

# Heart & Soul

Under The Spotlight

Driving Change With Our  
Mental Health Strategy

**Heart  
& Soul**



# Rewinding To The Start

Our Heart & Soul story is quite the journey so I'll rewind us back to the beginning. In 2018, when we looked at our work with people and culture, there was a big void when it came to mental health, which meant we hadn't cracked the code of Diversity, Inclusion, Equity and Belonging. If any of our band members came to us in the HR team asking for support, we gave it to them, but we didn't have a strategy.

Society and even families have been reluctant to have real conversations about mental health and I really felt that if we could actually start to talk about mental health both internally and externally, that we'd encourage others to do the same. If we could talk about it and other companies started to talk about it, collectively, we could be part of a much-needed movement to remove the stigma. At Spotify, we're all about learning and aren't afraid to have difficult conversations so we weren't reluctant to roll up our sleeves and get on with it.

When we launched our Heart & Soul strategy, I didn't expect any pushback from the executive team, but I got zero questions. Everybody said: "this is good stuff, let's do this." This is one of the reasons I'm proud of the leadership team, and this company. I also asked them to share their own experiences, and not one of them said that they didn't want to. I was so moved, as this is the psychology we all know, and they knew it too: we need to drive change from the inside out and also top-down and bottom up. When a strategy is

sanctioned from the very top, everybody rolls with it, because it sends the message that it's obviously important.

Once Heart & Soul was authenticated, it became more of a movement from the inside out, rather than top-down, which is so powerful. This is where Linn, who leads the Mental Health work at Spotify, showed her brilliance. Her ability to listen, engage and create a safe environment made Heart & Soul really impactful. She's built that safe environment bigger and bigger and bigger.

Linn and the listening ears of our amazing Heart & Soul Ambassadors, have given us many learnings and insights to share. We hope you'll find some inspiring stories here and can find ways to listen to the voices of your people, who are the heart and soul of your organisation. We'd love our people and other businesses to amplify our message on mental health too, which is why we're stepping up to the mic to share our approach and thinking.



*Katarina Berg*  
Katarina Berg (She/Her/Hers)  
CHRO

# Going Our Own Way

One of our main objectives is removing stigma around mental health, which comes from presumptions about mental health and mental illness. The truth is, we all have mental health and we all go through periods in our life when our mental health is affected. This means it isn't just a workplace subject – what we're talking about, to put it simply, is life.

Being inclusive of all aspects of life needs a holistic approach that incorporates the entire continuum and everything we do within our strategy at Spotify is rooted in this fact that everyone has mental health.

Coming from this position means making sure this is more than a finite programme with a beginning and end date. And it means creating and implementing an ever-evolving strategy which drives both behavioural and cultural changes. That's why, when we decided to put mental health on the agenda, we always had the conviction that it had to be grounded in our values and culture, rather than a campaign or programme. Back then, in 2018 there was no blueprint.

At Spotify we have a common understanding that 'listening is everything', and as with any work that asks for change, we knew that first we needed to listen, and then we needed our leaders to be role models. With full leadership buy-in from day one, Heart & Soul could start to break the silence

and reduce the stigma. Reflecting a more holistic and human approach to working life, the strategy got right to the heart of opening up conversations about mental health. As a broad and commonly misunderstood space, we wanted everyone to understand what falls within the area of mental health, which is why we gave it a name that could convey what we wanted our effort to be – a name that encompasses all mental health experiences: Heart & Soul. That way, our band members are always reminded of what we stand for.

Fast forwarding to earlier this year (2022), we launched a Global Domestic Abuse Support programme and rolled out Substance Use Awareness and Support programme. We've come a long way since those initial focus groups and we're talking about things we could never have imagined at the start. This is testament to the passion, commitment and desire for a healthy workplace that Spottifiers have shown.



*Linn Caldas*  
Linn Caldas (She/Her/Hers)  
Associate Director,  
Global Mental Health (Heart & Soul)

# 3 Pillars Of Our Strategy

Heart & Soul is our global mental health initiative for all Spotify employees. We believe that everyone's experiences of mental health — from illness to wellbeing — are welcomed, respected and championed.

## The strategy focuses on three pillars of work:

1. **Raise awareness** and build knowledge to bring a greater understanding, because, generally speaking, knowledge is low, misunderstandings high and often misguided when it comes to mental health
2. **Enable self-care** and professional support so that everyone can find their own way of taking care of themselves
3. **Normalise** the conversation to reduce mental health stigma

Together, these three pillars bring focus and impact to all our initiatives.

All areas of the strategy need to co-exist, are equally important, and that everything we do connects back to the strategy.

# Our Ambassadors: Bringing Our Strategy To Life

The three pillars help us to focus and set us up for making an impact, but Heart & Soul can not truly thrive without the help of others. A healthy environment is created from the inside, meaning that it needs to be approached as a grand plan driven together by and with employees.

We introduced a mental health ambassador team made up of employee volunteers who devote a couple hours per week to spreading the Heart & Soul message, planning and driving initiatives, and to ensuring that mental health is being approached in a locally relevant way.

Since the founding of the ambassador team in 2018, we saw an increase in employees reaching out to them for guidance and advice, so the ambassadors trained to become Mental Health First Aiders, providing an invaluable resource for our band members. Since 2021 they have been equipped to have supportive conversations, to

listen non-judgmentally and guide employees towards the right support, whether it's setting boundaries, self-care, or therapy (to name a few examples).

The ambassadors' dedication to creating a culture that allows people to speak up and take good care of themselves is undeniable, and the team can feel the impact they have much more tacitly, and we can say from the bottom of our hearts, that they are instrumental to helping our strategy across all three pillars. HR provides the guidance and the framework but it's our ambassadors who breathe life into our strategy.

# Highlights From Our Journey

## ↳ February 2018 | Soul searching

Exploration outside of the Spotify arena to help us to see the state of the nation and to imagine what our mental health work could be.

## ↳ April 2018 | Setting our heartbeat

A baseline is written by focus groups throughout the band, and fifteen eager Spottifiers come together to form the initial Ambassadors team.

## ↳ May 2018 | We're all ears

We ask our HR colleagues, who have their ears to the business, to help us find a name. Heart & Soul is voted the winner. And we love it.

## ↳ August 2018 | Making it official

Heart & Soul is officially launched.

## ↳ September 2018 | First mental health workshops piloted

Workshops on depression, substance abuse and emotional wellbeing are piloted. Employees seem like they're not ready for the first two but turn up to the third in large numbers. It's a learning point, we know we're onto something.

## ↳ February 2019 | Growing our Ambassador Team

The ambassador team increased to 35 people, situated across 17 locations .

## ↳ October 2019 | World Mental Health Day

Seventeen different Spotify locations around the world use the same Heart & Soul messaging, with localised initiatives to celebrate WMHD.

## ↳ January 2020 | Mental health partners chosen

We're not mental health professionals, but we know people who are – they are involved early on.

## ↳ March 2020 | Global pandemic hits

Spotify offices around the world are closed. Heart & Soul's strategy means we are more prepared than many businesses for the coming tsunami of mental health needs.

## ↳ June 2020 | Mental health support for our Black community

Launch of *Real Talk* and 1:1 coaching for specific support for Black Spottifiers.

## ↳ February 2021 | Equipping ambassadors for first response

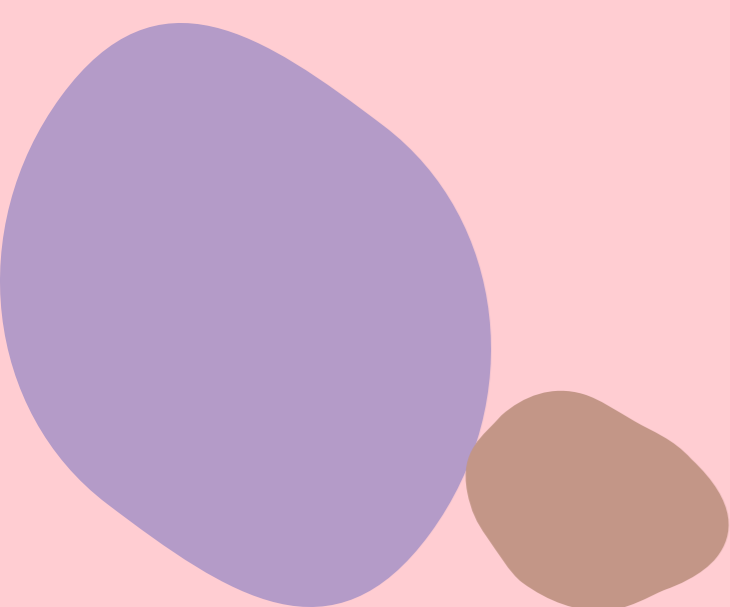
Our Heart & Soul Ambassadors are trained as Mental Health First Aiders.

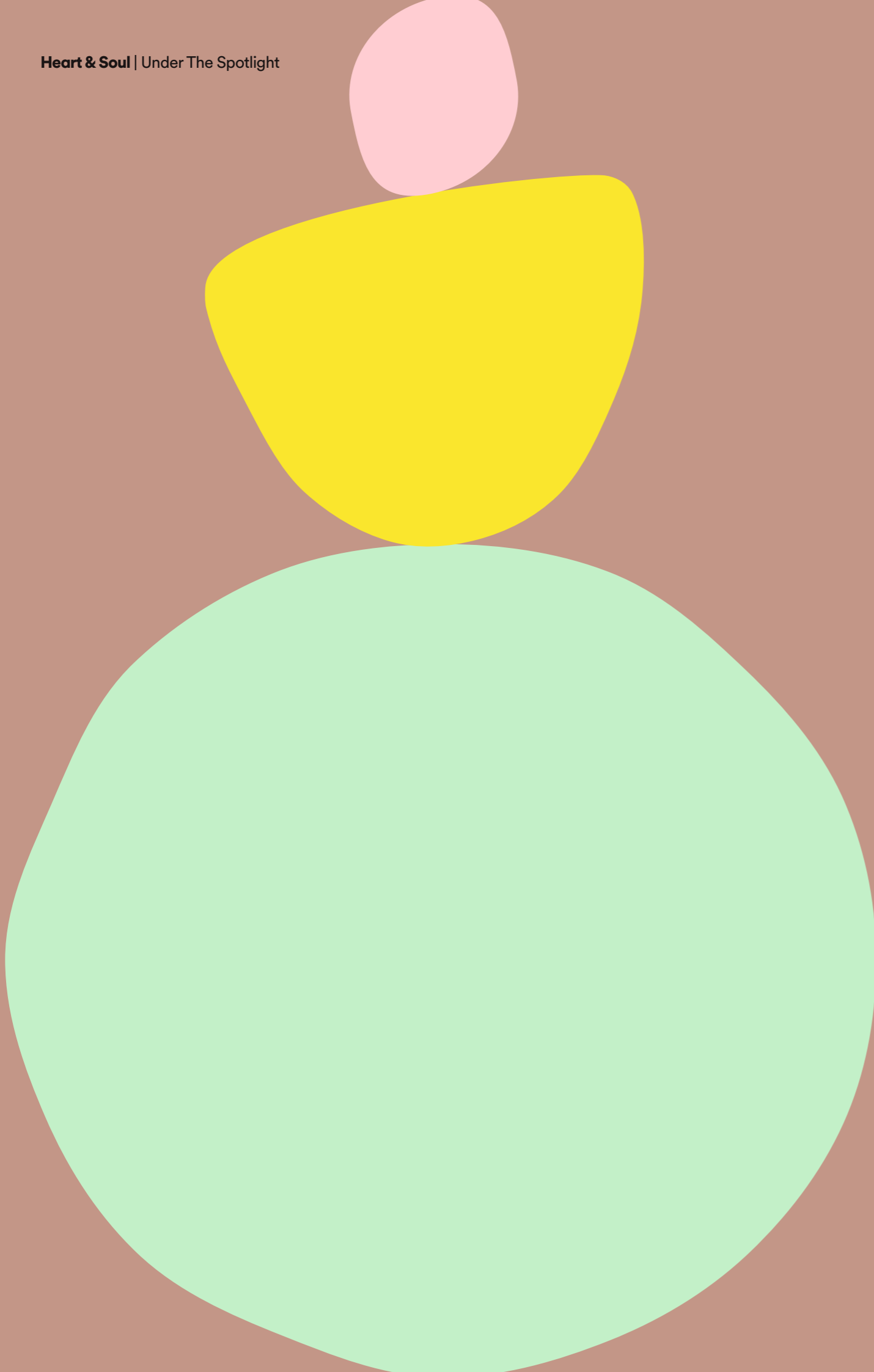
## ↳ April 2022 | Tuning in to domestic abuse support

Launch of a Domestic Abuse Support Programme.

## ↳ September 2022 | Raising awareness of substance use and support

Expanding even further, a Substance Use Awareness & Support Programme is launched.





# Does It Work?

When we first launched Heart & Soul, we didn't know how it would be received. Would people show up to workshops? Would HR be deluged by claims and struggle to cope?

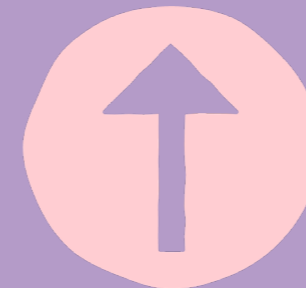
There have been many learnings along the way, and we're now able to talk about a successful strategy thanks to its solid foundation. Four and a half years in, we can say (anecdotally, from our Heart & Soul Ambassadors) that conversation on mental health is expanding across the company and stigma is being reduced.

More concretely, our latest employee engagement survey Tune In, which we ask Spotifiers twice per year, shows that Spotifiers strongly agree that we advocate for positive mental health as an organisation. It also shows that an increasing number feel comfortable approaching their manager for mental health support.



**88% Spotifiers**  
who agree that Spotify advocates  
for positive mental health / employee  
wellbeing

September 2022



**83% Spotifiers who say:**  
I feel comfortable approaching my  
manager for support regarding my mental  
health and wellbeing

September 2022

For the Mental Health Question "Spotify advocates for positive mental health/ employee wellbeing" there was an increase by 5% in the score from March 2022 to September 2022.

gradual increase in the score from its introduction in September 2021. Across the last 3 survey cycles, the score for this question has increased by around 1%.

For the Wellbeing Question "I feel comfortable approaching my manager for support regarding my mental health and wellbeing" there has been a

So, the answer to that all-important question, does it work? Well, it's pretty simple. Yes, it does.



# The Required Mindset

To say that we've tried a few different things without knowing what would work is an understatement. We've always kept things scientifically informed as we know that's one thing that our employees want and that helps to build trust when trying to drive change. However, there was no blueprint so we embraced the fact that growth is our mantra and got ourselves ready for some intense learning.

For an HR team, or any internal team, when trying to drive behavioural and cultural change, your approach and mindset can be the difference between box-ticking activities and positive impact.

Here are our top tips:

## 1. Situate mental health strategy within Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging (DIB)

Underrepresented backgrounds are disproportionately affected by mental health issues. In addition, building our foundations with Heart & Soul has undoubtedly helped us in other areas of DIB. For example, during times of unprecedented global social change, the infrastructure of Heart & Soul has facilitated a more open conversation about both internal and external events. Therefore, situating a mental health strategy within DIB is key.

## 2. Drive change through a strategy, not a programme

We knew from the start that Heart & Soul would be a lifelong philosophy rather than a programme with a beginning and end date. This is how it has become baked into our culture here at Spotify. Make it part of your culture and the way you treat yourselves and each other.

## 3. The Ambassador team

Being such a global company, we might have been able to spread the message but the actual implementation and change happens because of the Ambassadors. Having people on the ground who can drive change with localised initiatives is essential.

## 4. Buy-in from the leadership team

The fact that our leadership team stood up on stage and spoke about their own mental health experiences was crucial to bringing the message forward. Make sure you have anchored your strategy well and find leadership team advocates.

## 5. Embrace discomfort

Moving into this field of work may create discomfort in yourself and others, so be as prepared for that as you can be. At the same time, don't forget that it takes time for people to be comfortable with discomfort.

## 6. Listen

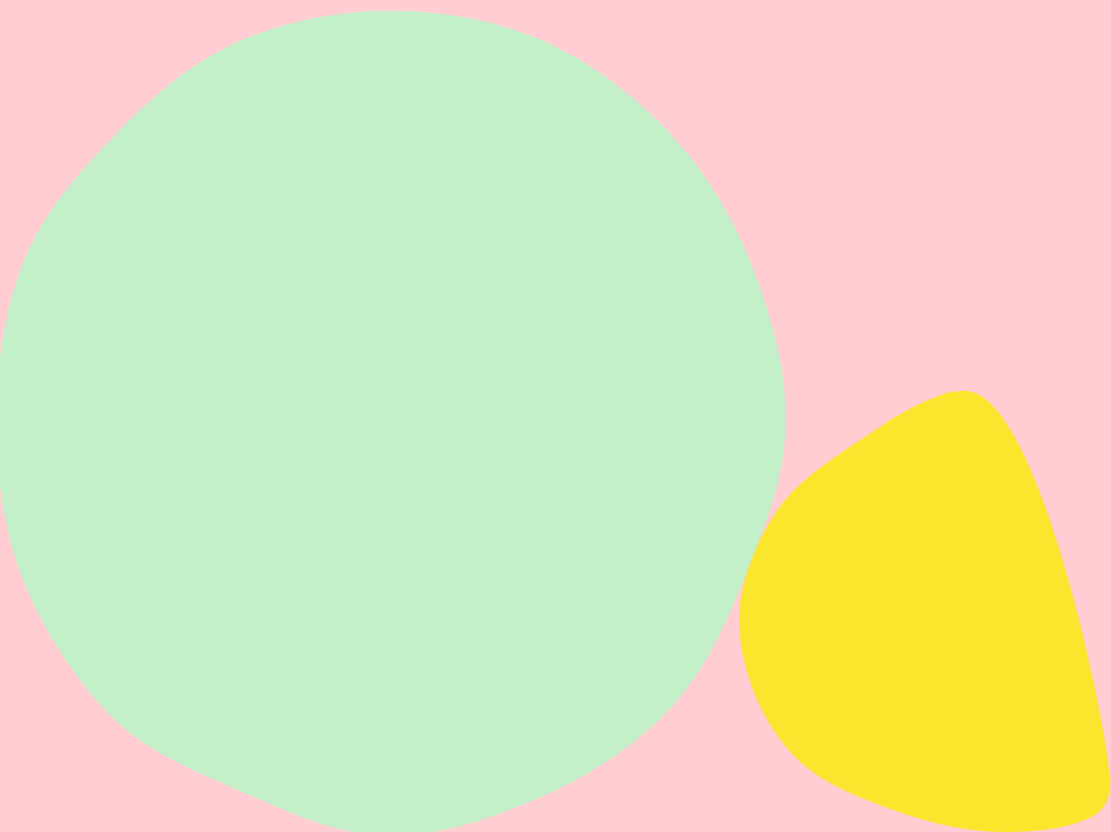
Listen to your employees. All the time. Before you roll anything out, whilst you are implementing, and then again after. Also, listen to your HR colleagues as they are the ones with their ears to the organisation. And listen to the external environment. Listening is everything.

## 7. Lean on partners

We're not mental health specialists; drawing on external experts, who can give employees evidence-based information in a digestible format, is vital.

## 8. Keep equity in the forefront

Mental Health resources aren't always equitable and access to professional support depends on how a person identifies. For example, the therapist industry is dominated by white for white and there's a huge shortage of therapists from underrepresented groups. Keep this in mind when you design any benefits or support and do what you can to make resources right for your environment.



# Heart & Soul In Action: The Pandemic

When the world stopped, Heart & Soul listened for the voices that were getting quieter...

As Covid-19 hit, like all businesses across the globe, we closed our offices and asked all employees to work from home with immediate effect. The level of trust Heart & Soul had earned was repaid more deeply beyond the frontline response as the pandemic wore on.

We had already prepared resources on anxiety and how to manage uncertainty in a crisis, so we could instantly roll that out to support our band members, and our Ambassador team instantly shifted their focus from local in-person initiatives to how we can support Spotifyers across the globe.

With Heart & Soul's ears to the ground, we could identify that our band members who were a single household, very young, and recently relocated, were most at risk.

Many of them were living in a very small apartment where the whole world was their bed. They slept there, they ate there, and they worked there. We understood that it was not where the noise came from, but where it was getting more and more quiet, was where people are really, really suffering. Therefore, when it was safe to re-open limited space within our offices, those workers most deprived of human interaction were prioritised to return as a way to safeguard their mental wellbeing.

# Heart & Soul in Action: The “shadow pandemic”

1 in 4 women, and 1 in 6 men (and other genders), will experience domestic abuse in their lifetime. During the pandemic, domestic abuse in all its forms (physical, sexual, psychological, economic) rose sharply around the globe. The UN described a “shadow pandemic”.

Domestic abuse can extend to the workplace in the simple fact that it may take place nearby or during working hours and the impact of being in an abusive relationship always has an impact on the wellbeing and ability to work, concentrate, contribute. These shocking statistics, an acceptance of the merging of work and life, and a realisation that this is undoubtedly happening in every workplace, should be the biggest call to action of a HR profession to address domestic abuse and its impact on the productivity, safety, and wellbeing of their employees.

In addition, for many of those affected by abuse, work can also be a lifeline as it may represent a refuge where they can seek help safely, maintain financial stability, and regain self-worth.

However, only 5% of organisations currently have a specific policy on domestic abuse. At Spotify, we stand by the belief that violence and abuse, in whatever shape or form, will never be the answer. That's why, earlier this year, we launched our Domestic Abuse Support Program.

Our program takes a two-pronged approach: awareness and response. We focus on raising awareness for everyone so that all our band members can understand what domestic abuse is, and how they can effectively recognise and support others affected by domestic abuse. The response element is where we offer confidential referral services, reimbursement for temporary accommodation, safety planning, and workplace adjustments.

# Stories From The Ambassadors

## ↳ LaValle's story: It's ok not to be ok



**LaValle Hill** (She/Her/Hers)  
HR Specialist

Boston-based Location Lead Ambassador, LaValle, drew on a background in family therapy and her current skills as an HR specialist when she joined as a Heart & Soul Ambassador in January 2021.

LaValle believes Heart & Soul's day-to-day programming and employee panels play a huge role in Spotifyers talking more openly about their mental health.

"Last summer employees took part in a panel about postpartum depression and infertility and different struggles – seeing this type of vulnerability from colleagues is next level. People are feeling comfortable to sit on a stage and share these most intimate moments and feelings that they're having is incredible. As a result so

many others think if that's ok, then it's definitely ok for me to be vulnerable with my team or with my manager. Seeing things broadcast so openly makes it easier for things on a smaller scale."

In the U.S. 24/7 access to All The Feels' five free counselling sessions at the point of need is especially welcome for Spotifyers for whom health insurance cover may vary. LaVelle agrees that a key strength of Heart & Soul is its ever-evolving offering.

"It's not just we have a mental health initiative and we put out programming sometimes, there are so many pillars that hold up Heart & Soul and we are constantly re-evaluating them. It's not just lip service here – we're really putting hard work into it."

## ↳ Gary's story: Sharing life-saving tools



**Gary Niemen** (He/Him/His)  
Product Manager

Gary is a Heart & Soul Ambassador in Sweden, and says the behaviour and culture change at Spotify since the launch of Heart & Soul joined four and a half ago is striking – mental health is less and less stigmatised.

"Mental health is just much more part of the culture," says Gary. "Four years ago very few people would talk about it or think about it in the workplace – that was something you either did at home or didn't think about at all. When I did my spells of therapy I did them from 8-9am and then got to work; I separated them. In the beginning, when we introduced Heart & Soul – that's where we were, and now, four years later, it's perfectly ok for an employee to raise concerns to their

manager, and they might go in the middle of the day. It's so much part of the culture now."

Someone who's always taken an interest in psychology and personal development, Gary's role as one of Heart & Soul's original Ambassadors has enabled him to pass on the "life-saving" tools he's learned along the way to colleagues and team members.

"I've been through my own challenges – I've discovered many ways of dealing with those challenges, many tools – it helped me; it saved my life almost. And I got the opportunity to teach others that tool."

## ↳ Stephania's story: Being your unfiltered self



**Stephania Karathanasi** (She/Her/Hers)  
Senior Client Partner

Stephania, Heart & Soul Ambassador in the Netherlands, believes the strategy is a key attraction tool for Spotify, and thought that reducing stigma and raising awareness around mental health as an Ambassador would be an "act of service" to her fellow Spotifyers. What she didn't expect was that being a Heart & Soul Ambassador would enrich her working life in other ways.

"I really thought it would add more depth into my employment at Spotify and I wanted to make sure I could contribute to the progress we make in terms of reducing the stigma and raising awareness."

Stephania says monthly check-ins and Ambassador circles allow her to be her "unfiltered self" and being an Ambassador is less a role and more a way of being at work.

"The connections I have with the Heart & Soul Ambassadors are the deepest connections I have outside of my immediate team and that is very unique, and it influences how I show up in the workplace: as open, non-judgemental, and approachable."



## ↳ Ezra's story: Finding a place where you belong



**Ezra Sheppard** (He/Him/His)  
Senior Engineering Manager

Ezra, who is based in New York, was initially drawn to Heart & Soul through the Talk It Through programme for managers, which taught tools to identify signs that colleagues may be struggling and signpost appropriate support. He believes Heart & Soul has helped him gain a sense of belonging.

"I have not been in a place where I have felt as encouraged to be myself as I have at Spotify. The Heart & Soul activities have really inspired me to think differently about what it means to be a part of a company. The programming has touched

many people in the company and facilitated a more open discussion about mental health. So without it ... what would the company be like?"

He says the experience of being a Heart & Soul Ambassador has changed him for the better on multiple levels.

"I've learned. I've changed as a manager and I've changed as a colleague for the better. It's been one of the most enriching employee experiences I've had."

## ↳ Nicole's story: Opening the conversation



**Nicole Aoun** (She/Her/Hers)  
Marketing Manager

For Dubai-based Nicole, being a Heart & Soul Ambassador means creating a safe space for yourself and others, where they feel they can be themselves. Work has been seen as a place where you cannot be vulnerable. The idea of showing vulnerability at work was taboo in her previous workplace before she came to Spotify.

"In a past job I told my manager I needed to go to a doctor's appointment and he said he was going to the doctor too on the same day – I said my stomach hurts and he said his wife was ill. Then I went to my therapist session instead and, when I walked out, I saw my manager and his wife entering the therapist's building. We exchanged looks but never spoke about it. That wouldn't happen at Spotify – we would have had that conversation very openly."

Heart & Soul holds a personal significance for

Nicole so she jumped at the chance to be Dubai's first location Ambassador.

"Mental health is really important to me, it's something I've struggled with ever since I was really young and always felt like people didn't understand it. People judged and there was always a stigma around it, especially where I'm from – so when I was first diagnosed with anxiety and depression I was 18 I was like, what is anxiety? In past workplaces it was a very toxic environment, it really impacted my mental health. Just being able to share my background of not being able to speak up about this, getting a chance to be heard, I jumped on the opportunity and applied to be an Ambassador."

She has seen the stigma reduced during her three years as a Heart & Soul Ambassador, with the pandemic acting as a catalyst for change.

"To see it's not just impacting colleagues it's also going to help their families or help them have that open discussion where future generations do that, is moving coming from Lebanon where it was such a stigma. In the Arab world especially – Arab men

reaching out, there's toxic masculinity – you need to 'be a man' and not talk to anyone about it – just having people trusting me it really does move me. I really felt times are changing and it's moving to see that.

## ↳ Tse-Lyn's story: Integral resources



**Tse-Lyn Chua** (She/Her/Hers)  
Community X Lead and  
Heart & Soul Lead, JAPAC & SAMEA

Tse-Lyn decided to take up the role of Heart & Soul Ambassador in 2021 after experiencing 'baby blues' during parental leave.

"Being a new mother, there was a huge mental change. I was experiencing baby blues. It made me realise that my mental health is actually very important and that this could be a great opportunity for me to learn about mental wellbeing and taking care of myself."

Tse-Lyn reckons Heart & Soul's job is to support

everyone with the tools they need, however they work, wherever they are.

"There's a difference in every market geographically and culturally, and inspiring employee panels, alongside all the other tools and resources, help Spotifyers through the highs and lows of life. Everyone has good and bad days – some days you might feel overwhelmed but you know there are tips and tricks that can help combat that."

## ↳ Hannah's story: The courage to share



**Hannah Milne** (She/Her/Hers)  
Client Partner

When Sydney-based Heart & Soul Ambassador Hannah spoke on a World Mental Health Day panel in her office three years ago, it was the first time she'd told anyone outside her family and close friends about her experience of depression – she admits being so nervous she nearly cancelled.

"The panel was facilitated by our head of communications and there were also a couple of music artists on it as well – we were discussing our experiences of mental health. That was actually the first time I've told people outside of close family and friends that I had had depression so I was pretty scared to tell a room full of people, let alone people that I work with. But afterwards I felt

really liberated by it and found it really liberating being able to be open about it," says Hannah.

This courageous step would ultimately lead her to becoming a Heart & Soul Ambassador.

"I was hoping I could make a difference to other people who might be experiencing the same thing or more broadly help to reduce stigma around mental health and help people to understand how to look after their mental health better day to day. The fact that I felt comfortable telling all my colleagues I had experienced depression shows how Spotify is really unique in fostering a culture where you feel supported."

# What's Next For Spotify?

Four years into fighting stigma around mental health, Heart & Soul has grown from a network of just 15 volunteer Ambassadors to 75 across the globe. We're unbelievably proud that mental health is now something many Spottifiers can comfortably talk about with their managers or colleagues, without shame or fear of reprisal.

As a proud value-driven organisation, our message is clear – it's about taking care of Spotify's heart and soul: our people. Put simply, we don't just want Spottifiers to put on a fake smile and carry on at work if they are not feeling well. We want our people to be their best. And more specifically, we want them to be their best at that particular point in life. Sometimes your best is just showing up and that's the story that Spottifiers support.

The work is ever-evolving and we're sure the road ahead will bring numerous challenges. Until everyone is comfortable talking about mental health, and feels a sense of belonging, the work is not finished. However, we're more prepared to continue our journey than ever before, and we're certain that we'll continue to drive change and to push boundaries.

# Check out our HR Blog posts on Heart & Soul:

- [Hey, are you OK?](#)
- [Mental health ambassadors with Heart & Soul](#)
- [Let's not silence mental health at work](#)
- [Mental health at the heart](#)
- [Everyday is mental health day](#)
- [From ambassadors to mental health first aiders](#)
- [Normalising the conversation to reduce stigma](#)
- [World mental health day: a time to turbocharge mental health](#)
- [Spotify wellness week](#)
- [Mental health for Spottifiers and beyond: normalising the conversation](#)
- [Mental health thrives in safety and connection](#)
- [Spotify wellness week return in 2022](#)

For more on Spotify's Heart & Soul, and other HR philosophies check out the [Spotify HR Blog](#).

*"There are things you can do just by being more human as an employer. Be there for your people and they will be there for you."*

**Katarina Berg** (She/Her/Hers)  
CHRO

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