



We Are Vodafone - Episode 6

Transcript

HOST

Cara McGoogan

GUESTS

Maria Whiteley, Jason Grouse

Cara McGoogan 00:02

Welcome to We Are Vodafone, a new podcast series where we'll bring together people from very different parts of the organization; to hear their opinions, theories, fears, passions and successes. Over the course of this series, we'll explore the subjects that matter most to you, and how they impact on your life. I'm Cara McGoogan, a journalist and podcaster and in this episode, we're going to talk about life changing health moments and how they can impact the way we think about ourselves and our interactions at work. My guests are Maria Whiteley, and Jason Grouse. They've volunteered to share their personal stories, and they do so candidly. This episode isn't always an easy listen, but I hope you will be able to hear the positive impact they're having and what other people can do. In a year where we've all lived through a life changing health moment, it feels like an important discussion. To start things off. I asked Jason and Maria to introduce themselves and the experiences they want to share.

Maria Whiteley 01:08

Oh, hi, Cara. My name is Maria Whiteley. I'm a Sales Support Specialist, working in cloud and security for Vodafone. I've been going through the menopause for the last five, six years. I suffer from brain fog, which is so frustrating, hot sweats during the day, and during the night, sleepless nights at times, body aching, changes with my weight. I've tried going on HRT, which was absolutely amazing. But then I had to come off of it for various reasons and now I'm trying to manage it with vitamins with exercise with yoga. It's really, really affected me with work being in a quite high-pressure job, trying to negotiate my working life with the trials and tribulations that brings in and the things that you have to actually action in your performance. And with my personal life, it's been good with my friends because they're going through the menopause as well. But it does have a different dynamic when you're with your partner, you have to explain it with to your partner and to your children, why you suddenly have a blazing row over meatballs. At that time, it makes total sense to you. But to your husband and to your children, they're looking at you, like you've just decapitated the cat.

Cara McGoogan 02:29

And what about you Jason?

Jason Grouse 02:31

Hi there, I'm Jason Grouse, I'm Programme Manager in Delivery for Vodafone. December 2020, I contracted COVID. The morning of Christmas Eve, my wife woke and saw me all with blue lips and woke me up and I was garbling a load of nonsense. Called 111, who promptly called an ambulance. My stats had dropped to 62% in the bedroom. About 42% when we were in the ambulance. I knew none of this; I was placed on oxygen for the first hour, to no avail and then they quickly intubated and put me on a ventilator, where I stayed till mid-January. Where I woke up, not knowing where the hell I was, what had happened to me. You wake up, you can't swallow. You certainly can't talk. My wife was being told for the first five days to prepare herself for me not being able to make it. On



the fifth day, we had a goodbye call; I'm obviously in a coma, but the phones put to my ear and the nurse asked if I could squeeze her hand, which I did. My left leg kicked up in the air backwards and I did a massive thumbs up apparently and started to make a turnaround from that point there on in. I'm a year down the line, I've got paralysis of the voice box, which is damaged from COVID and the pipes that went in my mouth and down my throat. Fatigue, breathlessness, constant coughing fits 24 hours a day that lasted for months. I'm glad to say that the coughing fits stopped about October time because I was literally on my hands and knees with exhaustion. It's been a very, very long journey and without the support of family colleagues and friends, it would have been very, very much more difficult. I'm sure Maria you find what you've got debilitating at different stages or how it affects your work life and home life.

Maria Whiteley 04:49

Yes, listening to what you've been saying about the way that, the massive impact it had, where you thought you were ill, you phoned the hospital, they got an ambulance to you and you went in, that was really dramatic. Whereas with the menopause, it's one of those things where it comes up slowly.

Jason Grouse 05:07

Having been on rehab, and I was the only gentleman there and there was another five ladies. I was told that gentlemen, don't normally make it that severe, where ladies do, but ladies have more impacts afterwards. And the impacts are not too dissimilar to menopausal ladies. And a colleague of mine had COVID felt quite unwell for a couple of days, but subsequently, since then, has had this brain fog; feels the need that she has to write down all of our tasks as a list and if she deviates from that list, everything can crumble. And she was going to go to the doctor and see if it was pre-menopausal. But I said, look, you know, from what I've been told, some of what you're explaining to me now is long COVID symptoms.

Maria Whiteley 06:04

It's interesting, because I haven't had, I don't believe I've had COVID. But with the menopause, I totally get with the fog, and remembering things and forgetting things and having to write things down. I think I've always been like that. But I notice it got worse in the last couple of years. I don't even remember, actually actioning things. I changed jobs in April, but when I was working, I was working as Revenue Assurance Manager, and I was working with millions, with numbers, and you needed to be spot on, needed to be accurate. And I would do all these actions and I would never remember that I've done them. But like with you, with yours, you know, when it particularly started on the 23rd, 24th of December 2020, when you had yours. With my menopause, I didn't realise what was happening, I used to get hot and bothered and, in the cold, going into a restaurant, I would sweat profusely. And I just thought that was just me. It got to a point where I didn't sleep properly for six months, has your sleep been affected in any way?

Jason Grouse 07:04

Absolutely. When they wake you up from a coma another side effect of that is the inability to sleep and for nearly a year, even now, I can go to bed 10,11 o'clock at night, and I'm still awake 1, 2, 3 o'clock in the morning. All these things collectively become so debilitating, and I'm not sure whether you guys with the menopause get excess fatigue?

Maria Whiteley 07:34

It's not so much excess fatigue, it's your body aches, your bones ache, you feel bruised, you feel like you're walking through treacle sometimes and when you're getting out of bed, when you're coming



off the sofa, you feel like an old woman. And you just think, “what's going on?”, you think, “are you just getting old?”. And because it creeps up on you, you don't realise that there's something going on, there's something going on with you. So, the fact that I couldn't sleep, then I started getting hot flushes 8 o'clock at night, straightaway, like someone put a tap over my head; water was just pouring down my face. And I think it got to a point when I thought, “do you know what, I think I may be going through menopause”. I can't even remember the date or the time or even the year, when I thought, “do you know what? I need to go and speak to somebody about this”. And so I went to the doctors, and they said that they needed to do a blood test to see if I was in that place and I was.

Cara McGoogan 08:28

It's interesting, what you both in saying about the similarities in your experiences with long COVID and the menopause. It's not really something that I'd necessarily thought about before. I'm interested to hear a bit about how your experiences with those symptoms have changed your working lives, how that's impacted you at work?

Maria Whiteley 08:49

Like I say, I didn't realise for a long while what was happening and this happened probably in the last five, six years. I remember my manager, I did a massive piece of work for him and I was really pleased with a piece of work that I'd done. He sort of like, “nope, that's not good enough” and “that's not right”. And he sort of like, expressed that he wasn't happy. When I eventually came off the call, I just burst out crying and this was in the in the office. And I never would have done that I would have been like, “right, okay, what do you need?”. I would have had a different response to that. I couldn't understand what was going on and I think I was doubting myself because I had just started a new job, etc. And then it got to the point where I couldn't sleep for six months properly and I was working with numbers. And so I actually had to say to my manager, look, this is what's going on and I might embarrass you by this. But I need to tell you, I'm going through the menopause. I am really struggling sleeping, I am grumpier, because I'm tired, I've got fog, my body aches and I was telling this and he went, “I knew there was something Maria,” and the fact that I explained it to him and he was just like, “yeah”, it's a different type of manager. I've got a great manager, and he's very open and receptive and he and he's really passionate about wellbeing and work life balance. So he said, “what do you need?” and I went, “I just need just a little bit of understanding, there are times when I'll need to just stop for a bit and just relax”. With my other colleagues, I have just opened the door to have those conversations, and I said, “I'm a woman at a certain age, and I'm having a hot flush, or my body's aching, I've had a rough night”. And people are going, “ah, right, okay”, and listening. And the guys as well have been receptive because the guys are younger than I am, but they've got partners. And I'm saying, “you've got to remember that this is going to happen to your partner, and understand how it's going to affect you, as well, because it doesn't just affect us”. And I think it's with work and the way that Vodafone are, they give you the space to be able to be your authentic self and what's going on with your life, you can bring that into the conversation to say, “this is me, and this is the way I have to be”.

Jason Grouse 10:54

Did you feel like you weren't the same person you were before? You felt completely different?

Maria Whiteley 11:01

Yes, yes.

Jason Grouse 11:03



It's very, very similar to COVID. You know, long COVID. You can't put your finger on it and when people say to you, "oh, you look fine". Then I'd say what goes on behind the scenes, what preparation you have to do to present yourself for that hour, or that 30 minute call; it's taken all of your energy and your guile to do that, to meet that requirement. For me and my team, absolutely fantastic. They were saying I came back to work too soon. I didn't come back till April. My hands were shaking, I could hardly talk. That's the way I'm wired. The day I came home from hospital, I tried to log on to my system, I hadn't got a clue what I was doing, not a clue. You couldn't even hold your hands still enough to type. But for me, after having sort of like three months of rehabilitation and whatnot, and I still wasn't in a position to come back to work, but I did. But I had that support. I had just enough work that I could cope with. People understood and above all else as well, my customers understood, because I already had a relationship with them before I went away and when I come back, they were very sympathetic and if they heard or saw me struggling, they'd sort of take over on a call; cover that awkward silence while I was trying to get my breath or, you know,

Maria Whiteley 12:31

Yeah, and I think with, I think with COVID, there's so many people who have been affected by it. It's really physical, so you can actually see it, can't you, you can hear it and you can see it. When it's like that, people will support you straightaway because they can hear it, they can see it, and they will support you. With menopause, it's not visible and one of the things that I really struggled with, and I still do to a certain extent is the anxiety. I keep thinking my husband is going to die. And I lay in bed and I look at him and I think he's not moving very well and I'll touch him and think thank God he's warm. If he's driving out and about, and he's out and about and he's doing stuff, and I think oh, what's happened, what if someone has a car crash. And I've actually visualised a policeman coming to my door, knocking on my door, and telling me my husband's dead, and then going through all the whole thing of having a funeral and all the rest of it. And I'm not like that I am a very positive, positive person. So the anxiety part of it is not good. And being out of control like for me at the moment, I can't, I am always going up and down my weight. I could easily lose two and a half stones and I'd be fine, I'd be on it. I cannot lose the weight; I've been doing exercising and everything. So then you don't feel as attractive you don't feel as desirable

Jason Grouse 13:43

Funny thing that you should say that Maria is that the ladies I've interacted with in rehab, a lot of them have come forward and said I don't like to leave the house now. I'm very tearful. I can't stop putting on weight, even though I'm eating and having the same routine as I had before. It's invisible. So that can make it more difficult for that person and like you say, it's so comparable to the menopause with not being able to stabilise your weight, you know, the inability to sleep all sorts it's, it's really, really strange.

Cara McGoogan 14:27

You've both been talking about the mental health aspects of long COVID and the menopause there. How have you been supported with the mental health sides of what's happened with you at work?

Jason Grouse 14:37

For the mental health side of life for me, I've always been a strong, robust type of chap, you know, I spent 26 years in the Army. I'm wired slightly different to other people I'd probably say and I'm always a glass half full, positive person. Yeah, you do get dark times when you're on your own, being in hospital for days on end and not knowing what's going on, or you come home and you got, I couldn't get out of bed for two weeks, you can't walk. It's crazy. But the way I was supported mentally from work was people staying in touch, people actually caring and calling me. I even had,



one of my female colleagues come to the house, sat in a chair, and talk to them down the corridor. They bought flowers for my wife, work sent my wife hampers and myself hampers when I got out of hospital. My close friends stayed in touch; one of my best mates, basically, they called me every day, you know, just to check on me, talk about anything. In the early days, I couldn't basically use a phone, didn't know how to use it, you know, and when it was put in my hands, it felt like two house bricks. But from a mental point of view, I think everyone was very aware, very caring, and didn't want to trouble me too much with too much work and they were very supportive. Everyone asking if I needed help with anything and still to this day, things take me longer to do now, than they did before. People say, "oh, it's because you're getting old". No. A few months ago, I was like a blade, you know, I was sharp, I was on it. And I had to touch things once to be successful. Now, a simple thing like typing an email, I look at it and think yeah, that's perfect. I can go and get a drink of water, come back and go, "oh my God, there's a few mistakes there", send it and then check it again. And then just silly, silly mistakes, because the brain doesn't, doesn't coordinate with it.

Maria Whiteley 16:52

I think for me, during the time when it sort of really sort of flared up was around about the time when we had the pandemic as well. And so as part of the team that I'm in, Cloud & Security, we put in a number of initiatives to support people's wellbeing and mental health. Being able to have the space and the time in your calendar to be able to go, "right, I'm going to take this time for me, I'm going to take this time for other colleagues to support". And so, there's a number of my colleagues that I work with, who were in the same age bracket as me, or a bit younger, who were going through the menopause. So the fact is that we could have time out and to talk about things, I think that's what was really helpful. I didn't feel alone. That's the thing about Vodafone, the way it's evolved in the last two, three years, is the fact that we've got a number of initiatives from the top, but our managers are actually giving it to our colleagues and going, "we've got this initiative, you go off and find out what you need and what the rest of your colleagues need". The fact that we were able to do that, and we're able to talk about it and have a safe place. And I'm really, really pleased about that because reading the forums outside of Vodafone, women have left the jobs because of the effects of the menopause. They're not supported, the brain fog, fog, frog, the brain fog see, it's started already. And the fact that they're not able to work at that pace like they used to do before. Even now, it's hard sometimes to do that.

Jason Grouse 18:25

For me, well, the guys was telling me whatever time you need, you take off. If you're working and you're struggling, take the time out, take whatever time you need. But for me being wired the way I am, I always felt guilty. You know, I'd be so tired, but I'd try and push through. But there were times you needed to step back, to be supported is half the ingredients I think, to you getting better; physically and mentally. You know because you think, well, you know, "I've got some good friends and the company are looking after me too, you know, life isn't that bad".

Cara McGoogan 19:04

You mentioned there, Jason that you're given the timeout that you need and I know that Maria, you've had some similar accommodations like that, could you give me a couple of specific accommodations that have helped each of you?

Jason Grouse 19:16

I think generally, for me, when I first came back, it was, "you only need to work half a day. Your customers are all aware of what's going on. We're all providing that holistic cover for you as well". And for people if they saw me struggling on the numerous calls that we all have to go on and would



jump in. You think you're doing your best you know, you're okay, but if you were looking at yourself from a different pair of eyes, you're not, you're completely not. For people to a) recognise that and b) act upon it and show a level of care and consideration is paramount.

Maria Whiteley 19:59

Yeah, I agree. I think for Vodafone and my team and my manager, was knowing that I would be able to get the work done. But leaving me to do it, trusting me that I would get it done in that timescale. Where I was really, really tired and I really couldn't function well, it might be in the afternoon, but I could work and work on an evening, because I'd have to sort of lay down. And then once I explained to my manager, that that was the way it was, he was fine, because he knew that if something was going to need to be delivered, say Monday, it will be delivered on Monday, I think it's coming to a realisation, that things are different, and then you find a way to work around it. This is what's going on, this is the support I need. Can you help me do that? It's not easy for everybody to do it. But I think if you can do that, and I think it's delegation as well, Jason, where you would take it all on yourself and do everything yourself. Even though you've got a team and whatever, you can't do that.

Jason Grouse 20:54

You see the world through different eyes after an event like that, or, you know, you're going through something like you are and you realise you can't be the be all and end all; you've got to delegate and I was given the time to do what I needed to do and everyone was really, really supportive. And like yourself, Maria, I had to do things in the evening, or it took me twice as long to prep for things than it did before. I think for long COVID it's accepting. Accepting, you've got it and not like "oh, well, you know, it's just one of them things". It's accepting, you've got it, and adjusting your life around it. So, you can live your life as closest to what you did before. But if I do things, now I have to break it down into phases. I can walk to the front door, I can have a shower, and I'm completely out of breath and exhausted, just having a shower and I have to have a sit down. I'm nowhere near as strong as it was before. If I wash the car, an activity like that will take me the majority of the day. And what you've got to understand is you have good days and you have bad days, same as with the menopause, but on your good days, is not to do too much. So, you spend the next three days, like a buckled wheel and you've got to recover from that. It's just having that mental strength to say, "well, I feel great. I could do a lot more. But no, I'll just do a little bit more". Because you don't want to suffer the consequences after.

Cara McGoogan 22:35

So Jason, you shared your story on Vodafone's workplace community, what compelled you to do that?

Jason Grouse 22:42

I did a couple of videos and stuff like that, and a write up of what it's like to be intubated and stuff and I put that on our workplace Facebook and that kind of went viral around the company. People were coming back to me saying, "oh my God, I didn't realise what it entailed". It was down to the colleagues, I think and the support, they were giving me the thought, do you know what, if I can give something back, if I can share to one person, they're probably going to share to 10, then 10 are gonna share to 100. And if it can keep people safe, and if it can raise more awareness, even though it was a bit of a shock for some people to read and, and go, "oh my God", but it raised awareness and a lot of people after seeing it would comment and say, "you've really made me think about this, wearing a mask isn't difficult, getting a vaccination isn't difficult, in the grand scheme of things". People have looked after me, kept me alive. I've had the support from family, friends and colleagues. So, I kind of see it as a moral duty to give, give something back.



Cara McGoogan 24:01

And Maria, what do you hope will come now with understanding of the menopause? And also, what's next for you?

Maria Whiteley 24:08

The understanding is that it happens to more than 50% of the population and I think it's the fact of being aware. It's not the end of your life, either. It's how you manage a transition of your life. There's conversations from when you're going through puberty, people know that it's a massive change for teenagers, for young adults, when they're going through puberty and it's talked about and it's supported and it's accepted. And I think for the menopause, for women, it's a really big, massive change. My mum when she went through it, it was just "oh, I'm going through the change," and that was it, it was just like "shh, shh", you know. I mean and "you're not a woman anymore". For me there is life before, during and after menopause. I'm moving on. I've sorted out what type of support I need from my family, from my friends and from my work colleagues and from my own personal support, like taking the vitamins so I can help. I've taken on new challenges. This year, I'm really hopeful. I am being positive. And my word for this year is champion when I'm going to champion myself and champion other people. It's not the end of the world, when you're going through menopause. For me, it's, what else can I do?

Jason Grouse 25:21

It's another phase of your life that as you say, most women will go through. And it should be respected and supported. From what I've experienced. I'm a bit more tolerant now of the world, and we should be kinder to people. We're there for a short time, a long time.

Cara McGoogan 25:41

I wondered if just as we close, if each of you have one piece of advice you would give to someone else who's struggling with a health condition at work?

Jason Grouse 25:50

Share, share your journey. Be open to people and have the courage, the moral courage to talk about it freely. Because there's probably a handful of people out there, thinking, "oh my god, I'm so glad he or she has said that because I'm feeling exactly the same". And then that's what brings people together. And you can share a common thing, whether it be menopause, or long COVID. Or, you know, you can share your journey and support each other.

Maria Whiteley 26:30

I echo what Jason said it, sharing it and talking to communicating so that people know that something's happened. If you were going through a divorce, and you had things going on, you'd tell people, wouldn't you? So, it's the same thing, it's a life change. So, you're just letting people know, to turn around and say, "this is what's going on with me". And by the time you know it, like Jason said, you're sharing, people are coming together and talking about their experiences. And then you've got the support. Not just in your work life, which you're going to need, but in your personally private life. Have the conversation with your partner. Have the conversation with your husband. Have conversations with a friend and your family. And we all know that a problem shared is a problem halved.

Cara McGoogan 27:12



Thanks to Maria and Jason for sharing their stories. This episode brings us to the end of the current podcast series. It's been a pleasure to meet the many Vodafone people who've shared their opinions, fears, passions and successes in thought provoking life stories. We've learned about the lives people have outside of work, and how their backgrounds make them who they are. There have been tips on how to support one another and bring your whole self to work. I really hope you've enjoyed their stories as much as I have. If you've been affected by any of the issues we've talked about. You can find resources in the show notes and look out for more information on workplace about our next series. This has been We Are Vodafone, a podcast series brought to you by Vodafone for Vodafone people.