

James Newman on Becoming a More Positive Leader with Pursuit Wellbeing

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Summary

- James Newman, Headteacher, Epsom and Ewell High School
- Completed the *Headteacher Heart Health* Programme in October 2022.
- In four, 90-minute sessions, delivered over 12 weeks, a summary of the results he experienced is:
 - The programme has completely changed the way he reacts to pressure.
 - He has become a better and more positive leader.
 - He feels back in control and can look positively to the future impacting his professional and home life.

"It's one of the best things I've ever done. It's completely changed me as a professional."

Dealing with daily pressures

James Newman is the Headteacher of Epsom and Ewell High School: a school that prides itself on its innovation and creativity, with good reason. It was the first school in the UK to be awarded the Schools Mental Health Gold Award and is one of only 300 Microsoft showcase schools in the world.

But James was struggling to deal with the pressures that he faced on a daily basis, such as parental complaints, difficult emails, staff resignations etc. He found problems like this would often send him into quite a low place which he was finding increasingly hard to pick himself up and carry on from. This was leading him to question what he was doing and why. Did he want to continue and did he have the strength to pick himself up and go again?

'Headship is a lonely place...there often isn't anyone to talk to about things. And there often aren't any ideal solutions, which can make you feel a bit hopeless.'

Reducing stress through the physiology of the body

James heard about the *Heart Health for Headteachers* programme through the CEO of the Bourne Education Trust back in June 2022 and, interested, joined the initial pilot with the Trust. The Trust had always been good at promoting staff wellbeing, but had never done anything particularly for leaders and James felt it was an opportunity to address that.

What stood out for him during his time on the programme was that much of the learning was connected to the physiology of the body. This emphasis made it personally relatable and gave him an anchor for better understanding his response to stress.

There were some key lightbulb moments for James which brought everything into perspective for him. For example, truly understanding for the first time why the body reacts the way it does to stress, such as why he was getting the physical reactions of an increased heart rate, feeling hot or that sick, sinking feeling in his stomach when he was stressed.

And using the technology to look at his data every day prompted him to reflect on what could be happening in his life to create these unpleasant physical symptoms. For example, had he slept poorly? Was his workload impacting stress levels? James felt seeing the data every day forced him to look at his life to see what was going on to cause such noticeable effects in his body and crucially, to make adjustments.

Using the *Inner Balance* technology is a key part of the programme, which he quickly built into his daily routine, starting with 3 minutes a day and building up to 10 minutes.

[The daily practice involves connecting to an ear sensor, logging in to the app, and regulating your breathing in response to prompts on the screen. The app immediately feeds back what is happening in the Heart Rate; Heart Rate Variability (a key marker of heart health); and the balance of the nervous system - instantly showing a person's stress levels and guiding them back to a much more balanced state.]

James finds the practices a really great way to start the day, helping him go to work with a much clearer mind.

Learning about the physiology of the body under stress gave him the language to articulate why we all might behave in the way we do, and how we can move forward, which has really helped at work and home.

Becoming a better leader

James finds that when faced with 'the knocks' of negative situations and pressures, his physical or mental reactions are completely different now than before the programme. He finds he can deal with challenges from a much better base. Rather than taking him down, he doesn't dwell on them and now has a sense of positivity, where he can see the bigger picture and more easily find a better way to deal with certain negative aspects of the job.

This positivity has helped James to think more clearly and make better decisions. He feels that he has become a better leader because of it. In difficult times he can step up to lead the team rather than be consumed by challenges as he had previously been. His team can also see the benefit in his leadership.

He is able to face the future more positively which has had a big impact on his professional and home life. He is much more considered about family dynamics and his role in them. He now pauses to consider whether certain issues are worth arguing about, which has definitely impacted family harmony.

The most unexpected benefit to James is the scale of the impact, in his words:

'I didn't expect for it to have such a big impact...I didn't think it would completely change my life....it definitely has.'

Taking back control

James now feels he is in a great place and more confident looking at what his future might hold for him, both professionally and importantly, at home. Whereas previously he may have played it safe, he now feels that nothing would scare him or put him off. He feels he is back in control.

James believes this programme is what all school leaders need, in terms of leadership development.

"This is way better than run-of-the-mill training that will teach people about leadership styles. This programme will make people better leaders."

And some final advice from James for those considering the programme: *be completely open-minded and make it part of your routine early on to really get the benefits. Be truthful with yourself and other people to get the most out of it.*

For more information on how you can take part in the Heart Health for Headteachers Programme, contact Maria Brosnan at:

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