



# This is *me*<sup>TM</sup> One Year On

A year ago we launched the CMS *This is Me* video, in which our colleagues talked openly about their mental health, and the challenges they have faced and overcome.

On the occasion of Mental Health Awareness Week 2019 and the first anniversary of our video, we asked them about the experience of sharing their story with the firm.

## Rebecca Roffe, Partner:

When I found about the This is Me initiative I was intrigued but, to be honest, I was worried about the impact being too involved might have on my career and partnership prospects. I felt I was appreciated by clients and managers for being a strong person, always calm under pressure and delivering for clients with minimal fuss, and talking about mental health might reveal the chinks in my armour. It took close friends (including the wonderful Chelsie) to persuade me to take the plunge. The funny thing is, I really enjoyed opening up and, having done it and seen the reaction from those watching, I now can't imagine feeling the way I did a year ago. Everyone has been super supportive and I have received nothing but positivity from across the business. It turns out that nobody sees me, or any of the

participants as weak... far from it. So, removing even the assumption of a stigma has been the biggest positive for me, and hopefully for many others.

Having been part of starting SWAG (Sheffield Wellbeing Awareness Group) in Sheffield, I can also see first-hand how much of a difference it has made to the office. People now talk much more openly about their own experiences, and we are able and willing to spot people struggling and to reach out earlier. I am very proud of that. Personally, it has also helped me to deal with my grief, by having a support network around me and being able to support them back. I have always said that the only good thing about going through bereavement is that I can help others through theirs. Oh, and it didn't do my career any harm at all!



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### Fiona Picken, Senior Paralegal:

The thought of sharing my story was far worse than the reality and I found it quite a therapeutic process as it enabled me to look back at how far I have come in my journey. The anticipation of people's reactions caused me the most amount of anxiety as it was such a big step to openly discuss my situation outside of the safety of family and friends. I made a speech about my story prior to the video being shown in Glasgow and despite being so proud of what we had all achieved and produced it was daunting.

However, as soon as the screening was over, it was like a wave of admiration and support hitting me. I received emails from people telling me that what I said really resonated with them, others had also been battling with mental health issues in secret and felt relieved that it was now being brought to light in the workplace.... The support was endless.

There has been no negative impact on my working relationships at all and I am delighted by this as I feared that it would. If anything it has strengthened them as you cannot help but have a better relationship with someone when they come to speak to you about how they are feeling.

### Helen Morse, Trainee Solicitor:

I was very nervous about sharing my story at work, especially because I was in such a junior position with no "track record", so to speak. I was concerned if people knew about my views on mental health, particularly in regards to promoting a healthy work/life balance and allowing people to take time for themselves, they would think I wasn't ambitious or committed to the firm. I nearly didn't do it for these reasons!

I found the video quite an emotional watch and I was hopeful other people would find it just as meaningful. There were of course nerves that it wouldn't be received in the right way, but the editing team did an amazing job

and the message was pitched perfectly. A number of trainees messaged me to say they saw me in the video and how brave they thought I was to volunteer to feature in it. I think the video generally captured views a lot of people were feeling, but didn't want to say out loud, so I was proud to play a small part in breaking the silence.

Featuring in 'This is Me' has certainly impacted on my relationship with my colleagues who also featured in the video, as we all have this shared experience and a ready-made support network should we ever need a friendly face. I hope more generally other colleagues will feel comfortable in approaching me if they have any worries or issues knowing I'll be sympathetic to them.

As I'm just starting out in my legal career, I wouldn't say the experience has massively impacted my work, but it has certainly reinforced to me that I should not suffer in silence and reach out if I ever need support with managing my work load etc..

### Cathy Pitt, Partner:

I felt very apprehensive that sharing my story would adversely affect colleagues' opinion of me. I also felt a strong desire to help bring about change in the way we perceive Mental Health and also to let colleagues know about this side of me, so that I could openly be myself at work.

I have received overwhelmingly positive feedback. It was clear that people were very ready to have this conversation. I had feedback from people who were themselves struggling with Mental Health issues or with supporting friends/family/colleagues. I also had feedback from people who were not directly affected but strongly supported the steps the firm was taking to make discussion of these topics more open.

Taking part in 'This is Me' has been very positive, people have been incredibly supportive. It also helps that colleagues now understand some of the decisions I take about how I work and do BD.



## Laura Cole, Associate:

I initially felt very nervous about sharing my story at work – in fact, my partner asked me whether I thought I should take part, or whether it might impact on my position/career. For me though, that response was part of the impetus to step forward – the assumption that being connected in any way with poor mental health was a stigma.

I was also conscious that my story was ‘second-hand’ – I didn’t want to detract from those sharing their own experiences, who for me are the really courageous ones. I remember though that when my partner and I were going through issues, I felt very alone – so I hoped that by taking part, I would help others who are caring for those with illnesses to know that there are colleagues and friends out there who understand.

I was beyond nervous ahead of the launch of the ‘This is Me’ video. I was extremely uncomfortable about being in the room when the video was shown, not knowing the reaction it would create. The support both of SWAG/the other participants, particularly Sophie Breuil and Vanessa Whitman who led the campaign, proved absolutely crucial. We’re a team.

The feedback has been phenomenal, even now. When the video was first released, I received emails and calls from colleagues, some who know me well, some barely at all, thanking us for being open and bringing the subject into conversation.

I bumped into a former colleague at an event recently, and he still remembered the video – and apparently, they’re now doing a similar one at his new firm.

More widely, people I know in Sheffield (for example, on opposing netball teams!) mentioned seeing the video through mutual LinkedIn contacts and praised both us and the firm for supporting This is Me.

I underestimated the impact this would have, and how widely it would affect people. One piece of feedback I received specifically thanked us for being role models/ contacts for more junior staff at the firm who are either themselves struggling or are going through difficult experiences, and that really hit home to me. It’s allowed for more open conversations about how people are ‘really’ feeling.

## Nick Hopper, Senior Associate:

I think the main personal thing to come out of the whole process through creation of the video and the formation of a Wellbeing Awareness Group in Sheffield is to listen to what I was trying to get others to listen to. I have always taken the approach of speaking openly about things that affect me (as I find that it helps) but listening back to my own words and those of others on the video prompted me to seek professional help to manage some of my own issues and concerns.

My own circumstances have led me to feel strongly that mental health should be considered in the same bracket as physical health and I am willing to do what I can to further that cause – I find the thought of friends and colleagues suffering day-to-day with mental health issues and feeling either alone or embarrassed/ashamed about them very troubling and really feel that campaigns like “This is Me” seek to address that issue. The positive feedback the video received was staggering, but within that feedback were numerous messages from people from all areas of the business who now felt they had the confidence to talk about how they struggle – this is the key impact of the video for me and what makes it so worthwhile – its ok to not be ok, and once you accept that there are things you can do to try to spend more time being ok or better than ok!



## Sarah Palmer, Team Secretary:

Before 'This is Me' launched, I was a little nervous but overall happy to participate. It felt good to be encouraged and supported in doing this and that made it easier!

I received a lot of feedback and it was very positive. It was nice to know there were so many supportive people around me, people that I'd never spoken to about my depression.

Since 'This is Me' I've found it so much easier to be open and honest and talk about mental health. I recently had a difficult time, which was quite unexpected, and due to a change in medication. I struggled for quite a few weeks and it gradually got worse and unmanageable. I was able to talk to my colleagues regarding this and ended up having some time away from work. I worried I had taken time off and was stressed about coming back to work but the support I received was amazing. This support gave me the confidence to be truthful when others asked if I was OK as I had been away from work. I found myself talking about it more openly – the people that were asking me genuinely cared about my health, and whilst talking, if I shed a tear or two it was OK. That is something that I have always struggled with as I get very tearful during these episodes, but I just laughed it off, or talked my way through it. I realised it didn't matter – they were just tears and gradually the tears got less and less. A couple of us had a little joke together about it, and I'd say I haven't cried for a whole week etc, but if I did have a little cry it was OK! The saying "It's Ok not to be OK" makes sense to me!

The whole experience definitely helped me feel more relaxed which has had a positive effect on my work.



If you need any support in relation to mental health please contact **Rachel Czernobay**.



If you wish to share your story about mental health, please contact **Sophie Breuil** or **Vanessa Whitman**.