

## Golden shackles

**The pay is good and the life seductive, but servers, bartenders and bouncers are risking their mental health for our good times**

*By Jake Pesaruk*

**WE'VE ALL BEEN THERE:** sitting at a bar stool, ordering a drink, exchanging pleasantries with the bartender or server. But when you ask, How's it going? do you really care?

Not really.

And as you sit there taking the edge off of your day, the people pouring and serving your drinks have problems of their own. Yet it's hard to see past the hard-varnished smiles and the cold glasses sliding your way.

We're living in an era of massive change when it comes to our perception of mental health, especially in the workplace. With every passing year, the embarrassment and shame of bringing these issues to light fades further, as society becomes more accepting and empathetic.

So, with all the awareness initiatives across the country, you'd assume there would be something to assure the mental well being for people in high-tension jobs at restaurants and bars.

Well, there isn't.

So how did this come to pass? This is an industry full of stressors – from substance abuse to physical abuse, to sexual abuse – that involve patrons and staff. So, how does such a perfect incubator for the worst intricacies of human behaviour offer its workers no safeguards?

Well, chalk it up to equal parts tradition, isolationism and the fact that no one has tried.

It may sound a little outlandish to someone who has never worked in hospitality, but the inherent attitude is: That's just the way things are.

This mind set is an intrinsic part of the bar and restaurant scene – that, if you go into that kind of work, you have to be ready to deal with people at their worst. And people at their worst don't care about how you're feeling. They just want their vodka cranberry and their smile.

So, if you're working long, stressful shifts into the small hours of the morning, with every sort of nefarious activity thrown at you, your mental fortitude will get chipped away – no matter how strong you are.

So, if there is a fix, where is it?

Sadma Mahajan is the program director for the Mental Health Commission of Canada, overseeing initiatives in just about every industry you can think of. She says our society has come a long way, but the battle to de-stigmatize mental health continues – and there are no hospitality-specific initiatives.

“We are so far from normalizing mental health. We're making progress, but, when it comes to people talking about it, they won't do it often. In many organizations, there's the fear that if you tell your boss about a mental health issue your professional life will suffer it.

“It took us 80 years to mandate physical health and safety in the workplace, and only now are we just starting with mental health awareness.”

**'If you tell your boss about a mental health issue  
your professional life will suffer for it'**

So what are the roadblocks preventing mental health discussions in the hospitality industry?

For one thing, this is a workforce that has numerous branches, each dealing with its special issues. Servers have different problems from bartenders, and bartenders have different problems from security. To get an understanding of what can be done to fix the game, you have to look at all the players on the field.

Mahajan says there is an immense effort to prevent psychological injury at the work place, but for those in security, there is the issue of physical *and* psychological injury, mental sucker punches as well as real ones. And the harsh reality for people at that end of the industry is that showing weakness can cost you your job.

“There's this idea about being a bouncer,” says Paige Gregg, head of security at a local bar she prefers not to name. “If you can't handle a brawl by yourself, you don't deserve to be a bouncer.

“If physical weakness is put under scrutiny in that way, why would you admit mental weakness?”

However, as in any industry, the willingness to discuss mental wellness revolves around whom you are working for and with. For example, Gregg has set a major precedent by ensuring that her security staff is healthy in every way.

“You always have to check on staff,” she says. “Someone could cross them the wrong way and that will ruin their night for them. You always have to check in with your team mentally and physically.”

As for the future of mental health in the hospitality industry, Gregg says things have to change, and quickly.

“It has to evolve, adapt and change. Or we’ll be stuck here, and so many people just don’t get that yet.”

It should come as no surprise that those who are on the front line of physical punishment from the drunk and unruly suffer more than their fair share of mental anguish. But what of those whose job it is to smile no matter the circumstance?

Regularly thrust into situations that threaten their mental health, servers and bartenders are pressured to keep pouring drinks and looking happy. There is one simple reason: money. The wider the smile, the bigger the tips.

'You have to mentally keep your thoughts to yourself  
and provide a service to your customers'

Those who work in hospitality usually don’t get much in the way of a salary. Often they earn minimum wage, and rely on tips to make ends meet. Those tips can mean serious money, and you don’t get them unless you are pleasant and accommodating – and can eat as much shit as your supervisors and customers can feed you. You just have to be able to take the abuse and follow it up with a smile and a, You have a good night now.

“Tips play a huge part of it,” says Kaila Bouzane an Edmonton bartender and server, who chooses not to disclose her workplace. “You have to mentally keep your thoughts to yourself and provide a service to your customers – because they pay your way,”

This places an unfathomable amount of weight on serving and bartending staff, Mahajan says – especially when you consider that people in the industry are young. And between 18 and 25 people are most susceptible to mental illness.

So here's a cocktail for you. Take one part extreme workplace stress, and add two parts high staff turnover and the job insecurity that implies. Then mix that brew with unruly clientele and lightly garnish it with a huge risk factor for mental distress. It may go down easy, but the long-term effects are devastating.

"There's a term that seems to be industry specific, called 'being in the weeds,'" Bouzane says. "It references when you're so overwhelmed by what your job is doing to you, but you contemplate how much you need the job."

This is all further complicated by the responsibility that trickles down to these workers.

Someone is being drunk, unruly and trying to start a fight, or to inappropriately touch patrons? Blame a bartender for not cutting them off.

Is trouble in the kitchen slowing down the food? Blame the server.

And, if you're a woman, add harassment, slurs and sexual misconduct.

'I've had female managers tell me  
to suck it up, unless it's very serious'

"There is a lot of stress for females just by way of sexual harassment," Bouzane says. "Females deal with it on a whole different level, and often don't speak up out of fear of losing their jobs.

"Even then, I've had female managers tell me to suck it up, unless it's very serious."

This type of abuse isn't specific to bartending and wait staff. Often, women in security jobs face all sorts of scrutiny and harassment because of their gender.

"There are certain things that trigger me personally," Gregg says. "Like when people attack the fact that I'm a woman and working security. Luckily it doesn't happen too often and, when it does, it doesn't often refer to my ability to work as a female – just more what they can say about my gender as a whole to hurt me."

So what have we learned so far?

That, when it comes to managing mental health in the hospitality industry, the onus is on the individual.

“Like physical health, if you were to injure yourself, you would be accommodated by your employer,” Mahajan says. “They would put you on desk duty, or move you off of the sales floor.

“But the question would remain that, if something happened to you psychologically, would your workplace still accommodate you?”

The Mental Health Commission of Canada has helped implement the *Not Myself Today* initiative, in which companies can adopt policies and gather information to help promote mental health in the workplace.

But why hasn't the hospitality industry adopted policies or taken steps to work with the commission to create something specific to restaurant and bar workers? Well, that's because, the hospitality industry is a unique beast that likes its seclusion.

“The service industry is the Wild West of jobs,” says Mallory, who requested anonymity. “It's this secluded little slice of the greater work force, and a lot of people in that world don't want outsiders interfering with it.”

She has spent years working in and managing bars, and she says she has seen how essential it is for good managers to check up on their staff. The issue is that many people who work in hospitality want to be left the hell alone – much like the industry itself.

“It's hard to imagine a different system than what's in place currently, especially when you've been entrenched in it for so long,” Mallory says. “You're essentially, for the most part, trying to help people who don't want to be helped.”

She says she has seen the impact of mental health issues on staff – and the dubious coping mechanisms that restaurant and bar employees deploy to deal with stress and pressure. Alcohol and drug abuse are rampant, used as mental first aid when dealing with the cold, uncaring and demanding masses.

“In all the places I’ve worked – serving, bartending and managing – I’ve seen so much bullshit happen to people,” Mallory says. “Even if you have perfect mental stability, have a backpack full of coping mechanisms for stress, and you’ve had a perfect day leading up to it, making it through an insane late-night rush is going to be hell.”

There is also the public perception that, if you work in the bar industry, you are an inherently broken person, or someone who can’t work in a normal environment, Mallory says. Though there may be some truth to that, there’s not nearly enough to merit turning a blind eye to those in need.

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because for the most part people are in some way broken'

“I think in any job you’re going to find broken people, because for the most part people are in some way broken. But you wouldn’t be wrong in thinking the bar industry attracts a certain kind of person.

“Managing a bar can be a lot like managing 17 dysfunctional children. For me, being a manager went beyond work – and helping them with their life.”

So, if the industry is broken and the people who make the rules are set in their ways, is there any hope for an open discussion about mental health among people who work in bars and restaurants?

Well yes, but everyone has to be involved, Mahajan says.

“You can’t do blanket programs across Canada. We have some great tools that hospitality can use, but you have to tailor it specifically to that industry. Hospitality needs its own support system, and doing so would require partnering with people who know the industry.”

That may be difficult, when the industry, and those in it, don’t seem to want help.

The only way to de-stigmatize the subject, Mahajan says, to show the benefits of discussing it – and that there are effective ways to deal with mental distress.

But it can be difficult to get on board with that, when someone with no experience in your business is telling you how to cope, while you’re understaffed and you’re busy coping with two people fighting by the dart boards, a line of 20 people shouting for drinks, and the resident drunk is playing

grab-ass with your server.

Just like the barfly perched on his special stool, throwing back glass after glass, it all seems so hopeless.

The term "golden shackles" has often been used to describe working in a bar. The pay is good, yet you're indefinitely stuck in a system that has so much wrong with it, and where people have been conditioned to do nothing to change it.

For mental-health awareness for hospitality workers, it isn't quite last call. There are programs and systems that can and should be used to get to a greater goal.

All the industry needs is to put down the glass, sober up and realize that the help it needs might lie just outside the pub doors.

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