

Mental Health & Wellbeing
A shared learning experience

By Paul Stanford

**Life long railway employee and
Co-Founder Of Head-shunt**

Background

Joined BR age 16 in 1984; after an un-traumatic school life

Worked in BR, Railtrack and Network Rail in operations, infrastructure and commercial roles over 37 years

Never thought about mental health impact of significant rail events layering on one another - but they did upon me

Events ranged from attending serious personal accidents on the railway, and major train accidents, witnessing the London bus bomb, to making two interventions with distressed passengers

The effect of all of these conspired against my mental health; so that my own existence was nearly erased as I contemplated the most final of actions on 2 occasions at railway stations



“I GOT UP OUT OF MY SEAT AND STRODE THROUGH THE CARRIAGES – I COULDN’T LET THIS MAN KILL HIMSELF”

Paul Stanford quickly turned from commuter to hero after noticing a man acting out of the ordinary on a train



Wheels fell off my wagon

By September 2020; flashbacks of past rail incidents; occurring every 15 minutes; every day

Within 5 minutes of my initial call to my Doctor; the GP diagnosed PTSD

Signed off sick from work with stress and anxiety; 8 months off work

And then a course of 10 months of psychology started; including CBT and mindfulness

At the time; drinking 14 coffees daily; deemed by Dr to be in a constant state of fight or flight



Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

PTSD isn't limited to affecting military or emergency personnel; I thought it was. How wrong I was

Flashbacks to past my events occurred regularly - I thought it was just normal life in the 2000s

Flashbacks would cause me upset; anxiety, disrupt my thinking, make me short with people

Additionally; realised I was frightened at rail stations that people would jump in front of trains; frightened on trains that crashes would occur - this pre-existed over several years before my 2020 diagnosis

Train journeys heightened my anxiety; had happened for several years unbeknownst to me

TV and films with violence triggered me

My wife suspected I had been suffering PTSD for several years as I recounted train accidents and rail suicides I had attended; with regularity



What happened next after seeing the GP?

Psychologist started work with me to tackle intrusive thoughts October 2020

Hypnotised in each session and over 10 weeks had to relive every rail suicide I attended - using technique of 'watching the events' in a virtual cinema

In the midsts of the 'reliving' events had a complete melt-down; and went to my rail station to end my life; saved by a great GWR staff member & my wife Fiona

Post melt-down, I produced a safety plan from a pro-forma on the MIND website - and shared with Doctor and Psychologist; to help get me better and stay safe

Placed on Sertraline by GP; Psychologist tailored sessions post melt-down

Over the successive months I gradually became better and better



Learning points from my mental health experience

Ask for help if you are suffering; or offer help to someone who is - please don't be afraid

People will fall over themselves to help - my GP was brilliant as was my wife and family, friends along with Mike's Gallop and Gurtenne of Network Rail and Barry Milsom of GWR

Ending of a life might feel right to the person struggling; but others really will help, as I experienced when I was in a very dark place

Be open to anything; if it helps make you better; for me that was / is

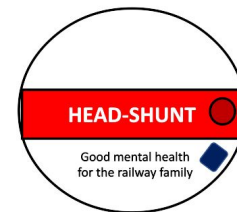
Psychologist; the turn-around in my well-being she helped me achieve over 10 months

Learning & undertaking self appreciation; so I was kinder to myself (see Dr Kristin Neff on YouTube)

Relaxation and meditation - both self-taught and coached by the Psychologist

Understanding the role of my GP and what they can do - don't be afraid to use them

Volunteering; a game-changer for making me feel better



Other learned experience

Layering

A succession of events impacting an individual's mental wellbeing - doesn't have to be train accidents; could be home issues overlaid with workplace events conspiring against a person's wellbeing

A blend of measures to keep people well

A blend of measures can keep people well - personally that's regular exercise; relaxation techniques and doing things I like - reading, walking in the country, model making and volunteering

Keep it simple and have a chat and tea, or a think and a write

Something as simple as a cup of tea and a simple chat can help someone else who is struggling or to help you if you are struggling

A simple log book of things you did, what made you feel good, what you are proud of; a simple option



And now, on a personal level?

For me I am grateful for -

Enjoying life; with simple pleasures walking and cycling in countryside

Friends and family

Diverse hobbies; from painting, cooking to model-making

Opportunity to help others through volunteering at a foodbank and with Head-shunt

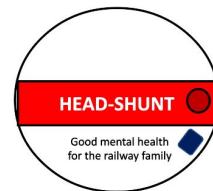
increasing personal feelings of

self-worth

satisfaction of helping people by putting something back into society

And a toolbox of tools and techniques I can and do use if the 'Black Dog' re-appears to affect my well-being

www.head-shunt.com *Supporting the railway family to stay well*



Head-shunt - why and what is it?

Learned experience of Paul and Fiona determined they wanted to help people in the railway family stay well or get better and tackle any stigma

Why? The experiences of Paul aren't unique; the last two years with COVID has put a huge mental strain on people and the changes to the UK railway industry to come, the cost of living crisis will put on strain on people - so ways of increasing resilience is key

So a dedicated voluntary body is being established to help the railway family stay well

It -

Provides sign-posting for companies and individuals; using lived experience

Will undertake and publish research working with rail industry, using that lived experience

Reduce stigma around mental health through the above and education



Head-shunt - since its launch May 2022

Website - www.head-shunt.com as a resource to help and educate - which continues to grow

Donations from the railway family has enabled investment to publicise railway mental health and start work tackling same

Several large rail companies have engaged with us, for us to speak about learned experience and provide expertise to their business

Circa 1000 railway people have heard Paul's story over the past year since October 2021

We have engaged with other charities with a view to partnering and joint work

We have a growing number of volunteers from train drivers to project managers; enthused and offering to undertake research, tell lived experience and help run the charity



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In conclusion

There is always hope; as I hope my story shows

People are so willing to help

A toolbox of measures can help get people better

As a 100% voluntary body; Head-shunt has a body of people wanting to help; who have real lived experience in the railway family, to help individuals and provide 'lived experience' input to companies

Thank you. Paul Stanford

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