

# Inclusion supports better mental well-being

Danielle Brown, a nasen patron, talks about how inclusion can support and develop mental wellbeing.

There is no worse feeling than that of being excluded. Human beings are social creatures. We need people, not just to help us survive, but to allow us to live fulfilling lives. We surround ourselves with others, and to acquire acceptance, attention and a sense of belonging from them, we often look for common ground. Connection and mutual understanding can be easier to build when we see ourselves reflected in them.

But we know that the world doesn't work this way. The beautiful thing about the human race is the endless spectrum of difference that it has to offer. In the end, the

only thing that truly makes us the same is that we are all different.

Inclusion understands this; it aims to remove barriers and intolerance, embracing all people irrespective of their characteristics, needs and differences. When inclusion is prioritised – and implemented correctly – people receive the right support that allows them to thrive in their environment. This is inextricably linked to our mental wellbeing.

A key component of success is purpose. I firmly believe that we all have the capacity to achieve great things, but everybody's journey to success is different. We all have different passions, interests, strengths and abilities – and we all need varying levels of support in order to maximise these. Understanding

our purpose and being in control of our own personal roadmap leads us to pursue that which is meaningful and rewarding to us. Everybody should be valued for what they have to offer, to have their differences recognised as strengths, and this is where inclusion really comes into its own. With the right support we are able to let our abilities shine, which impacts so many different facets of our wellbeing from our happiness to our self-esteem. This, in turn, has a knock-on effect on our ability to succeed.

Social ties are a fundamental human need. When we develop relationships with people who like and accept us for who we are, we gain a sense of belonging. This increases our happiness levels, our self-worth and our confidence. It helps us put challenges and

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**DANIELLE BROWN MBE**

Danielle is a double Paralympic gold medallist, five-time World Champion and the first disabled athlete to represent England – and win gold – at the Commonwealth Games. She now works as a keynote speaker, Inclusion Champion and Coach with a mission to empower people to unlock their potential, overcome adversity and achieve more. She is passionate about working with young people and has developed online educational resources that centre around improving mental well-being and academic performance and has co-authored a children's self-development book: *Be Your Best Self: Life Skills for Unstoppable Kids*. She can be contacted at [info@daniellebrown.co.uk](mailto:info@daniellebrown.co.uk) or visit her webpage: [www.daniellebrown.co.uk](http://www.daniellebrown.co.uk)

curveballs into perspective and reduces our stress levels. When we get inclusion right we can turn up each day as ourselves and don't feel pressurised into changing our behaviour to fit in. We don't have to waste time and energy on acting a certain way because it's how we feel we should act, or how we feel we should look, or the sort of things we ought to be interested in.

Creating environments where needs are met is essential to getting this right. When we feel like we belong, when adjustments are made so that we can thrive and succeed, and where we are comfortable enough to turn up as ourselves it proactively supports better mental well-being. Of course, this isn't the path of least resistance. Inclusion requires changing behaviours, attitudes and long-standing views – and we know that this can sometimes be altogether more difficult to achieve.

The antithesis of inclusion is exclusion, and exclusion hurts. At best it is a sharp sting that temporarily knocks us down. More serious consequences can see it shatter self-esteem and lead to isolation. We will all experience barriers at some point in our lives, and by their very definition they are tough to navigate. This becomes far

harder if more are thrown up through a lack of inclusion, which can have a corollary effect on our mental well-being. Keep hitting walls, keep being pushed out and that sense of isolation grows. Without the social circles to support us and without this fundamental need being met it has a far-reaching impact on how we see ourselves.

We are seeing a shift towards better inclusion and we are also seeing a greater prioritisation of mental well-being. Bringing these two together is a very powerful combination. This allows us to tap into greater benefits and bring about quicker change. As with all movements we still have a long way to go until the playing field is truly level, and it can sometimes feel frustrating when we think of how much still needs to be done. Education is one of the best tools we have to promote inclusion.

Education makes difference less different. When we are given the ability to learn from each other we gain exposure to other experiences and perspectives, and it can be powerful enough to challenge world views that might be outdated or



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discriminatory. This isn't just about shining a light on the bad stuff. We need to hear the good news stories and the great strides forward too. We need to celebrate success and initiate conversations about how we can start redefining perspectives and break through barriers that still exist. And we need to bring everybody together. We achieve far more when we work as collaborators, not competitors, changing expectations and the concept of 'difference' in a way that helps everybody.

