



Taxing Matters

Navigating the complexities of the tax world

RPC

Season 3

Episode 10 – Mental Health Awareness week: breaking down mental barriers in the mind with Jo Maughan

Alexis

Hello, and welcome to Taxing Matters, your one stop audio shop for all things tax brought to you by RPC. My name is Alexis Armitage and I'm a Senior Associate in RPC's Tax Disputes Team. I will be your guide as we explore the sometimes hostile and ever-changing landscape that is the world of tax law and tax disputes. Taxing Matters brings you a roadmap to guide you and your business through this labyrinth. In case any of you miss any crucial information or just want some bedtime reading, there is a full transcript of this and indeed every episode of Taxing Matters on our website at www.rpclegal.com/taxingmatters.

I am delighted to be joined today by Jo Maughan for this special podcast episode for Mental Health Awareness Week. Since 2012, Jo has been a career coach and artist. Before that, Jo's first career was as a tax director. Her most recent tax roles were at BP and PwC, so she has a good idea of what it's like to work in the tax world. Jo now specialises in coaching professionals at a career or life crossroads and has a special interest in helping her clients manage their critical inner voice.

Today, Jo and I will be discussing ways to manage that critical inner voice that actually work. So welcome, Jo, and thank you so much for joining me today.

Jo: Thank you for inviting me to be here. It's a great pleasure.

Alexis: So shall we start by talking about why you have a special interest in helping your clients manage their critical inner voice?

Jo: Sure, it's because I had a very loud one myself and what I used to do as a tax person was not engage with it and ignore it. But that didn't work because it was always there still. And when I got myself a coach who helped me identify my critical inner voice and helped me manage it, it made the whole world of difference - so that's one reason.

And the second reason is, members of my family, I have two members of my family who have mental health difficulties. And so throughout my life, I've been aware of those, and it was only when I started engaging with my own critical inner voice that I realised what must be going on for them. And what I now believe is somebody, for example, who has an anxiety condition, then their critical inner voice is more catastrophic, is louder, says more things about what could go wrong in the future. And so... it made sense to me really why it was important to learn to manage my own and also why it helps others so much. Because once we handle it better and it quietsens and it doesn't interfere so much, then we can really thrive in our lives. I think we can in our careers, in our relationships, in how we empathise with others. So for all those reasons, there's quite a lot there, isn't there?

Alexis: I think it's all very true though what you've said. So having worked in the tax world yourself, what do you think are some of the unique challenges and pressures that professionals face working in this area? Do you think the critical inner voice is a particular issue in working in tax in particular?

Jo: Well, I can only speak from my own experience and I wouldn't pretend that I'm an expert. What I've noticed though is that most of the people I work with, their critical inner voice is pretty loud and I mainly work with lawyers, tax professionals, engineers, sales directors - so professional people, and I think what's in common with tax professionals and lawyers is that it tends to attract high achievers, so people who want to do well, and also people who perhaps have a perfectionist tendency. And the profession encourages perfectionist tendencies because in tax, of course, there is a right answer. There's some grey, but there is often a right answer. And it's also quite competitive. So I think the external circumstances exist whereby if one's critical inner voice is already operating

louder than one would like, shall we say, the external circumstances exist to perhaps help it get even louder. Because us humans have a tendency to compare ourselves, for example, to others and the environment encourages that almost. Does that make sense?

Alexis: Yeah, I think it does, and actually the theme for this year's Mental Health Awareness Week is community. And actually, I think it does massively matter what environment you're in and the community that surrounds you. So I think actually, everyone being alive to these issues, working in this space is actually, I think it can only be a good thing in order to help quieten the critical inner voice, so to speak. So what are your top tips then on how to successfully navigate these challenges?

Jo: I have two top tips and why am I bringing these today? It's because these are the ones that have worked for me the best. So one is a tool called FOG, which I'm going to talk about. And the other one is calming the critical inner voice by getting into one's body. So shall I go ahead and talk about the first one?

Alexis: Yes, please do. What does FOG stand for, first?

Jo: It stands for 'fact, opinion, guess'. And this is a tool by which we can challenge our inner voice and therefore quieten it and disable the effect it's having on us. So the best thing for me to do is to explain this via an example, one that I hope our listeners can relate to. So imagine you're in a technical meeting, let's say and somebody is presenting on a technical issue and you think, that doesn't make sense or I don't understand that. If we tune into, and I'm going to tune into the type of things I used to tell myself, I would sit there starting to get worried, wanting to ask something but thinking, I can't ask that, no one else is thinking that. I should know the answer. They'll think I'm stupid. They'll think I'm not up to the job and really catastrophising I would think I'll be sacked. So it sounds ridiculous, but once I engaged with my inner voice literally and really listened to it, that was the type of thing it said. And the FOG tool works by challenging each of those statements and questioning - is that a fact? Is that an opinion? Or is that a guess? And we do this very literally as if we were a lawyer. And I know you are Alexis, so you're perfectly, you've got the qualifications to apply this tool. So if I take, if I take it very literally, 'I can't ask that', is that a fact, an opinion or a guess? So is it a fact that I can't physically ask that? No, of course it isn't. I could open my mouth. I can say that. So it's in fact an opinion. It's an opinion I'm putting on myself.

Taking the next statement, 'no one else is thinking that'. Is that a fact, an opinion or a guess? It's a guess because I have no idea what is any anybody else's head. And indeed they may be thinking that. I should know the answer. So our critical inner voice usually has a lot of demanding words like should, must, have to, I should know that. Is it a fact? Is it an opinion or is it a guess that I should know that? And again, it's an opinion. So one goes through the statements that one's critical inner voice made, attacks them one by one and challenges them. Are they a fact? Are they an opinion? Or a guess? And then when one steps back and I can see this from mine and I haven't gone through all the statements, but there isn't a single fact there.

So now the next part of the tool is to say, okay, if there's not a single fact there, this is something my mind has made up. This is something my critical inner voice has made up to keep me quiet, to keep me safe, to keep me from rocking the boat, to keep me being liked by the community. But if none of this is true, actually I have more choices. I can ask the question I want to ask. This helps us because when we engage with our critical inner voice and use the FOG tool and we practice it, pretty much none of what our critical inner voice says is true. It's all made up, there's usually not a single fact in there. So with that awareness, when we start to feel anxious, for example, in a meeting, because we don't think we can ask something, then we're able to disable the thoughts and if we disable the thoughts, then the feelings, the feelings of worry start to subside too. I will say this does take practice and it's taken me many practices to get to where I am today with my critical inner voice now being much quieter. It doesn't go away in my experience, but it becomes much quieter and therefore easier to manage.

Alexis: Yeah, and actually, that's really good tool. Thank you, Jo. And I think, as you've just said, I think it takes a huge amount of practice, doesn't it? Because if you're in that meeting and there's 15 people in the meeting and everybody's talking and the pace of the meeting is fast, you might not have time to break it all down like that in your head and also keep listening to everything that's going on in the meeting and things like that. I suppose, would your best tip be to try and practice this skill in your personal life first? And then try and bring it into the professional arena and then you get better at it and quicker.

Jo: Yes, that's a good idea. Think practising it as one goes about one's life in all areas of one's life is helpful. And then one can almost prime yourself before you go into the meeting. You can think, this is the sort of meeting where this type of trigger comes up for me. This is where my critical inner voice tends to go. Remember, I've done this before.

None of these thoughts are facts, and prime oneself to be more resilient before one even goes in. And that all comes from what you've said by practicing in various arenas in one's life.

Alexis: I think that's a very good tip though about having a think about how the meeting might go before you go in because as we all know, there might be certain personalities in the meeting and they might, for whatever reason, set off your critical inner voice more than certain other people. So you might be able, or the topic of what you're discussing might do that, or the environment or whatever. So actually, if you have a think about it before you go in, I think that would be very helpful.

And so do you want to tell us about the second tool?

Jo: Yes, the second tool is about getting out of your head and getting more into your body. And you might think, well, what does Jo mean by that? What I mean by that is we as humans, we spend a lot of time in our head and in modern society, thinking and in the tax world, intellect, problem solving, all of those are head-based activities. Those are highly valued. And that's where our critical inner voice is too.

We need to give ourselves a break in my opinion. Getting out of one's head and instead getting more into one's body through becoming more aware of one's feelings. For example, walking outside in nature, running, meditating, mindfulness, journaling, slowing down, listening to music. All of those things help us disengage from the critical inner voice to take it more as an observer. And when we're more aware of our body, it tends to be that our focus goes there and then our mind may start to calm, think more slower. I say may because it doesn't always.

Just the fact of taking some time for oneself and thinking, hmm, I'm going to calm my mind, I'm going to consciously become more aware of my body - that can work in itself. Even if when one is sitting there mindfully breathing, one notices that the mind is incredibly active and is being very critical, but the sitting and the mindfulness tends to create some distance, which is beneficial. One of the things I really like to do is mindful walking whereby the rhythm of the walk and the nature and becoming more aware of my senses helps me calm my mind, get into my body. Does that make sense?

Alexis: Yes, I was actually very calm just listening to you there, Jo. Honestly your voice is so calming. And I've said that before many times, but it really is. And actually, that brings us very nicely on to your mindful walks that you're doing this summer. And I'd love to talk about those actually, because I went on maybe one or two of Jo's mindful walks last year, and they were brilliant. So do you want to just tell us a bit more about why you do these walks and what you think they bring to the people who come along to them.

Jo: Yes, so I do them because I like nature myself and I find walking in nature slowly, mindfully, very calming for my critical inner voice. That's one reason. Another one is certainly the walks I run in Surrey. I live in a very beautiful place just in Guildford and there's loads of walks on my doorstep and people say to me, I'd love to come out into nature and do a walk but I never have time.

People also say they like pub lunches and that's what we do, we finish with a pub lunch at the end. The benefits people get from it though, what I'd say is it's very connecting. One connects with nature and then one connects with self. And people say that they feel much calmer. It was so nice to have some time out. People tend to realise what it is they need more of or less in their lives because they've had a bit of time to think.

So all in all, people decompress. We get to go on a really lovely walk. There's networking and I have a nice time. So that's why I do it. And it's always a really nice group of people, it just seems to work out that way, people gel and when we have the lunch at the end or the coffee for the morning sessions, people really connect with each other and benefit from that as well, just like you've said, Alexis.

Alexis: Yeah, definitely. I'm still in touch with actually quite a few of the people I met on your walks, Jo, that I'd never met before. It has a dual purpose, if you like. It gets you away from your desk. It gets the steps in, gets you, gets some time and some space to just reflect on where you are in your career and your life really. And also an opportunity to meet some really good people.

And also the pub lunch can't be understated. So please do, please do come along if you get an opportunity.

So just to rattle through some of the dates, Jo's doing one on the 12th of May in Guildford all day, one on the 13th of May in London in the morning. One on the 20th of June in Guildford All Day, the 24th of June in London, the morning and the 4th of July in Guildford All Day. And I believe you can sign up for any of these walks on Eventbrite by searching for Jo's name, Jo Maughan, mindful walks. And honestly, it will be one of the best things you do this year for sure. So thank you so much, Jo, for joining me today. That's all we've got time for today, folks.

Jo: Thank you. I've enjoyed being here and I'm hoping to see some of you on a mindful walk.

Alexis As ever, a big thank you goes to RPC's in-house team for the production, music and sound editing of this episode. A full transcript of this episode together with our references can be found on our website at www.rpclegal.com/taxingmatters. And if you have any questions for me or any topics you'd us to cover in a future episode, please do email us on taxingmatters@rpclegal.com. I would love to hear from you. If you like Taxing Matters, why not try RPC's other podcast offerings, Insurance Covered, which looks at the inner workings of the insurance industry hosted by the brilliant Peter Mansfield and available on Apple podcasts, Spotify and our website. Or the Work Couch, the podcast series, which is where we explore how your business can navigate today's tricky people challenges and respond to key developments in the ever-evolving world of employment law. Hosted by the fantastic Ellie Gelder and also available on Apple podcasts, Spotify and our website rpclegal.com. If you like this episode, please take a moment to rate, review and subscribe and remember to tell a colleague about us. Thank you all for listening and talk to you again soon.



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