

S2 E8: Talking Mental Health with Darren Clarkson

Ricky Snodgrass 0:00

Hello and welcome to this episode of the coaching podcast from British canoeing.

Ben Woodruff 0:07

Hello everyone, and welcome to a special episode of the coaching podcast from British canoeing. My name is Ben Woodruff, and I'm the eLearning and digital developer at British canoeing. As you know, we currently have three miniseries ongoing with Pete Lee and Sid, but today we have a separate episode talking about something very current in both the world of paddling and overall, we're going to be discussing mental health and its impact on the return to paddling. Currently, one in four people experienced various mental health issues in the UK annually, with COVID-19 and our three lockdowns having further negative impact on our mental wellbeing as a nation. Today, we'll be discussing mental health, how we can highlight moving forward, looking at supporting people as they return to paddlesport. And how we can develop strategies to help with anxiety, stress, and other feelings, among other things in the return to the water. Before we start just a pre warning on this podcast, we will be discussing some sensitive subjects around the topic of mental health today, with some things that may be triggers for those suffering mental health conditions. It's an important conversation that's becoming more and more pertinent. But please only listen if you can. So I'm extremely pleased to be joined today by Darren Clarkson. So thanks for your time, Darren.

Darren Clarkson 1:19

Hello, everybody.

Ben Woodruff 1:21

Yeah, lovely. Thank you. So I'm really pleased we've got this podcast organized. Your experience and reputation is, is absolutely fascinating to me and so beneficial for our chat today. So I could try and introduce you, but I don't think I do it justice to our listeners. So for those that don't know you, could you please introduce yourself for us today?

Darren Clarkson 1:40

Yeah, so I'm Darren Clarkson. And I'm a white-water kayaker, principally expedition Kayaker, spent two decades approximately, in the Himalayas, kayaking rivers from Everest, rivers from K2, first descent in India, Nepal, Pakistan, Bhutan, Tibet, and helped

write the white-water guide to Nepal, the white-water guide teladoc. Yeah, I live in North Wales when I'm back in the UK and do quite a lot of kayaking. That's me in a nutshell. But on the other side of me, rather than just sounding like somebody that kayaks all the time, I work in social services, and I work with people with mental health issues. And myself, I've been diagnosed with PTSD. So I'm speaking from a place, that's, that's quite personal to me. I'm not saying I'm a specialist in this subject, there are people and resources that you can go to the way more qualified than me. And, you know, I urge people to do that. But I also want to speak about things that as coaches and with the users, as people that want activities that we can sort of work towards, and maybe expand our knowledge a little bit and make people feel like welcoming again, when they come back into paddlesport.

Ben Woodruff 3:04

Yeah, 100%. And like I said earlier, thank you very much. We're really grateful for you to come on and have a really open conversation about this. I know that it will benefit a lot of coaches in the returns to the water, different paddlers, maybe experiencing different emotions, be that positive or negative, or a mixture of both. So it's really good that we've got you on to have this conversation today. So to start with, I'm going to pose you a question, and we'll have a little discussion about it. And it's how can coaches and providers support people in their return to paddlesports?

Darren Clarkson 3:37

Really good question. It's a question that, up until recently, we didn't really think about, obviously, we didn't have the return to paddlesport. But in acquitting the question like that, but we also didn't really acknowledge people may have difficulties the providers and coaches can't see. Now, for me, personally, I've seen this work. And I think it's a really simple first where we just say space reduces pressure. Now, we've all been on courses, we've all been at clubs, that we've all been with peers, where people congregate around the head guide, or the head coach or whoever that may be, and the congregate and it can be quite stifling. And we quite often as leaders, or as leaders, obsessions, we wave our arms and we get people to come closer, you know, we could come here, come here, come here. I want to brief you all. Now. Some people are not okay with that, than not okay, especially with turning back into groups type sessions, after periods of isolation, being asked to come back into a group can be quite nerve racking for people. So spare space will reduce pressure. And these are just ideas, really, and I'm sure we can all work can adapt these to our personal need, it may be easier for the leader of those sections to walk around individual cars or individual people sat on the bank to brief our debrief, rather than getting everyone together in one in one area at the start of a session, because people may be uneasy, all suffering because people return to paddlesport in an organized way, we have to give ourselves more time.

Whereas before we may be give ourselves 20 minutes or half an hour, to unload the trailer, get the books ready, before people arrive, we may need to have much more time now to space those equipment out to maybe disinfect the equipment. Some people are going to be emailing or calling the providers and the coaches asking what sort of issues are being covered, you know, how we safeguard and against, you know, transmission of space are people. And I've seen this work. I've seen people storyboard it divides and coaches go out on the river by themselves. And this started barred the beginning of that session, taking photographs, maybe video and explain the boat will be here may be going to five hours to email each participant. If the especially if the Highland boats, your boat will be the red, but I have just disinfected this red bar and having it spaced on the bank. So they just spaced out and everyone's spread out. And people if they want to move closer together, people will do that naturally. But some people don't want that. And they want to be a little bit of distance while still being part of the group. So that's really important.

Ben Woodruff 6:49

Yeah, 100%. And I mean, one thing I thought when you were speaking was actually we've been in in COVID regulations for over a year now. Certainly natural, we've learned to distance from people naturally. And so it then feels a little bit strange when we're allowed to stand closer to people upon a return to sport. And like you've said some people get anxious being in big groups in that stage. And it's just being adaptable is going to be really key for the coaches and leaders are about. So obviously, you've alluded to it so far, about the new methods to storyboarding sessions. Can you think of any other new methods? Yeah, coaches could use in their return. And it's potentially a good way to expand their repertoire, as well.

Darren Clarkson 7:35

Definitely. These are things that, that I've seen work and things that I've been used in my line of work outside paddlesport I think for a lot of providers, coaches, people leading sessions, were so used to pre COVID sort of policies in that maybe the organization's we work for our personal paddling and kerchief were so used to those policies that we maybe we don't sit on, pause for a bit. And step back. One of the things that really works is to ask people that are coming on the session, in private, maybe a phone call, maybe an email, ask them what it is that the provider can give, to allow the participants to enjoy to the fullest and that may be different for everyone. You know, it may be people that people feel claustrophobic even putting on a PFD. I've seen that happen that people that are, you know, paddlers for a long time to go back onto the onto the water, and they feel restricted by it and maybe feel a little bit claustrophobic putting on the PFD. How can we overcome that, and a discussion and an open and frank discussion with all participants? Some people are going to, you know, email back and

say that it works fine. And it's cool, it's cool. And some people are going to come back and say, I'd really appreciate it. If I could park next to you. I'd really appreciate it. If I could park at the end of the car park and come over in my own time. Some people are going to have certain environments that trigger past memories perhaps. So open front, also accept that some people like some people that will say yeah, it's cool, it's okay. Whatever may not be, there may be masking it. Masking it, as you know, as a broad speaking yachtsman that I am. I'm always going to say, yeah, things are cool. Always. But obviously, a skilled provider will be able to ask questions and get answers should they need to?

Ben Woodruff 9:41

Yeah, of course. And I mean, I'm very much the same as you if something's wrong, I'm going to just say, Yeah, no, it's cool. It's okay. Because I don't want to distract the group or the leader. And that there will be times where the participant you're working with you know them so well that you can know if something's wrong and instead when you potentially have that like you say private conversation and try and move forward with them so that they can get back to the water, which will inevitably be good for their mental wellbeing. So, moving on a little bit, how can coaches and providers develop strategies help them with specifically anxiety, stress, and any other feelings that people may have? And that could be COVID related, it could be returning to the water after a year, it could be just completely in general, a participant is struggling in life with some anxiety and, and what is the strategy to help them with that.

Darren Clarkson 10:31

So I think if we have a strategy that we can flex with, with this strategy doesn't need to be written down anywhere, I don't believe I don't believe it needs to be linear as strategy. And one strategy for one person is not going to be the same as a strategy for them next. Also, to call it strategy perhaps makes it sound more technical than it is. I think, as providers, coaches, and as participants, honesty is always going to be the best policy. As a provider, when you're briefing, whether you're briefing individually, or in groups, please, please respect people's boundaries. It used to be the case that when we were briefing, we could make hand gestures, maybe what we what we would call, maybe a caring gesture would pass on the on the back for a job, well done our handshake. And those things now, are no longer there, for obvious reasons. So we need to respect people's boundaries, maybe a little bit more, and have some time to sit and think, as a provider. How would I feel? If so, perhaps get a list of things that we've heard of is triggers our triggers to ourselves, and distinct about what would happen? If so what would happen? If one of my participants doesn't want to join the group that wants to be part of the session? How can I involve that participant? What framework can I put in place, everyone enjoys, nobody feels isolated, and nobody feels alone. Nobody feels

hurt. And see how it develops. And it's amazing when we're on the water, and boundaries slowly start to fade. People get off the wall. And I've developed a little bit, I changed the way they are. Now, one thing that's really important is we talked about what strategies in inverted commas with canoes at the start of the session. But how many of us do the follow on phone calls, we may be doing the feedback forms after the cast, where people fill in the feedback. But how many of us make that phone call or the email, or we make a wait time in our day to speak to the app participants. And ask them how they really feel outside of the peer environment, and how maybe we could change and adaptive they feel uncomfortable. And that's really important. What we have to understand, I think is everybody that is returning to paddle sport, whether it be a provider, coaches, guides, participants, people on the bank watching, everybody is going to be above what we would normally classes bear slide. So pre COVID people would be getting on the water and their baseline their slight agitation may have slight anxiety, but that wouldn't be normal for them in that situation. To get on the white-water, they've got to get on a sea trip or to get on the first s up trip. You're going to have a slight apprehension, slight anxiety, and slight discomfort above your baseline being you saw your normal functioning, but people are going to be above that. Same as providers, people that especially if not had any sort of work in the arena for a long time, your agitation levels are going to be higher. It won't take long for a trigger to come, which could escalate up and you might get a great anxiety, a great reputation and they'll be allowed if that is not checked. Then there will be an outburst and when we say that in day to day life, I think you know how little niggles build and build and build and people have an outburst because of little niggles as providers we need to be aware of those nickels aware of our own nickel niggles. I want ugly tissues with nickels because we all know what I'm talking about. I know sort of discomfort perhaps even talk about mental health issues is uncomfortable for us as providers, and we don't like the subject we don't necessarily understand the subject. So because of that our agitation left and we need to keep that need to keep that in check also after some de-escalates if it goes that far we keep it on check, how do we bring people back into the group?

That can be really difficult. We don't want people leaving sessions, after having maybe that was like a peak of anxiety or anger, even feeling that they won't support getting in the car and driving home and feel that they've been let down by that provider or their peers or a situation they were, how can we develop individually? Because each coach is going to be different, each ride is going to be different each participants going to be different. How can we deal with that? And I think that's where the follow up phone call comes in. Have a follow up email.

Ben Woodruff 15:39

Yeah, yeah, no, 100%, I agree. And it is so easy to just leave the session and move on to the next one. That's something that coaches in not just paddlesports, but every sport will do across some of that their coaching journey. So one thing that I remember when I was younger is that I always looked up to my coaches. And that was all the way through till when I was sort of 1819 still play. Now, even as an adult, the coach is sort of a role model figure whenever you're participating. And so it's a beautiful responsibility to have as a coach is having all of these people look up to you and look to you for advice. But it's also a responsibility to make sure that these people are okay, that duty of care. Can you talk to me more about why as a coach, do you feel pressured at all, to look after your participants in a mental health capacity?

Darren Clarkson 16:38

I think, as coaches and providers, however, whatever name we put around that guide, Coach provider, we do have a safeguarding responsibility to the people on our sessions, whether it be a club session, whether it be, you know, a session for another provider, we do have that responsibility to look after people and not necessarily understand mental health issues to the fullest, but have an understanding of mental health and mental health issues. Some people, especially with mental health issues, be more apparent in COVID times in isolation. And as we're coming out a lockdown and the numbers of people that are suffering from mental health issues. We shouldn't diminish it used to be people in communities in peer groups would almost ridicule people that had mental health issues. And I think the fact that we say issues when we say mental health was their mental health issues, like it's not normal, yeah. stigmatises a lot of people. So we're just having people just need to be aware that there may be people in the group that are suffering, or dealing with our living with whatever words we wish to use, things that we cannot see on week, we have not experienced. And just because we have experienced maybe a similar or the same thing that triggers somebody else, doesn't mean to say that we will process it the same.

Ben Woodruff 18:17

Yeah, 100%, I mean, again, sort of alluded to there a really good way of, of breaking down these barriers is to promote a healthy group culture of talking to each other and opening up and, and trying to break down those stigma, barriers that are with us a mental health issues is, is the word that's thrown around is, is not an issue. It's something that people have to live with. And it's, it's something that's really not nice for a lot of people. And yeah, that healthy group culture can really help with that

Darren Clarkson 18:48

Open it one of the things on the back of that is if somebody had a broken arm, we would know that see that and deal with that. Because it's because it's a visual thing, a book, if somebody has issues that we cannot see whatever that may be, we tend to sort of shy away from dealing with it. We don't understand how to deal with perhaps. And this is where people need to pause if you where people need time to reflect and people need honesty in an open culture on it.

Ben Woodruff 19:22

Yeah, so I'm just completely agree with you, Darrin. Just a quick one. So my previous question was about you feel that as a coach is pressure to deal with mental health and bits and pieces. So the coach may be anxious themselves about returning, anxious about the COVID protocols to follow it, keeping their participants safe and making sure that they've got an enjoyable return to the water returned to play. How can a coach manage their own anxieties and mental health during this transition because it's not only their own that they're looking after? It's the participants as well.

Darren Clarkson 20:00

After shot, I mean, that's a really interesting, very interesting question. And it's one that as coaches, providers guides, whatever name we're going to use, we sort of run on autopilot a lot when we want in sessions, because we decided know that this is how it works. But now that's not the case. And I think for a lot of providers, it's time to sit back again, pause, work out, not just what participants require from the session, but what we require from the session. You know, just because there's a guideline that says, if you're outdoor space, and you ever to me is you don't need to wear a mask, and this and the other. If you feel comfortable about wearing one, why won't, you know, do what feels right for you, but not at the expense of other people feeling uncomfortable? I think it's time that as providers, we sit and we pause a lab and just think about what I could say what our participants want out of the session, what do we want out of the session? How will this affect us? What learning outcomes will we have? How will we develop after the session, perhaps get a friend to check in with your afternoon your section. So you know, the day before your session, you call your friend, you say I'm doing this session, maybe I'm a little uneasy, these are the points that I'm uneasy about the new session, check back in with your friend, or maybe another coach, maybe another provider. And then maybe have a debrief about it if you work in, in independently if you work in with all cultures and providers check in with yourself with each other. Maybe put it in your log book, if you if you're working with log book about how this feels, how each section differs. You know,

Ben Woodruff 21:51

Yeah, 100% I think good coaching practices to reflect on sessions and an add in to how you feel is definitely a good step forward. Rather than just thinking how the session went? How, how did you feel delivering the session? Did it feel good? And moving forward in that return to the water after COVID is something that's really important for coaches to consider. Because I mean, nine times out of 10, you have the best session in the world, you've absolutely loved it. It's been brilliant. But the other one, it feels like the loneliest job in the world when it's you and the participants. So moving onwards, coaches and providers who don't have much experience with considering mental wellbeing, how is the best way to educate yourself on the topic? And why would you educate yourself on the topic?

Darren Clarkson 22:36

I love that mental wellbeing so much better than issues?

Ben Woodruff 22:40

Yes. 100.

Darren Clarkson 22:43

Yeah, mental wellbeing little bit fluid. Let's take it out of the arena of paddle spot for a second. Yep. Right. And the first question, so that it means why should I have experience of mental health and wellbeing? Not as providers? Why should I? Well, actually, it's quite simple. Usually, everyone should be aware of their own needs and wants their own mental health check-up, almost a wellbeing check that everyone should be aware of that. We know that if we spend every meal of every day in junk food, we're going to feel like rubbish. We know that. We know that if we sit in front of the television, drinking Coke and drinking beer, we're going to feel rubbish. We know that. Yeah. So I think as coaches and guides, we can bring that in, what do we already know about what makes us what makes us tick, and we see this. This is like, pre COVID stuff, but it is quite relevant. We see it a lot with the younger participants, and especially school groups and young younger members of clubs, where they go on a paddling trip for the day. Maybe they're excited and giggling. And all I've done the night before maybe we can do air, an early start and all I've done is eat and Haribo sweets are the sweets obviously available. The sugary sweets, the bad a lot of energy drinks. The knocking back Lucozade tablets are going out of fashion in the listening to loud music. And they're going on a sugar high. And within an hour, maybe they'll crash bang, the don't get grumpy they get tired. We see that quite a lot. We can use that example I've just given into a longer session post COVID how people interact when they're When they're hungry, because they're not going to be necessarily used to put in dietary requirements in place, because they're

now going out for the first time to participate in your activities. Again, they've sort of maybe need reminding of even tech food and hot drinks, stopping for snacks, as providers, maybe we forgotten, because maybe we're a little bit more athletic. And we forget that people do need to stop snacks introductions. And some people, maybe they're going to start feeling alone and lonely. You know, we need to sort of bring all that back in. So as individuals, we need to be understanding of sort of mental wellbeing checks personally. How can we do that? How can we be sort of aware of our mental health and wet mental wellbeing? We can do it quite simply by the days that we walk around. You know, I didn't feel so good today on a simple level. Go back through and look at what affected our days. Did we have any triggers that made us feel anxious? Did we personally have triggers that made us feel stressed? Did we have things that made us feel loved and cared for? One of my personal bugbears is when I in the days when you could share transport to livers because obviously, that's a thing at the moment due to restrictions, or you get in somebody else's car, and you're going into a show. And they've got loud drum and bass music. With a God knows how many beats per minute you get out of that car, personally, I get out of that car already anxious, the heartbeat in a way. And I'm already anxious when I get out of that car, simulator game changing car, parks, car stereos, and the music because music plays a massive factor in the way that our environments are set. So as providers again, how can we look at the environment in which we are leading our sessions, and how this work does. But also, it's worth everyone. And I'm not just saying to provide a purchase here, you know, and guides, and everybody on sessions to look at like, courses, there's a lot of resources online. You know, there's that mind and calm resources. If you're feeling like you do need a lot of support with the mental health issues, and your mental wellbeing, please consult the NHS and a doctor.

That's really important, there are places that you can get help. If you need help, there are places where you can gain the skills and the knowledge to help others. This, this is not the conversation to have about how that works. Because it's going to be individual for everyone. But I urge people to please, please, if you feel the need, contact your doctor contact the NHS, if you just want more knowledge, you can get a base knowledge online, you can buy books, you can go on training classes. And this is really important to everyone.

Ben Woodruff 28:08

Yeah, I couldn't agree more Darren. One, one place I massively recommend is the Open University. They have some amazing free courses online, looking at understanding anxiety, panic attacks, depression, PTSD, the whole sort of spectrum of, of people's mental wellbeing. And it's a really good place to start and try and delve deeper into it. And it's quite a taboo subject sometimes. And it's one of those things where we need to

become more comfortable as not just providers, leaders, guys as a nation, in opening up and talking about mental wellbeing and how important it is. And like you alluded to, it's important to understand your feelings throughout the day, whether it's a good day or a bad day. And it's equally important to note what works well for you in maintaining an equilibrium in your mental wellbeing. Maintaining that congruent balance that you're feeling grounded and enjoying what you're doing is really important and sort of take time and recognize that. And yeah, you're completely right, it's so important that the people do take the time to learn more about mental wellbeing and open up to each other. And we can then become much more connected as a nation and as paddlesports providers through that. Yeah. I mean, Darren, thank you very

Darren Clarkson 29:32

Much for your time today. Like I say, I'm not saying that I'm an expert in this stuff. I'm not saying that I know the answers. What I'm saying is that we need as a, as a community as providers, we need to maybe pause a little and see how people can get the best of our sessions and, and just basically learn and develop our own skills to deal with issues that well being called strategies if we're going to use words like that. Thank you very much for

Ben Woodruff 29:59

Your time. Other amazing. Yes, thank you very much. And as always guys, make sure you're listening out for the next podcast. And they talk every other week unless there's a special like this. Thank you for listening.