

Mental Health 2.0:

Positive Disruption for a Great Cause

Brand and Communications Expert, PR Week's Communications Personality of the Decade, and now Chair of BasicNeeds, Jenny Burns talks all things mental health, charity sector, and leadership insights to create real change.



Jenny is a passionate and energetic Brand and Communications expert with more than 20 years experience. She was recently appointed as the Director of Brand and Customer Experience at Just Retirement who over the past 11 years have provided more than 250,000 retirees with better retirements. Before this role, Jenny spent 5 years at RSA Insurance as the Group Communications, Brand and Social Media Director. From her early career at WHSmith, Jenny has held senior leadership and communications positions at Barclays, Centrica British Gas, HBOS and Telefonica O2. Over the years she's become a positive disrupter; leading the way in making transformational and innovative changes in well established businesses. We had a chance to talk with Jenny about her role as Chair of BasicNeeds, her ambitions for positively disrupting the mental health sector, and her views about leadership more generally...

About BasicNeeds

How are things going?

Really good. I feel like I've got really stuck in already. I'm quite action-orientated, and also I've had a few weeks off before starting my new day job, so it meant that I could really dedicate some time to the BasicNeeds team in terms of getting up to speed and just helping them with a few things really. So it's been a busy 8 weeks!

What's the essence of your role as Chair?

My role as Chair is to guide Chris (CEO /founder) and Jess (Executive Director) in terms of future strategy- helping them think more laterally than they probably have done before, and to support future design

of strategy and where we're going. It's a crucial time for as understanding is rapidly increasing, the associated stigma is in decline and mental health is starting to get the spotlight it deserves. My aim is to lead BasicNeeds through this period of immense opportunity to ensure we're well positioned to provide even more people with the support they need to make a long-term recovery; helping them feel like a valued asset to their families and communities, rather than a burden. I believe that better mental health really does mean better lives.

Why BasicNeeds?

They approached me initially after a previous Chair stepped down. They were looking for someone to bring

more of a commercial edge to the charity, and recognised that they needed someone who had experience of a complex business environment, managing finances, budgeting, and future strategy to help them take the charity to next level – which I think is future thinking in itself!

The charity sector is competitive in a way, so they also wanted my skills as a communicator, marketer, and brand expert to help them raise awareness of the brand. I met Chris and was completely inspired by him, his mission with BasicNeeds, and him as a person. I was blown away and just felt that we could work together really well. And that's how it all came about!

Why the mental health sector?

Mental health is one of those things that's not well understood and its got a huge stigma attached to it. But if you look at the statistics, it's going to be a bigger killer than cancer in the near future. It's the next thing we need to tackle, not just as a nation but globally. It was also of interest to me because its gone up the radar from a press perspective with more celebrity endorsements recently. A recent report stated that in the UK the NHS needs another £1.2 billion just to cope with mental health issues. It's a huge topic that I'm passionate about. Mental health can be as basic, without being derogatory, as loneliness right through to some of the illnesses that are most commonly known like Alzheimer's and dementia.

How is BasicNeeds different to other mental health charities out there?

Two things – one is its predominant work is in developing countries rather than here at home (and that's something we need to look at in terms of future strategy but that's what it is at the moment). Secondly, it's based on a model of sustainability. It's not just about going in, helping people and then walking away. It's designed to set up a programme within a community in a country and train people in how to deal with mental health issues. So it uses a sustainability model which makes it different to other mental

health charities, and arguably charities in general.

Why are you doing this now?

I turn 40 next week... quite a big milestone! Last year when I left RSA, I had an opportunity to take some time out and think about what I want to do moving forward. I reflected on two things that I wanted to achieve in the next 10 years. One was to take my career in a slightly different path. I've worked predominantly in internal comms and cultural change, and in the next 10 years I want to make an even bigger impact, and to move into the brand, customer and marketing space.

The other thing was that I had a bit of a moment where I thought *'god, I've worked in big corporates for 22 years... there must be more to life than this. What can I do with all the valuable skills I've learned and how can I give something back?'* I wanted to do something a bit more meaningful, something that made me a bit more thoughtful about what I do and how I do it, and to give something back. It's as simple as that. Both things happened at once which is exciting

Also there's a fit with Just Retirement as well. Our target market is people who are near or in retirement (60+). One in three of them will have mental health issues

in the future. So for me there's a customer responsibility piece. It's made me more cognisant of who our target audience is. It couldn't have come at a better time.

What's your view on access to support being a basic right? Why is it important?

Mental health issues are very difficult to spot. My nan had dementia probably for a lot longer than we knew she had because we were unaware of what the early triggers were. Unless you know what the triggers are then you don't know how to help. There's a lot of ignorance around what mental health actually is and whether or not people have an issue. Before we can ask, 'is help accessible?' we have to first ask how aware and good are we at spotting mental health issues to begin with. At the moment even within the NHS here mental health is not understood to the depth required compared to other illnesses that are much more visible and invested in. So then you're on a waiting list for 6 months to actually see someone who can help you, by which time you've become part of the stigma in the community and so you start to tell yourself *'I can live with this, it's not a disease, it's not really a problem'*, and then it starts to spiral out of control. I feel like we're on the cusp of a shift though.

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Nepal – Self-help group session
(Photo credit: [LEADS](#), BasicNeeds' long standing partner in Nepal)



Kenya – Livelihoods activity
(Photo credit: BasicNeeds Kenya)

“It’s not all about medication; often it’s about being able to talk to someone and for them to have company and a support system.”

As a charity, what are some of its strengths?

Its people; they are a real asset. There’s not many of them but they would do anything for the charity. They’re really committed to the cause, passionate about what they do and about the wider issue of mental health. Their sustainable model and programmes are also a massive strength. The BasicNeeds team is quite small but they’ve sparked trail blazers in lots of countries who are now running programmes in their own countries on behalf of BasicNeeds. You can’t really ask for more than that!

Based on BasicNeeds’ success so far, what’s one lesson of best practice that BasicNeeds could share to help improve NHS mental health services?

It’s the community based approach that we have. It doesn’t need to be all about expanding the number of doctors and nurses, it should be about helping communities tackle the problem. A lot of mental health issues are about listening to people, giving them support, checking if they’re still going to the shops and feeding themselves. It’s not all about medication; often it’s about being able to talk to someone and for them to have company and a support system. I don’t mean this to undermine those people that have trained and worked in Mental Health, but with the rapidly increasing numbers of people that will suffer we need to take a more

innovative approach to deal with the demand.

What are some of BasicNeeds achievements?

We’ve just appointed a celebrity ambassador- Helen Lederer, a British comedian who now does a programme on Radio4. She is incredibly passionate about mental health. Getting her on board is exciting and a big achievement for 2016 already. There are so many other success stories from the individual programmes; we’ve supported 600,000+ people now with mental health issues and that’s something to be proud of.

Over the past year there have been several charities in the hot seat, Kids Company as an example. How does BasicNeeds currently go about assessing its health as an organisation, both performance wise in terms of the service it offers as well as its financial health?

My first task as Chair was to conduct a governance review. As part of that I’m introducing a monthly health check, which is a one page document that summarises key metrics that a charity should be looking at, like engagement, financial status, fundraising pipeline, emerging risks... Charities in the past have maybe done it once a quarter where I think some of our friends have got in trouble. In a shrinking world that’s moving fast, once a quarter to look at key metrics is not enough- there’s too

much change. The strength that I’ve been able to bring to BasicNeeds already is the ability to spot the important things that need to be in a report like that to assess them more regularly.

What’s been the most exciting and rewarding aspect of being Chair at BasicNeeds?

In only 8 weeks?! Being part of it! I just feel so proud to be part of something that has so much meaning and adds so much value. And I’m learning as well! It’s helping me to do the day job differently and to flex my thinking in ways that I wouldn’t normally do.

.... And most challenging?

(I think Chris would agree with me, but...) Trying to get decisions made quicker and getting the balance between being a charity and also making it feel like a business. Which I think is a challenge across the whole charitable sector. There’s a huge responsibility that charities have to the people we support, and the funders who trust us, so it needs to be slightly more business-like. Getting the balance between the Great Cause but feeling like a business; we must be careful that the pendulum doesn’t swing too far one way. We aren’t a FTSE100 or anything, and that would take away the emotion and passion of what people do, but there’s a lack of professionalism sometime. I can understand why, people are giving up their time and it can be tough.

You identify yourself as a ‘Positive Disruptor’. How do you foresee yourself bringing this into BasicNeeds? And into the charitable sector more broadly?

Being a Positive Disruptor means creating change where change is needed. I spent the last 22 years in corporate businesses, but I’m not really a very “corporate” person. I don’t like process and governance that’s overdone; it ruins the relationship you have with your employees and customers, and in some cases it paralyses people from making decisions. I like mixing it up a bit and throwing the rule book out the window, and having

you have to start being more commercial and competitive because you’re fighting to survive and secure funding. But on the other hand you can’t do that too much because you’ll lose the essence of what a charity is about. That’s my biggest fear; that the competitiveness will drive a business-type approach that’s too strong, and in doing that you’re going to lose the emotional connection in what charities were trying to do in the first place.

I don’t think charities should shy away from pulling together. What’s

leaders & trustees to truly feel accountable?

They need to buy-in emotionally to what they’re trying to achieve, and they need clear roles and responsibilities. Because people are volunteers, there are less clear conversations about what you’re on the hook for, what you’re responsible for, and I think more transparency around that is really important. What I’m trying to create at BasicNeeds is more transparency and more open conversations about this. Asking people how much time they can give without it compromising their life and checking out people’s boundaries to see what’s really achievable.

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Lao PDR – Mental health clinic
(Photo credit: BasicNeeds Lao PDR)

challenging conversations with risk and compliance people who don’t like me! It’s about balance- you need some governance but you also need to crack on. I think that’s what I’m bring to BasicNeeds; the notion that yes we need strong governance but that it’s a framework to work within. I want to help us push boundaries, work quicker, and not over-process stuff for the sake of it.

**About the Charity Sector
What’s your view on the charity sector as a whole?**

It’s an awfully crowded space, in every cause. You have about 30 charities targeting the same cause now. Because of this, on one hand

wrong with being sensible and saying, ‘look were like minded, were going after the same slice of the pie, let’s pull together’. Charities are going to have to start thinking in this way. Whist the world is shrinking (we are more connected), our mind-set in narrowing. The future economy will also impact the charity sector’s future too. Are we heading for another economic slowdown or crisis? Interest rates are low; people who do have savings aren’t earning as much money on it, so are they going to be as charitable? We need to start broadening our thinking.

What does it really take for charity

What tends to get in the way of trustees not having as much of an influence or effect as they could to steer decisions?

Two thing... Firstly, themselves! You choose to be how you are don’t you? I think you’ve got to be honest with how much time and energy you have to give. At the point in which you can no longer give as much as the role requires, then you have to say no and step down. When you are there then you need to be active and be present. When I’m on a phone call with Chris or one of the team at BN, I’m not thinking about Just Retirement, I’m there for them and BasicNeeds. That way you can contribute and challenge to the best of your ability.

Also, trustees shouldn't shy away from the skills they have in their day job. I think when people become a trustee they think they need to be something they're not, but they forget that they've been invited because of the skills that they can bring. If you're good at marketing and advertising, then bring that to the debate! If you're good at financing, bring that to the table. Don't shy away from using the strengths you have.

Secondly, I think potentially the

shadow of a founder or someone that created the charity from its conception. It can be the thing that's driving and making decisions based on what they think is right instead of listening to trustees. Chris is fabulous at what he does but other trustees in other charities can find it difficult to move forward if CEOs have a set way in how things are done. That's where the Chair should play a more active role in shifting that dynamic.

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About Jenny

You've had a successful career so far. You've held several senior leadership and communications positions at Barclays, Centrica British Gas, HBOS and Telefonica, O2. Lots of industries. Where does your heart lie?

My heart lies in communications and cultural change.

I was purposeful in wanting to work in different industries. I was with WHSmith for 10 years in my early career and I was a self-taught communicator, but I felt like a bit of a fraud really. So I wanted to go on and work in different industries so that I could become a true expert in what I do, so that's what I've done.

What lights your flame?

I have to feel like I'm adding value. And a sense of team- that's one of my biggest drivers. I don't necessarily mean people who work for me, I just form a team if I don't have one directly! I get a lot of energy from teamwork.

What's the biggest insight you've learned about leadership throughout your career?

Listening is properly the biggest

most valuable skill but it's the one that's most underutilised. Often leaders think they have to impart wisdom at every moment of their existence, and actually they don't know everything and if they just listened a bit more then they'd be greater people. So I try and use that a lot.

In the spirit of learning from failures and feedback, what's one piece of feedback you've been given in your career that has helped you to become a better leader?

I am a very naturally bubbly, positive person. Learning to use that as a tool at the right moment has been my biggest bit of feedback; adjusting my style and knowing when to use that natural part of my personality to have impact with certain people at the right time has been invaluable.

In January you started as both Chair for Basic Needs as well as a full-time role as Director of Brand and Customer Experience at Just Retirement. How do you balance your time and energy?

I don't know, the busier I am the more I can do! But I also know where my limits are so I know when

I need a working from home day to operate in a different mode, or when to say no to that social event. I'm quite good at spotting those things now. I'm really careful with time management and efficiency, and that's what women bring to business; we're very efficient and good at managing time. (And having a very good husband helps!)

What do you like to do outside of work? Interests and passions?

Walking the dog, spending time with my husband, I'm a foodie and love trying new restaurants. I'm a Fulham football fan for my sins! So enjoy going to all the home games to let out that little bit of competitiveness that exists inside! I love seeing friends and I love connecting people.

As Chair of BasicNeeds, what key message do you want to share with the world?

That whoever reads this... 1 in 3 people are going to suffer with mental health issues in their future. That's it.

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