# Diverse Mental Health

# Interview with Caroline Ribeiro-Nelson

**DMH** It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to get to know you and your work better, Caroline.

**CRN** Thank you Maiten, it's lovely to speak with you. I'm glad to share with anyone who has interest and wants to learn more

**DMH** We know that mental health & well-being has been your career-long passion. What sparked your interest?

**CRN** I remember from a young age I was fascinated by people who displayed behaviour which many of us find challenging and I thrive on challenge. I wanted to talk to and understand our human difficulties, such as; the homeless man who would shout out and speak to invisible people, my friend who seemed always sad, lost and could not see the good in the world, the teacher who screamed and slapped me across my face when I refused to answer a question and the neighbour's son who took his own life.
I wanted to know what led people to these struggles and states of unhappiness and what is it that promotes our happiness and the ability to get on well in the world?

I also questioned why we focus so much on our physical health and not on our mental health? It was clear to me that these were equally important, in order for us to perform effectively and to be happy.

So, in my pursuit for human understanding, what else could I become, but an Existential Psychotherapist. Over the years, I've worked with a range of organisations, with a focus on the creation of mentally healthy, diverse and inclusive work cultures.

**DMH** Tell us a bit about your career evolution. When did you realise that a new mental health approach, one that embraces diversity, inclusion and equity, was needed and why?

**CRN**

I think that DMH has always been a part of my perspective and work. This has been from the very start of my career over 25 years ago.

Throughout my career, both personally and professionally I have witnessed how certain factors in our society are harmful to the mental health of women, Black people and those from different backgrounds. Recent research also bears this out.

I recognised how factors such as; social injustice, verbal, sexual and physical abuse and assault amounted to traumatic experiences. On-going circumstances of exclusion, inequity, lack of opportunity, low income, rejection, inadequate or no resources, discrimination, sexism, racism and other isms all constituted to chronic stress and were harmful to our mental health. Although this was clear for me, this was something barely being written or talked about, went acknowledged and has not been adequately addressed.

" *My driving statement is Good Mental Health requires Good DEI* "

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**DMH**

Is there any episode you can recall (maybe in your childhood or adolescence) that ignited the passion you have been carrying for so long?

**CRN**

My experience from early childhood was not much different from many others, due to their diverse background. I have been racially abused verbally throughout my school years and by strangers on the street, excluded from social and professional events and venues, ignored, shunned, treated unfairly by managers and colleagues who did not wish to include or me, told by educational professionals, that I was unintelligent with a message that I was not valued by society. I tell you all this, not as a pity / sob story, but to express how this has become the norm for people from diverse backgrounds. This involves having to find ways to continually adapt, cope and overcome these challenges.

So, I have personally and professionally seen how these types of experiences cause trauma, chronic stress and mental health problems for people who are non-white or due to being different from the dominant power, particularly due to their ethnicity, sexual orientation/ identity,

physical ability, religion, age or social status. For me then, an approach which takes this into account and addresses these needs is completely obvious and essential.

**DMH** What can you say about the status quo regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)? What is still to be done?

**CRN** I'm afraid, that there is no short answer to this question Maiten

Twenty-five years ago, being the first Black woman within a national organisation, incredibly I didn't think much about this at the time and I'm struck by how very naïve I was. I had great confidence and believed that I deserved an opportunity to grow in this new position. However, there were those within the organisation, who felt the opposite and wanted to see me fail. "She only got the position because she's Black" were statements I heard directly and indirectly. I was viewed as a token for the organisation. Indeed, I was asked to pose for company brochures and asked to speak about racism, being "complimented", in a surprised tone on how eloquently I seemed to be able to express myself.

Despite this I had a supportive manager and great team, which helped me to get through and to flourish

Twenty-five years later we are seeing a great trend of women, Black. Brown and Indigenous people being the first to be appointed historical positions within organisations. I question if my appointment and those being made today have made a significant difference. The problem is that many people and organisations have failed to understand that real and effective diversity, equity and inclusion is more than mere "Tokenism" or a marketing ploy. It requires a fundamental shift in the status quo, the dismantling of restrictive societal structures and constructive education. This involves long-term and genuine commitment, along with strong investment. Without this meaningful and lasting change is not possible. I'm on my soap box now,

" *for real equity we need a more even distribution of resources, wealth and power. Inclusion requires meaningful participation and influence, which is representative throughout for everyone.* "

Looking at how things stand today, I would have to say that we have an incredibly long way to go yet.

**DMH** In your view, what would be the fundamental shift, corporates need to embrace DMH and why?

**CRN** The way I see businesses seriously approaching the creation of a mentally healthy and inclusive workforce, which is productive and engaged, involves both understanding and addressing the strong relationship between people's mental health and detrimental factors related to the status of equity, inclusion and diversity relevant to their organisation and culture. This means fully supporting everyone, in managing mental health issues, the impact of a lack of DEI, as well as the way these challenges are related to people's experiences of trauma, inequity, exclusion, injustice, lack of resources, racism, sexism, other isms and discrimination.

It is essential to recognise how a lack of DEI impacts mental health and well-being can lead to a wide range of negative consequences within the workplace. These can affect relationships, engagement, retention, performance, productivity and contribute to a negative work culture. Therefore, addressing the impact on employees, clients / customers, as well as the way, in which this is perpetuated in the workplace is hugely important.

Embracing the Diverse Mental Health approach offers a way forward in addressing the connection between mental health and harmful DEI issues. A major problem is that the fundamental and important aspects of a persons lived experience, the restrictive structures, as well as the inequitable dynamics, on which these problems are based have not been significantly confronted. Meaningful and significant change requires developing relevant mental health support strategies, which cover the impact of detrimental DEI issues, as well as tackling the factors, which perpetuate, uphold and bar the way for better DEI. This isn't easy and presents an immense challenge, which requires courage, commitment, investment and adequate resources

**DMH** Many corporates are trying to do so, but the beginnings are complex, and sometimes they seem completely lost. How would you guide them to achieve success in that area? Is there a "right path"?

**CRN** Commitment to the mental health and well-being of women and a diverse workforce, requires strong and on-going mental health support structures and effective strategies, which reflect the related DEI issues.

> " *A crucial factor, is without a doubt, psychologically safe environments, which are inclusive, non-judgemental and protective* "

In response to your question Maiten, about a right path. I think that in seeking clarity about the issues involved, the impact and the road considering questions such as;

- How are we gaining relevant insight and knowledge into the mental health needs and DEI issues of our people?

- What does a genuine and effective strategy, which reflects and meets the needs of our diverse workforce, look like?

- What does a genuine commitment involve and are we ready to take meaningful steps towards this?

- Are we ready and willing to invest significant and meaningful time, finances and resources in order to create fundamental changes?

- How do we engage and build strong and lasting relationships with all of our people and stakeholders, in an equitable way?

- What needs to be in place, in order to provide a psychologically safe environment?

Can be useful in creating a starting point

> " *A company's culture has to be more than its stated values. These need to be an expression of the diverse and actual experience of those connected to it.* "

It is important for organisations to engage, in order to create caring and strong structures, as well as constructive relationships. This requires investment of relevant time and resources, which are essential for stability, productivity, growth, good health and happiness

DMH expresses more than a person-centred approach, where all aspects of a person's experience are considered. This perspective means that individuals and organisations do not seek to merely cope with, manage ignore, avoid, mask or get away from mental health+ related DEI issues. This is not an effective solution or way forward.  My focus is one, which informs and supports you to recognise, learn, understand, confront, transform and create cultures, which incorporate ways of thinking, behaving, building cultures upon strategies, which address the fundamental and crucial issues of our mental health and the related DEI issues

Of course, I have to say that it makes perfect sense for leaders and organisations to work together with experts and professionals, with the skills and know-how to support their employees and meet their goals

**DMH** **What is your position regarding the recent episodes involving Simone Biles and Naomi Osaka?**

**CRN** Simone Biles and Naomi Osaka are two incredibly talented and courageous young woman.

I greatly appreciate and respect their decision to take an open stand on making their mental health a priority. Particularly being Black women, they are continually confronted with enormous societal pressure and stress. They have to work that much harder, achieve more, prove their worth and are expected to sacrifice their health. The issues for considering the impact for diverse mental health, which these women face, are all too clear here - with factors of sexism, racism, negative press and criticism and unfair treatment

This is momentous time in the history of sport and in the drive to promote better mental health. I really don't think that anything or anyone should tell, make or expect you to risk or harm your health

Caring for our mental health has often been seen as self-indulgent and selfish, with a huge stigma attached to mental health problems. Many individual face barriers in fearing that they will be seen as "crazy", weak or incapable. This is definitely not the case.

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Safeguarding our mental health is not a luxury, nor it is selfish. This is about self-preservation and the choice not to damage or sacrifice, a crucial part of who we are and how we exist
"

**DMH** **What three works, be those films, books, podcasts, talks, theatre pieces have had the most profound impact on your view of the world, and how does this impact your work?**

**CRN** That's always a difficult one for me Maiten. There are so many, which I have been touched by. I think that what strikes me about all of these forms of expression, is the amazingly powerful and creative way, people are able to express their ideas, to tell stories and feed our imagination. These reveal so much about the human condition. They show our natural drive to connect with others. They also have the fantastic ability to inspire, prompt thoughts and evoke a myriad of emotions and reactions. We are incredibly talented and are capable of attaining the most amazing achievements. At the same time, we are fallible and extremely vulnerable. Recognising all of this, my work must then involve acceptance and understanding of these different human facets. I look to bring about mutual understanding, create safe and healthy cultures, to help people mentally heal and enable us to be the best we can be

**Caroline Ribeiro-Nelson is a Psychotherapist, Diverse Mental Health Consultant, Coach & Trainer with 25+ years' experience**

**Diverse Mental Health**
**Head of Free Choices I Diverse Mental Health**