

# Speaking Up needn't be lonely

Mental Health Awareness Week and International Nurses Day blog by Dr Jayne Chidgey-Clark

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**On International Nurses Day, Dr Jayne Chidgey-Clark reflects on her speaking up experience as a nurse and how being supported when we speak up is important for our mental health.**

This week is also Mental Health Awareness Week and a great opportunity to reflect on the importance of feeling psychologically safe to speak up.

“Have you ever struggled with feeling lonely – even when you’re surrounded by people you love? I have. It’s painful and confusing.” Brene Brown

The theme for this year’s Mental Health Awareness Week is loneliness. I am reflecting on how speaking up can sometimes feel like Brene Brown describes – lonely and painful. Earlier on in my career I spoke up about patient safety concerns and on another occasion about inappropriate behaviours in a team around a colleague’s sexuality. I felt lonely and afraid of what might happen, or not happen, on both occasions. Would I suffer consequences of speaking up, what if I didn’t speak up and patient safety was compromised? Would my confidentiality be breached and make behaviours in the team worse? What if I just kept quiet and let someone else raise matters? So many questions ran through my head, with no one I felt I could talk it through with. Reasons which contribute to my commitment to helping make speaking up business as usual in the NHS.

Speaking up can take courage, however you are not alone. If you cannot speak up to your manager or HR or your patient safety team, you can **talk to your Freedom to Speak Up Guardian**. They will listen with empathy, so you need not feel lonely, and will help raise the matter in your organisation. I would like to thank everyone who has spoken up to their Freedom to Speak Up Guardian and to all Freedom to Speak Up Guardians who have listened to the 55,918 speak up cases to date.

Our mental health can be impacted upon if we do not feel we can speak up – whether that is about mental health, ways of working, ideas for improvement or patient safety. Teams that are psychologically safe work with a growth mindset, always eager to learn – a culture that makes everyone feel included, and so by definition, less alone. These are key elements to a successful speaking up culture.

Ensuring people feel psychologically safe is a core **leadership skill**. Fostering an environment where workers do not feel alone, but instead feel free to share concerns or ideas for improvements, without fear of repercussion and consequence is vital.

As we celebrate International Nurses Day, I would like to put a spotlight on all nurses who make a difference to people’s lives on a daily basis. My own nursing career has been a privilege and one I would repeat at the drop of a hat.

From my first days as a student nurse, to my time specialising in end of life care, through to leadership posts, nurse non-executive director and now the National Guardian, I remain incredibly proud to be part of this profession that provides care, puts people at its heart, involving service users and their families and carers.

Nurses are the largest professional group who speak up to their Freedom to Speak Up Guardian. We hear how exhausted many are after navigating the pandemic. Two years of physical and mental challenges do not seem to be relenting with high rates of staff shortages and the demand for NHS services continuing to rise. In these circumstances, it is essential that workers feel able to speak up about anything that gets in the way of them doing a great job and enable a culture of compassion and understanding to flourish.



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