

WELLBEINGRepublic

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Can Wellbeing really live up to the

HYPE?



The Business Case for Wellbeing at work

We often hear many statistics bandied around when it comes to mental ill-health, such as the fact that at any one time it is estimated that one in six people will be experiencing mental ill-health. It is rare that a week goes by without some mention of mental ill-health in the media. And we know from research by the Mental Health Foundation in 2017 that only 1 in 10 of us has positive mental health. According to the World Health Organisation, depression is now the leading cause of disability worldwide and is a major contributor to the overall global burden of disease.

Research by Deloitte published in February 2020 estimates that it is costing employers up to £3,3000 per employee per annum. Meanwhile, Vitality together with RAND Europe estimate that organisations are losing 35 days' worth of productivity per employee over the course of a year due to presenteeism. If correct, Deloitte's estimate would significantly underestimate the cost of mental ill-health to organisations.

In January 2020, the Financial Conduct Authority wrote to all the CEO's in the insurance industry asking them to improve their record in relation to tackling non-financial misconduct. It came in the wake of findings published in autumn 2019, detailing more than 500 instances of bullying and harassment within the industry. Invariably, while the link hasn't necessarily been made overtly, it is fairly evident that when employees have high levels of wellbeing, they are far less likely to engage in non-financial misconduct, such as bullying and harassment.

Some of the biggest corporate scandals in recent history have resulted from poor psychological wellbeing and not feeling safe to speak up. Examples include the France Telecom suicide scandal for which the former CEO was jailed. You may separately recall the Wells Fargo fake accounts scandal, which saw the creation of 2 million fake accounts by retail bankers who were under relentless pressure from management to hit unrealistic sales

targets. No one spoke up because they feared the negative repercussions of doing so and they would rather commit fraud than face such repercussions.

Another tragic example is that of KLM flight 4805 in 1977, which crashed into Pan Am flight 1736 on the runway at Los Rodeos in Tenerife, killing 583 people. The KLM captain happened to be an influential figure in KLM's ranks - the chief flight instructor and head of flight safety who was responsible for issuing pilot licences. It was his decision to take-off when clearance had not been formally given, which resulted in them crashing into the Pan Am flight, which was still taxiing along the runway.

The conditions on that fateful day were by no means ideal (fog had engulfed the runway, the airport was overburdened due to a bomb scare at a neighbouring airport, and the crew were under pressure to keep to their schedule). However, both the co-pilot and flight engineer who were sat in the cockpit alongside the captain only timidly raised their concerns, to the audibly irritated captain, that they were not clear for take-off and that another flight may be blocking the runway. Had they felt psychologically safe, there is no doubt that they would have intervened and saved their lives and that of the 580 others who perished that day. But, whilst extraordinarily important, the business case for wellbeing is about much more than tackling these non-financial misconduct issues. It is about creating the optimum conditions for thriving.

The link between wellbeing, performance and success

Science is now catching up with what the main protagonists from Disney movies have known for quite some time; when we are in a positive mental state, we are more focused, more energised, more resourceful, more fulfilled and more motivated to achieve what may previously have seemed impossible. Ultimately, we are more successful. In fact, scientists have identified that a positive mental state leads to better personal and business outcomes in virtually every metric studied. The reason behind why this happens boils down to the biochemistry of the brain, which operates significantly differently depending on whether it is in a positive, neutral or negative state.

Harnessing a positive mental state or being more resilient is not simply a matter of thinking differently or more optimistically (although renowned psychologists Martin Seligman and Carol Dweck have demonstrated that positive psychology has an important role to play). Resilience is also about ensuring we give ourselves the opportunity to recharge on a regular basis. What the science clearly shows is that resilience is not simply something we are born with, but a set of skills that need to be cultivated. Skills such as mindfulness, regular exercise, obtaining good quality sleep (on a regular basis) and taking time out to relax and reconnect with friends and family are fundamental. Developing greater self-awareness and challenging harmful automatic thought patterns, through harnessing the power of positive psychology, is also crucial to long-term positive mental and physical health.

The somewhat flawed equation for happiness

To this day, most people still believe that their happiness is contingent of being successful. Yet, this belief is outdated and fundamentally flawed. The idea that, in order to be happy, we first need to be successful, almost always leaves us wanting – it consistently overpromises and underdelivers. While there does exist a correlation between success and happiness, there is a much stronger correlation demonstrating that happiness predicts long-term success. Essentially, being happy is a far bigger predictor of success than being successful is of becoming happy.

The reason the happiness equation is backwards is because we have a much greater capacity for growth when we are in a positive mental state. We have access to mental resources that we simply cannot access in any other mental state, be that negative, neutral or stressed. The reason why, lies in the biochemistry of the brain. The brain functions differently, and different regions become more or less active, depending on the mental state we find ourselves in. Some of the key regions that are affected by our mental state, include the prefrontal cortex (our conscious self, responsible for logical, rational thinking) and the limbic system (our subconscious brain, which is automatic and impulsive). Research has identified that our optimum biochemical state is a positive mental state.

There are numerous studies that demonstrate how our mental state affects our performance, but one of my favourites is a replication study (the gold standard in psychology) that was published in 2014. It involved a group of Asian-American females who had similar SAT scores in maths, being asked to complete a maths test under subtly different conditions. The participants were split into three groups – a control group and two experimental groups. One experimental group was primed to think of themselves as female, while those in the second group were primed to think of themselves as Asian. If you are familiar with the stereotypes that exist, you will know that women are thought to be worse at maths and Asians extremely good at maths. However, given that all participants had similar maths SAT scores going into the exam, all three groups should have scored roughly the same on average.

Yet, that is not what happened. Whereas the control group scored an average of 55%, those primed to think of themselves as Asian scored a mean score of 63%. Conversely, the group primed to think of themselves as female, scored an average of 51%. The grade point difference is similar to the difference between a first and a 2:2 at university. This mirrored the results from the initial study conducted in 1999 and highlights the significant difference in performance mediated by the mental state of participants. Researchers found that subconscious activation of a social identity can enhance (Asian) as well as hinder (Female) performance on a quantitative task.

Another useful experiment conducted in the 1980s, demonstrates how our beliefs affect our mental state. The experiment required the participants to have a life-like scar drawn on their face by a professional make-up artist. The study participants were then asked to sit in an adjacent room and have a conversation with someone they had not met before. Afterwards, they were asked to report back to the moderator on how the conversation had gone and what they thought of the person they had conversed with. The participants reported that the person they had conversed with had been rude and kept staring at their scar and made inappropriate remarks aimed at their disfigurement. Shortly before they went to meet the

person in the adjacent room, the make-up artist would make the point of touching-up their scar, to ensure it remained life-like. However, unbeknown to the participants, the make-up artist actually removed all traces of the scar completely.

It transpired that people's own perceptions of themselves affected how they thought other people viewed them and interacted with them. There was no visible scar present, but they viewed themselves as being scared. The experiment raises a profound question: how many of us are wearing invisible scars that undermine our confidence (and thereby our mental state) in interactions with others? How often have those invisible scars prevented us from realising our true potential? Those scars are born out of fear and those fears manifest as self-limiting beliefs and behaviours.

WHAT IS WELLBEING?

Wellbeing has been defined in a myriad of different ways over the decades. The challenge stems from its subjective nature and fully appreciating what helps to drive individual wellbeing. One of my favourite definitions belongs to that of leading happiness researcher Sonja Lyubomirsky, who defines wellbeing as 'the experience of joy, contentment or positive wellbeing, combined with a sense that one's life is good, meaningful and worthwhile.

That definition also correlates closely with the approach of Professor Paul Dolan of the London School of Economics. He worked with the UK government to better measure happiness and, through his work in behavioural economics, he identified the idea of the pleasure:purpose principle. Essentially, according to Dolan, happiness is the experience of pleasure and purpose over time. Importantly, our experience is derived from what we pay conscious attention to. His research suggests we need a balance of both pleasure and purpose to be happy.

A STATE OF WELLBEING

The experience of joy, contentment, or positive wellbeing
combined with a sense that one's life is good, meaningful, and worthwhile

HOW CAN INDIVIDUALS THRIVE?

When it comes to maximising our wellbeing, there are plenty of research backed ways to do so. Below I have outlined several ways which anyone can bolster their levels of wellbeing.

The basics

It probably won't come as a huge surprise to learn that exercise, nutrition, sleep and mindfulness are all proven ways to help bolster your wellbeing. We often forget how important these basics are and, when our lives get busy, they can inadvertently be some of the first things that we let slip. Below, I have very briefly outlined why they are so important to helping us be at our best.

Exercise

We know from research that exercise is proven to help bolster our underlying mood and helps us experience more positive emotions. There are a variety of mechanisms by which exercise achieves this, which would take several hours to explain in any depth. However, for the purposes of building our cognitive reserves (and thereby our resilience) it is sufficient to appreciate that regular exercise (which includes brisk walking as well as more intense cardiovascular activity) has a positive impact on our mental and physical health, including our self-esteem, motivation, concentration and energy levels. If you are keen to learn more, I can thoroughly recommend John Ratey's Book Spark.

We can easily make the mistake, when we're busy, to stay glued to our chair for prolonged periods, but we actually have much better clarity of thought when we move regularly (every 60-90 minutes), as it helps re-engage our brain on the task at hand and bolsters our positive emotions.

Sleep

It probably won't come as a huge surprise to learn that sleep is fundamental to good wellbeing and resilience. Recent research has demonstrated that when we are deprived of sleep, our amygdala activity increases by up to 60%, predisposing us to negative thinking. A number of studies have shown that the propensity for having suicidal thoughts is inversely proportional to the amount of sleep we get i.e. less sleep is correlated with increased suicidal thoughts, irrespective of pre-existing mental ill-health. We're also far less able to regulate our emotions in a sleep deprived state. The research indicates that adults need between 7-9 hours of sleep to function at their best. If you are interested in learning about the science that underpins sleep, you should check out Matthew Walker's book *Why We Sleep*.

Nutrition

There is growing evidence that nutrition plays a fundamental role in regulating our mood, which influences how we think and the behaviours we adopt. For example, eating wholefoods leads to less pronounced spikes in blood sugar which helps to regulate our mood more effectively. Other evidence is based on our growing understanding of the gut-brain axis and how the trillions of bacteria in our gut can lead to biochemical changes in our brain, affecting our mood and our resilience. Ideally you should aim for wholefoods which are low on the glycemic index, with a good mix of carbohydrates and proteins sourced from foods such as fish, nuts, grains and legumes.

Mindfulness

The word mindfulness is talked about a lot these days and some scepticism still remains. Yet, there is compelling evidence that practising different forms of meditation, including present moment non-judgemental awareness (mindfulness) can have a tangible positive effect on our wellbeing. Mindfulness can help us to more easily choose the thoughts that we engage with, allowing less helpful thoughts to pass. In that way it can help us to regulate our nervous system (and thereby our stress response). Through mindfulness practice, we can also harness the power of our breath to help calm our mind. A helpful breathing technique is called the 4-4-4-4, where you breathe in for a count of four, hold for four, breathe out for a count of four and hold for four. The idea is to take deep breaths into your diaphragm area, as opposed to shallow breaths into your chest. By repeating this pattern for 2-5 minutes, you can tangibly reduce the amount of stress your body is experiencing, slowing your heart rate and reducing your blood pressure.

Cultivate Relationships + Friendships

While the mantra of eat, move, sleep is fairly well ingrained in our psyches, we often forget other aspects of our wellbeing that help drive our resilience. Social connection is possibly the most overlooked aspect of wellbeing, which is fundamental to human flourishing, as it reduces negative stress and increases health and wellbeing.

Research has found that being supported by a loved one helps our wounds heal faster after a major operation. Separately, an ongoing study from Harvard, which commenced more than 80 years ago, found that the most important foundation for human flourishing was the quality of our relationships.

Making the time to talk, properly talk, is fundamental if we wish to thrive. When was the last time to sit down with a friend or partner and asked them what their aspirations are, what they have found most challenging in the past 12 months or what brings them the most joy in their life? It can be all too easy to fall into the trap of simply talking about operational, day-to-day things, such as what should we cook for dinner tonight or whose turn is it to pick up the kids from school? But meaningful connection, requires a much greater depth of engagement and carving out the time to talk can bolster our wellbeing exponentially. If you need some help in this domain, a great book on cultivating positive relationships (not just romantic ones) is the book by Dr John Gottman called the Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work.

Develop Cognitive Reframing tools

A really important set of skills that we are rarely taught unless we happen to receive therapy, are the tools to enable us to reframe how we interpret set-backs such as rejection, grief, anger, sadness in such a way that it helps us to grow as an individual. Often, because we lack such important tools we end up in debilitating thought loops and unhelpful behaviours which prevent us from bouncing back from set-backs. We should all be taught how to become more optimistic and more compassionate, as well as learn how to forgive (for our own wellbeing).

Practise kindness

When we are stressed and overworked, it can be challenging to be the best version of our self. Perhaps we have a shorter temper and do and say things which actively undermine our relationships with others. Yet, if we can remember to practise kindness in those moments, we may stand a better chance of bolstering our wellbeing. Being kind to others doesn't just make them feel good, it also makes us feel good. In many ways, it is a selfish act. Kindness also has a ripple effect, which can lift the mood of an entire team.

It's also important to remember to be kind to ourselves in challenging times. There is mounting evidence that when are critical towards ourselves, we actually increase the amount of negative stress we experience, placing more strain on an already taxed nervous and cardiovascular system.

Cultivate greater authenticity

As mentioned previously, pretending to be someone we are not is physically, mentally and emotionally exhausting. When we feel comfortable to be ourselves around the people we spend time with, it has a positive influence on our overall levels of wellbeing. Whether it's at work or with friends, look to socialise with those people who help you to feel safe and enable you to be your authentic self. Sometimes it will be our own fears that hold us back from being authentic, so it may be worth exploring some of those fears to understand if they are based on solid foundations, or perhaps are simply old patterns of behaviour which no longer serve you well.

Identify how what you do is meaningful

Our wellbeing is intrinsically linked to how purposeful we believe our life is. Purpose, in this context, is very much about how meaningful we believe what we do is. Is it contributing to something greater than ourselves? It can be easy to dive into tasks and projects without really taking the time to stop and ponder why we're doing it, which may mean the whole thing feels much more like a chore than a joy. That is especially true for tasks which we feel provide very little enjoyment. Next time you find yourself procrastinating or putting off a piece of work, try to remind yourself why it's important and what greater purpose it is serving. Is it helping a colleague? Your wider team? The organisation? Or society as a whole?

Research suggests that making a conscious effort to remind ourselves of why we do what we do, not only increases our sense of wellbeing, it also reduces the amount of negative stress we experience.

Minimise time spent pursuing things which have a poor correlation with wellbeing

Our time is our most precious resource. Yet, we often spend much of it pursuing the things which have a statistically poor correlation with long-term wellbeing. For example, many of us focus on the end goal, such as making enough money, getting the next promotion or losing a certain amount of weight. However, most people will recognise that the expectation of how they would feel after achieving such a milestone is often short lived and underwhelming. Part of the reason is driven in part, by hedonic adaptation but also by the fact that extrinsic goals are far less fulfilling than those things that bring us intrinsic joy.

In some fairly counterintuitive studies, contingent rewards, including incentives (such as money) have been shown to lead to worse performance and diminished self-motivation and creativity over time. These studies have been repeated under different conditions within different cultures and have all pointed to the fact that intrinsic motivation trumps extrinsic rewards or punishments for tasks that require us to engage in even rudimentary cognitive thinking. The research also makes it quite clear that focusing our attention on extrinsic goals rather than looking to enjoy the process makes us less happy, less fulfilled and more prone to engage in unethical behaviour.

Often, by devoting our time to a single arbitrary goal we also inadvertently stop investing as much time in the things that actually do fulfil us. A Times article dated 19 January 2020 titled 'High-flyers pay the price in misery at home' reported on recent research suggesting that two thirds of high-income households (those with combined income greater than £100,000) are miserable. One of the main reasons cited was linked to the breakdown of personal relationships at home.

Avoid expending energy pretending to be someone we're not

We have a biological drive to want to feel safe within a tribe – a sense of belonging goes a long way to helping us feel safe. However, when we don't feel like we belong, perhaps because our values don't align with those around us, or we simply feel that we can't be accepted if we bring our authentic self to work, we will be forced to expend additional energy pretending to be someone we are not. Having to expend this additional energy can be exhausting and take a toll on our physical and mental health over time.

Savour what we do have rather than focus on what we do not

With the advent of social media, it has become extraordinarily easy to compare ourselves to others. Yet, we know from the research that this urge for constant comparison actually undermines our mental health and wellbeing. While it may have been adaptive thousands of years ago to know what other tribe members were up to, we now have access to thousands of different 'tribes' scattered across the internet, with an almost infinite permutation of things which we will not have. For the most part, it's not as if we actually want what they have, it's simply that we feel we are missing out by not having the same as them.

Simultaneously, we spend very little time appreciating what we do have. We don't necessarily stop to think that, while we may not have something, there are plenty of other things that we do have, which may be far more valuable.

Ensure you set clear boundaries + prioritise self-care

An important facet of maintaining positive wellbeing, lies in our ability to set clear boundaries that protect our non-negotiables such as exercise, sleep and any hobbies we might like to regularly dedicate some time to. I often hear people say that they simply do not have the time to prioritise their self-care. It feels like an indulgence. Yet, when we don't prioritise our self-care, we become a lesser version of ourselves for everyone else. Our performance suffers, our relationships suffer, and we suffer.

[1] Create a Culture of Care

[2] Define your Purpose

[3] Live your values

HOW CAN ORGANISATIONS THRIVE?

Creating a Culture of Care

There is plenty that organisations can do to help support their employees to thrive and reap the benefits at an organisational level. The first is to create a culture of care. Research from the Limeade Institute published in 2019, found that caring cultures had 3.5 times more people that feel that stress is manageable and who disagree that they feel burned out at work, compared to organisations who don't care.

One of the main challenges hindering people's ability to feel cared for is the sheer amount of negative stress in the workplace, which is causing a vicious cycle. Research has found that when we are stressed, our ability to care for others is significantly impacted, we become far more interested in self-preservation. In one experiment, when people were given a stress blocking agent, their compassion levels returned to normal again.

Another aspect, tied to the amount of pressure people are under, is that as many as 80% of leaders are reactive. They will be quick to make knee-jerk reactions in response to arbitrary financial metrics at a specific point in time. We are seeing this knee-jerk reaction in light of the coronavirus outbreak, which has seen billions of pounds wiped off the stock market in recent weeks. Yet, once the 'crisis' has passed it is highly likely the stocks will bounce back and readily grow higher than previous levels.

The CEO Barry Whemiller in the US is a great example of how a leader can be much more responsive (rather than reactive) when under pressure. In the midst of the financial crisis in 2008, the company was faced with having to save \$10million. While many organisations were cutting jobs, he had no intention of letting anyone go. Instead, he decided to implement a furlough programme whereby every employee was asked to take four weeks unpaid leave. The programme turned out to be an unmitigated success and company went on to have an extremely successful year.

There are other things that leaders can do in organisations, such as learn to listen more and empower others to make decisions. They can also take time out to praise more. A really easy habit to get into is to take two minutes at the start of the day to send an email thanking someone for their contribution. Obviously, it needs to be authentic and sincere praise, but as long as it is, you should start to notice a ripple effect of positivity around the office.

Define your purpose

The FCA, in its letter dated 6 January 2020, suggested that one way to improve culture was to have a well-defined purpose (beyond profit). We know from research that a life without meaning is not fulfilling and negatively impacts our wellbeing. Creating a bold purpose that inspires people to find more meaning in their work, can have a profound effect on engagement levels and productivity levels, as a case study from KPMG showed. To read more about KPMG's bold vision to empower its employees with purpose, you can check out the Harvard Business Review titled: How an Accounting Firm Convinced Its Employees They Could Change the World.

It can be helpful to try to help employees reconnect with why what they do is meaningful. How is it positively impacting their colleagues, their clients or society more broadly?

Live your values

Finally, all too often, while organisations do have values, it is rare that anyone knows what those values are, let alone how they are embodied in practice. When bad behaviour, which falls far short of the behaviours that a company is supposed to value, goes unchallenged and is swept under the carpet, it can have far reaching negative implications for the wellbeing of employees and the bottom line of the organisation.

Rather than having values plastered on a wall, which most people simply ignore, think about how these can be brought to life and celebrated. Are there leaders who effectively role model these values? Can they help inspire others? Can people be held accountable in their performance reviews? Or better yet, on a daily basis, by one another.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

There is little doubt in my mind that when we prioritise the wellbeing of ourselves and those around us, great things happen. Hopefully this note goes some way to convincing you that we've only just scratched the surface when it comes to the benefits of investing in wellbeing and that it can more than live up to the hype.



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