allen
- + Sherborne: Gráinne Nestor
- + Edinburgh: Amy Brazenall
- + Oxford: Craig Cullimore, Ben Wallis, Jade Sturme
- + Cyprus: Natalie Stylianou
- + London: Andy Nock

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