When the World Feels Like It's Burning: A Letter on Mental Health in Dark Times

From Neil Shah, Chief De-Stressing Officer, The Stress Management Society

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Some weeks feel heavier than others. Last week hit hard.

An Air India crash. Riots in Ballymena and LA. More missiles, more lives lost Israel striking Iran. And that's on top of the heartbreak that's already been breaking us, quietly or loudly: Gaza. Ukraine. Economic hardship. Loneliness. Burnout.

It feels like we're watching the world unravel—and somehow expected to keep calm and carry on. But how?

For twenty-two years, I've been in this space—helping people manage stress, find resilience, choose hope. But lately, I find myself asking: how do we show up when our hearts feel held together with spit and prayers? When grief clings to us like a second skin? When we're screaming into the void and getting silence back?

As someone who has led campaigns for mental health for over two decades I've been struggling too. But I've also been remembering.

The Problem with Our Information Diet

I don't read newspapers. I don't watch the news on TV. I limit my social media exposure. But still, the darkness finds its way in—through WhatsApp groups, messages from friends and family, fragments of tragedy that slip through the cracks of my carefully constructed boundaries.

Here's what they don't tell you about how information travels now: it's not just the media that's the problem.

It's how we share trauma with each other, passing it along like a virus, thinking we're keeping each other informed when we're keeping each other afraid.

But here's the truth—and I need you to really hear this—these fragments of tragedy aren't representative of the world you actually live in. The Air India crash was tragic. The riots are real. The wars are devastating. But they're also isolated events in a world of 8 billion people where millions of acts of kindness, love, and hope happen every single day.

You just don't see those in your WhatsApp groups.

The Mental Health Toll

The truth is, we're not built for this constant bombardment. The human nervous system wasn't designed to absorb

global devastation 24/7. Yet here we are—scrolling through war zones between meetings, absorbing trauma in bite-sized headlines, and trying to stay "resilient."

This constant exposure to trauma—even secondhand—is rewiring our brains. It's called "mean world syndrome," and it's making us believe the world is more dangerous, more broken, more hopeless than it actually is.

I see it in my work every day. Anxiety levels through the roof. Depression climbing. People feeling helpless, hopeless, like nothing they do matters because the world's just going to shit anyway.

Your nervous system can't tell the difference between a real threat and a perceived one. When you're consuming tragedy 24/7, your body thinks you're under constant attack. No wonder we're all exhausted.

My Truth (And Maybe Yours Too)

I lost one of my best friends Dan to suicide. My journey into this field started with a breakdown and an attempted suicide. For twenty-two years, I've carried that weight—the guilt, the anger, the questions that have no answers. Some days, the world feels so heavy I don't know how to keep holding it up.

But I've learned something in all those years of breaking and healing: we're not meant to carry the world's pain alone. We're not responsible for fixing everything that's broken.

What we are responsible for is choosing how we respond.

Remembering Our Campaigns: The Light We've Always Carried

For years, our Stress Awareness Month campaigns haven't just been hashtags—they've been lifelines thrown into dark waters. They've been our collective refusal to let the darkness win.

#ChooseHope wasn't born from naivety. It was born from the understanding that hope is a choice we make despite the evidence, not because of it. Not blind optimism, but a radical act of defiance. When Dan died, when Covid took so much from us, when the world felt like it was "falling further the fuck apart"—hope wasn't what I felt. It was what I chose. Every damn day.

LeadWithLove was our most radical campaign yet. Not as a soft slogan, but as a revolutionary call. Because in a world tearing at the seams, choosing love—real, fierce, unconditional love—is how we win. Love isn't soft—it's fierce. It's what makes you keep going when your "heart feels like it's held together with spit and prayers."

#BetterTogether emerged from the recognition that isolation is the real enemy. Not the tragedies themselves, but the way they make us retreat, disconnect, believe we're alone in our pain. Because in our deepest moments of pain, it's connection that carries us through. Healing isn't solitary. It's communal. We are not meant to do this alone.

These campaigns weren't just messages we put out into the world. They were promises we made to ourselves, to each other, to everyone still standing in the fire with us.

What I'm Choosing (And Inviting You to Choose Too)

It's easy to numb out. Easy to become cynical. But what if we stood in the fire with our hearts open? What if we bled gold from every crack—and let our wounds become our weapons of wisdom?

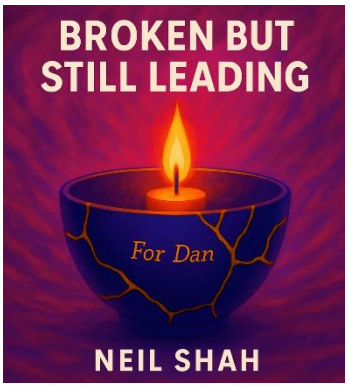
I'm choosing to eliminate my news consumption, and limit social media to twenty minutes per day, max. I need to know what's happening, but I don't need to marinate in it.

I'm choosing to seek out stories of hope, resilience, human kindness. They're there—you just have to look for them.

I'm choosing to remember that my mental health isn't selfish. It's necessary. If I'm broken, I can't help anyone else heal.

And I'm choosing to lead with love, even when—especially when—the world feels loveless.

A Poem and a Promise: Finding Gold in the Cracks



I've written a poem called "Broken but Still Leading." It's raw. It's angry. It's hopeful. It's everything I feel about trying to find light in dark times.

In it, I talk about Kintsugi—how "the cracks are where the light gets in. The breaks are the story. We fill our fractures with gold, we don't hide them." Because that's what we're all doing, isn't it? Learning to see our breaks not as failures, but as proof that we survived something that could have destroyed us.

The poem ends with this truth: "We bleed. We break. We build. And we lead with love. Not because it's easy... but because it's sacred."

I'll be sharing a recording because sometimes we need to hear that it's okay to be broken and still keep going. That our fractures don't disqualify us from leadership—they're exactly what qualifies us.

Click the link to hear the poem: https://youtu.be/c6dMtsz4wg8

The Revolution Continues: Why We Keep Going

So maybe this is our moment. To bleed. To break. To build something better.

#LeadWithLove isn't just a slogan—it's a fucking revolution. It's standing in the fire with your heart open. It's choosing to fill your cracks with gold instead of letting them define you as broken.

Every day we choose hope over despair, connection over isolation, love over hate—we're part of something bigger. We're part of a movement that says the darkness doesn't get the final word.

The world needs us. Broken, healing, imperfect, but here. Leading with love not because we've got it all figured out, but because we've learned that love is stronger than everything that's tried to break us.

When the WhatsApp messages come through with more tragedy, when the world feels heavy again, remember: you have a choice. You can marinate in the darkness, or you can choose to be part of the light.

Choose hope. Choose connection. Choose love.

For the ones we've lost. For the ones still standing. And for the world we're still here to shape—together.

Not because it's easy, but because it's sacred. Because it's how we win.

Your Mental Health Matters

If you're struggling—really struggling—please reach out. To me, to a friend, to a professional. The world needs you here. Broken, healing, imperfect, but here.

We're better together. We always have been.

With hope, with heart, with love,

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If you're experiencing thoughts of self-harm, please contact:

- *Samaritans: 116 123 (free, 24/7)*
- *Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 85258*
- *Or visit your local A&E*

You matter. Your story isn't over. It's just beginning….