

# Looking after your mental wellbeing

A guide for Occupational  
Health Practitioners

# Being well and staying well

As OH practitioners, we all know how to advise and support our clients on being and staying well. During our training we are taught the importance of maintaining good health to enhance wellbeing and productivity. With workplace initiatives, factsheets and training packages everywhere, there is a huge move to promote wellbeing and reduce avoidable mental health issues. As clinicians working in occupational health, we not only deliver such interventions but we also see at first hand the harm that can be done when employers are not doing enough in support of mental health and wellbeing in the workplace.

## But what about ourselves?

There is evidence that people working in healthcare are more prone than the general population to experience mental health problems.<sup>1,2</sup> However, despite our knowledge in understanding the importance of mental wellbeing, our profession has not been good at promoting this for ourselves.

In common with many of our clients, we too find ourselves under pressure from heavy workloads, working with insufficient resources and financial limitations. These pressures can affect us in exactly the same way as the employees we are supporting and advising. It is therefore crucial to 'put on our own oxygen mask before attempting to help others'.

Recognising when we are feeling overwhelmed, struggling or experiencing stress and monitoring our coping mechanisms are key to enabling us to manage challenging situations proactively and maintain our own wellbeing at work. Whether we work in-house or in case management clinics, delivering health surveillance or wellbeing initiatives, all our workplace activities can contribute to unwelcome stress if they are not managed well.





## **Burnout and compassion fatigue**

- Burnout is a term that has been widely used to describe the physical and emotional exhaustion that workers can experience when they have low job satisfaction and feel powerless and overwhelmed at work.
- Compassion fatigue refers to the deep emotional and physical exhaustion that those in the helping profession or other caregivers can develop over the course of their career. It is a gradual erosion of all the things that keep us connected to others in our caregiving role: our empathy, our hope, and of course, our compassion - not only for others but for ourselves too.

It is especially important for those of us in the caring professions to recognise when we might be starting to feel burnt out or suffering from compassion fatigue and to take appropriate action.

### **So how do we notice when the impact of work (and/or events in our personal life) are starting to cause us stress?**

The usual reaction to a potential stressor is for the hypothalamus in the brain to set a chain reaction stimulating the pituitary gland, which in turn triggers the adrenal gland into producing cortisol. This is a useful mechanism when responding to stressors in the short term, increasing heart rate and blood pressure and mobilising glucose for immediate use. This 'fight, flight or freeze' mode will help us deal with the situation in that moment. However, long-term activation can affect normal body function, including digestion, sleep, memory and concentration, and cause health issues such as increased blood pressure, digestive and skin problems. All this can lead to immune system suppression, anxiety and depression.

It is important to recognise when cortisol is impacting on you over a long period. By recognising it you can take steps to manage it better.

# How well are you looking after your mental wellbeing?

Thinking about these questions honestly will help you understand if you are doing enough for your mental (and physical) wellbeing

- Do I sleep well?
- Do I spend sufficient time with my friends and family?
- Am I eating healthily?
- Am I exercising regularly?
- Am I taking breaks?
- Am I spending time outside and close to nature?

Maybe you have started neglecting the things you know will help you keep well – and sometimes it feels hard to do them with all the demands that work and your personal life can put on you.



## How do I look after me?

Suggestions for maintaining wellbeing and developing a mental health tool box

### 1. Understand yourself

As we get to know ourselves, we can identify the areas of our life that make us feel overwhelmed or anxious, or trigger the stress response outlined above. Self-knowledge is vital in identifying the aspects of life and work that can deplete our resources, and those we find replenishing; it also helps us notice when things are starting to get on top of us. It can also help us recognise when the coping mechanisms we have in place are not working or are even being unhelpful to us.

## 2. Maintain a healthy lifestyle

At stressful times, if we are not careful we can fall into unhelpful behaviour patterns and an unhealthy lifestyle. We might try to manage our stress by using alcohol or drugs, for example, or by eating too much of the wrong food (or not eating), smoking, or excessive spending. In the long run, as you know, this will just increase the stress. When we are more self-aware (and we may need help with this) we can review our behaviour and make sure we attend to our mental and physical health. We all advise on diet, exercise and sleep but do we take our own advice?

### Diet

Increasingly, the links between diet and mental health are gathering support from clinical research communities<sup>2</sup>. Just like the heart, stomach and liver, the brain is an organ that is acutely sensitive to what we eat and drink. To remain healthy, it needs different amounts of complex carbohydrates, essential fatty acids, amino acids, vitamins and minerals, and water. So, in a nutshell, avoid processed foods high in 'trans fats' (e.g. crisps, ready meals, commercially-made cakes and biscuits), eat your 5 portions of fruit and vegetables a day and get a good balance of healthy fats, e.g. the ones containing omega 3 and 6 (oily fish, nuts, avocados etc.) and protein. To keep your digestion healthy, you'll need plenty of fibre, pro-biotics (e.g. natural yoghurt), fluid and regular exercise.

### Exercise

There is strong evidence<sup>3</sup> that physical activity can improve our mental wellbeing. Even a short burst of 10 minutes' brisk walking increases our mental alertness, energy and positive mood. If you are new to exercise, start slowly. Incorporate it into your daily life by walking or cycling rather than taking the car and using the stairs instead of a lift or escalator. A lunchtime walk can help raise energy levels for the afternoon. Don't forget exercise can be fun!

### Sleep

Often sleep is a casualty when we are stressed, anxious or depressed. Don't forget to attend to your sleep hygiene. Avoid stimulants such as caffeine in the evening and take daily exercise. Have some wind down time before going to bed and try to keep to a regular sleep routine, avoiding long lie-ins or sleeps in the daytime when not at work. This is extra challenging for people who work shifts. Increase exposure to natural sunlight or bright lights during the day and reduce blue light exposure (from electronic devices and screens) in the evening, especially in the hour before you plan to go to sleep. Avoid looking at any electronic devices in bed, even mobile phones. Finally, make sure your bedroom is comfortable and conducive to sleeping, including thinking about light, temperature, noise and comfortable bedding<sup>4</sup>.

### 3. Incorporate the 5 ways of wellbeing into your life

These are a set of evidence-based activities which can help support your mental wellbeing<sup>5</sup>:

#### **Connect: maintain contact with others**

Contact with other people is an important factor in combatting stress. One of the danger signs for some people is withdrawing from social contact. Creating strong nurturing relationships is known to reduce stress. Take time to think about what you might do to spend more social time with friends, family and colleagues. If you are struggling, talk to someone – a friend, colleague, family member or counsellor. Connecting with animals or nature is also really helpful for some people.



#### **Be active**

Get the blood flowing; go for a walk or bike ride – time outside is especially beneficial to our wellbeing. Spend time on a hobby, go to the cinema or a concert; tidy out a cupboard or do some gardening.



#### **Take notice**

Take the time to notice what is going on. Think about what you are eating, really listen to the music you enjoy, look at what is around you – it is amazing how much we miss as we go about our days, caught up in our thoughts and concerns.

The practice of meditation and mindfulness is nothing new. However, there is increasing research into the effectiveness of mindfulness and self-compassion on our mental wellbeing<sup>6,7</sup>.

Self-compassion teaches us to treat ourselves kindly and to be aware of when we are

unduly self-critical, hard or punitive. Mindfulness teaches us to be in the moment and increases awareness of ourselves and the world around us. Meditation can help us to find a quiet space in the day to focus on our breathing and empty our minds of intrusive thoughts and worries, calming us down and leading to greater acceptance of ourselves and others.



## Keep learning

It is important that we keep learning; this might be taking up a new hobby (if you have time) or pursuing some new CPD at work. Even listening with interest to what friends, family or colleagues are doing is learning. How about some bite-sized activities like learning a song, some dance moves or a few foreign phrases whilst on holiday?



## Give to others

Participation in social and community life has attracted a lot of attention in the field of wellbeing research. When we spend our working life giving, we need to be careful how and why we do this. However, even little things like showing appreciation to a friend or family member, thanking a colleague for a job well done or being extra courteous while driving all count. As Abraham Lincoln is supposed to have said, "When I do good, I feel good..."



## 4. Enjoy life

After any stressful activity, recovery is essential to maintain our own health and wellbeing. When your day to day life consists of sustained stressors, this is especially important. Make sure you take adequate breaks both during your working day and as annual leave. Not taking a lunch break (or equivalent) is a form of presenteeism which we know is not helpful or productive. Create space in your life for you, both at work and at home and don't feel guilty about it. Taking holidays and breaks will allow you time to relax and refresh both body and mind, helping you sustain hard work when you return. As well as relaxing, try to laugh a lot. Laughing has immense health benefits which include improving your immune system as well as promoting an overall sense of wellbeing<sup>8</sup>.





## Managing work-related stress

The HSE definition of stress is 'the adverse reaction a person has to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed upon them'.<sup>9</sup> When we experience too much pressure at work without the opportunity to recover we start to experience stress.

- If you are an employee, do for yourself what you would recommend to your clients. If you feel your stress is work-related, talk to your line manager. It is far better to take action early rather than waiting until you become unwell and unable to work.
- What kind of support is in place for employees, including the OH clinicians, in your organisation? Is there an EAP or access to counselling? Don't feel ashamed of asking for this kind of help. You would recommend it for clients, so why not for yourself?
- Set boundaries. Setting boundaries at work, between work and home, and at home will help you maintain a work-life balance. Setting boundaries at work will also help prevent you feeling overwhelmed. Know what your limits are both professionally and personally and don't exceed them. At the start of a consultation, it may be useful to confirm, and then work to, a time limit. Set the scene, which may include outlining what can and cannot be achieved by the consultation. It is important to keep focussed and not be drawn in by emotions, especially at the end of the discussion. After a difficult consultation take time out, if possible, to regroup. You could use the Headspace app<sup>10</sup> which has a 'Reset' session.

# Take your mental wellbeing seriously. Stay in wellbeing CREDIT:

**C**ommit to developing your own mental wellbeing toolbox

**R**ecognise you are as important as your clients

**E**xperiment and find the best coping strategies for you at home and at work

**D**evelop skills to maintain your mental wellbeing

**I**dentify where your stressors may be and take action to address these

**T**alk to someone early on if you need to

And don't forget to find a way of measuring and reviewing how well you are doing.



# Useful websites:

## Sources of support

<https://www.rcn.org.uk/get-help/member-support-services/counselling-service>

<https://www.bma.org.uk/advice/work-life-support/your-wellbeing/bma-counselling-and-doctor-advisor-service>

<https://www.samaritans.org/>

## General self-help

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/>

[www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)

<https://web.nrw.nhs.uk/selfhelp/>

<https://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/Resources/Overview>

## Mental health in the workplace

<https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/usefulresources/workandmentalhealth/worker.aspx>

<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/our-work/mental-health-workplace>

<https://publichealthmatters.blog.gov.uk/2018/01/30/is-lack-of-sleep-affecting-your-work/>

<https://wellbeing.bitc.org.uk/tools-impact-stories/toolkits>

## Compassion, mindfulness and reflective practice

<https://www.skillsyouneed.com/ps/reflective-practice.html>

<http://self-compassion.org/>

<http://www.mindfulhealth.co.uk/mindfulness-meditation-audio-with-karunavira/>

<http://franticworld.com/>

<https://www.som.org.uk/>

[www.charliewaller.org](http://www.charliewaller.org)

# References:

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2. [www.mentalhealth.org.nz/assets/ResourceFinder/Feeding-Minds.pdf](http://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/assets/ResourceFinder/Feeding-Minds.pdf)
3. [www.fsem.ac.uk/position\\_statement/the-role-of-physical-activity-and-sport-in-mental-health/](http://www.fsem.ac.uk/position_statement/the-role-of-physical-activity-and-sport-in-mental-health/)
4. [www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/sleep-report](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/sleep-report)
5. Government Office for Science Foresight report on Mental Capital and Wellbeing
6. <https://bemindful.co.uk/evidence-research/>
7. <http://ccare.stanford.edu/uncategorized/the-scientific-benefits-of-self-compassion-infographic/>
8. [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/27439375](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/27439375)
9. [www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg424.pdf](http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg424.pdf)
10. [www.headspace.com](http://www.headspace.com)

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