

OPENING DOORS: RECOGNISING, SUPPORTING AND TALKING ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

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Allen Archaeology employees on site in Lincolnshire. Credit: Allen Archaeology

Mental illness amongst archaeologists is a little-publicised condition. For whatever reason, a very high proportion of archaeologists suffer from some form of poor mental health and struggle on with little help, or in some cases, little tolerance. It is often seen as a taboo and embarrassing subject.

By its very nature, archaeology is often a transient profession, with short-term contracts and a site-by-site experience being the norm. Mental illness (in my experience) has affected every project I've worked on, supervised and managed and it's often most prevalent amongst the staff on short-term contracts. Poor mental health is often briefly picked up on before the staff member in question moves on to another project or another company, so the opportunity to engage, help and offer support has been lost. I've seen this happen all too frequently within our profession and it's something that I have

experienced first-hand during my time 'on the circuit'. My mental health suffered greatly; I was often working on away jobs, for an unfamiliar company, living and working with unfamiliar people. There was very little contact with the head office and management and certainly little or no opportunity to speak to someone who may have been able to help or simply listen. Unfortunately, many people still find themselves in this position.

I'm lucky enough to work for an energetic, forward-thinking and genuinely caring employer. Every staff member counts and

they are seen not just as a ‘digger’ but as a person. Through my own experiences and because I am now able to influence internal policy as a senior manager, I feel that I am in a great position to help out my colleagues, irrespective of their role or grade. I’m not ashamed to admit that I still struggle with mental health issues and I have an open dialogue with my employer to ensure they know that I’m coping and that strategies can be put in place to ensure that I am ok.

We have a very active and informal line management structure, with people being able to talk openly about issues and when they are struggling. Mental health isn’t looked down upon and is taken seriously and treated confidentially and compassionately. Every employee is on a permanent contract, making them feel valued and included; the vast majority of our supervisors and project officers started out as diggers at Allen Archaeology, which I feel is a massive sign that we are getting something right. The ethos of our company is as much about the happiness and wellbeing of our staff as it is about doing the archaeology well.

We have several members of staff who have attended ‘Mental Health First Aid’ courses and who are always available to have a chat with, whether in person or over the phone, and all conversations are treated confidentially and with patience. We can also offer guidance and help through our external occupational health team, who have been of great help to several staff members and can act as an intermediary with GPs and HR.

I have had some bad experiences within archaeology when it comes to mental health acceptance and provision and this has really made me determined to make a difference to my colleagues within Allen Archaeology and within archaeology in general. I work for an employer who is on ‘the same page’ as me and simply wants to help its staff. My hope is that other employers start paying attention and looking out for ‘the signs’ amongst all of their staff, not just their core, permanent staff. There is a still a duty of care to temporary/contract workers and we really all need to pull together to stop people slipping through the cracks. It could genuinely save a life.

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Craig Huddart, giving a site tour to clients and a County Archaeologist in Leicestershire. Credit: Allen Archaeology



Craig Huddart

Craig is Regional Manager for Northeast England and Scotland and is also the Business Development Manager for Allen Archaeology Ltd. Craig is also a father of four and his hobbies include football, boxing, running, reading and hiking. He has also travelled a lot, living and working in the Peruvian Andes, studying anthropology and archaeology at the University of Tennessee and visiting Jerusalem, Ephesus, Rome and Paris amongst other places.

Craig has been in archaeology for over 15 years and has worked on, supervised and managed every type of site from watching briefs through to large-scale infrastructure projects. Craig’s major archaeological interests lie in the period spanning the late Roman through to early medieval Britain.

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