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## Is there a therapist in the house? Mental wellbeing at work is no joke

For the founder of a chain of comedy clubs in the US, providing counselling for his employees has become routine

Mary O'Hara

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The Laugh Factory in Los Angeles, where a resident therapist attends to the mental health of employees. Photograph: Barry J Holmes

Sometimes fresh perspectives on old problems hail from unlikely places and this has certainly been the case in Los Angeles when it comes to [mental health](#) as Jamie Masada, founder of the US [Laugh Factory](#) chain of comedy clubs, shows. As a business owner, Masada has made the mental wellbeing of employees as much a part of what he does as balancing the books.

After a number of comedians who worked regularly at his Hollywood venue took their own lives in quick succession, Masada decided he couldn't just sit back and do nothing. So, in 2011 he hired an in-house therapist who has been holding counselling sessions in an upstairs room at the Hollywood club ever since. She is even on call when comics are on the road.

"We are obligated to do something to help others in our working environment," Masada says. "This should be common practice in any place of work. Make sure there is someone your people can talk to if they need to."

A superficial analysis might provoke kneejerk judgments such as: "This is Hollywood after all." But while LA may have a well-deserved reputation as an epicentre of everything from dubious healers to life coaches, Masada's initiative is a serious one, and he argues that other bosses in other sectors should make mental health at work a priority.

[Ildiko Tabori](#), the clinical psychologist employed by Laugh Factory, has counselled people across the entertainment industry, but she has also worked in the LA prison and parole systems, so her credentials are far from fluffy.

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Like Masada, she believes that, while comedians may have specific issues – triggered, for example, by the loneliness of their "nomadic" lifestyle and the pressures of live performance – the reasons support is needed in any workplace are shared by all kinds of people.

While her work at Laugh Factory takes place in an idiosyncratic environment, Tabori has a point when she says mental health professionals either in house or on hand in any company could be an asset and should be more commonplace. Many [organisations](#) in the US and elsewhere offer some form of [support to workers](#) already, of course. Many are aware, too, that policies promoting wellbeing are [good for staff and business](#).

But as campaigners have often pointed out, when it comes to advances in workplace attitudes to and support for mental health issues – whether pre-existing or prompted by work-related stresses – additional support often only exists if a boss or manager has taken a concerted lead.

Indeed, if recent moves in the UK to highlight [the importance of "coming out" at work](#) as having mental health difficulties tell us anything, it is that, while progress is being made, there's a long way to go before it is normalised.

On the other side of LA, someone else from the comedy arena has been busy doing his bit to normalise mental health difficulties in and out of the workplace. Paul Gilmartin, who has lived with mental health problems, including depression, could fit perfectly the stereotype of a comic plagued by psychological turmoil. But with his weekly podcast, [The Mental Illness Happy Hour](#), he has been drawing on his own experiences to highlight issues, including speaking out at work. One of his latest projects is a survey of listeners on the effects of workplace bullying on mental health.

It is widely acknowledged that [a job can help foster better mental health](#), but whatever the work environment, providing extra support when staff need it is surely one of those rare "win, wins for everyone", as Masada puts it. We should take heed of those advocating for it wherever they are.